The Disembodied Classroom: Adapting a Multimodal Business Communication Course for Distance Education

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The disembodied classroom: Adapting a multimodal business communication course for distance education

by

Matthew L. Search

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Program of Study Committee:
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Chapter 1: Welcome to My Disembodied Classroom

“Dan” is 55, a former sole-proprietor of a computer hardware business that didn’t survive the dot-com bubble. He’s now finishing the college degree he set aside in the 70s, and hopes to start a new career in supply-chain management. In the meantime, he works as a long-haul trucker, and he usually participates in my class’ online discussion sessions by pulling into rest stops with free Wi-Fi internet access. Tonight, however, a traffic jam outside of Denver has left him behind schedule and miles away from the next rest stop. He phones into class.

Our first exercise is based on a file I emailed to the session participants a week before. After asking the other students to open the file on their computers, I tell Dan that he can sit out this part of the session: he can jump in if he has something to add, but I understand that his circumstances… He interrupts. “Oh, no. It’s Ok. I printed it out over the weekend. Just gimme a minute to tack it up on my visor.” He explains that he’s put clips on his sun visor, and that he’s going to hang the pages of the exercise there so he can read them while he drives.

“Dan, really. You can just listen in for the next ten minutes or so.” I have visions of Flaming Highway Death on the evening news. “Really. It’s fine.” Another student in the session has the same concern. She lights up an icon next to her name to show her disapproval—entieth—then sends in the chat window, Should he do this while he drives?!!?

“Naah, it’s OK,” Dan tells us. “I read the newspaper on my visor all the time. Besides,” he laughs, “I just crossed from Colorado to Nebraska. The road’s straight as a ruler from here to Lincoln. I could drive it with my eyes closed.” Dan makes it through the next five minutes without incident, reaches a Wi-Fi hot spot, and logs in. I spend the rest of the session, and several hours afterward, wondering: what have I gotten myself into?

In August 2008, I was asked to design, produce, and deliver an experimental internet-only version of English 302 (Business Communication). I believed—incorrectly, as it turned out—that converting and then teaching my Business Communication course into an online setting would be straightforward and easy: after all, I already had the lessons, assignments, and auxiliary materials, and I’d been teaching what Gouge (2009) calls a “hybrid course” for years. That overconfidence quickly gave way to a deep (though vague) apprehension about what, exactly, I’d agreed to do: teach a sprawling topic to a broad audience I would likely never meet in person, and do so using a personal pedagogy that gives equal weight to spoken and written communication, in a medium that (at present) only grudgingly facilitates the nuances of spoken interactions, in a classroom that I’ve come to think of as disembodied.
Disembodied: “Freed from that in which it has been embodied,” as the OED says. Dispersed. Intangible, but present.

I turned to the literature and found a great deal of practical advice for integrating distance education technologies and practices into my classroom, but little for eliminating the classroom altogether. I also found meditations, cautionary tales, and jeremiads by educators on the implications of adopting these technologies and practices:

- Students in online classes are more likely to fall through the cracks than their peers in traditional classrooms, because the cracks are so wide, and so many (see DuFrene, Lehman, Kellermanns, and Pearson [2009] for a detailed discussion).

- Online and hybrid courses in composition and communication are bottomless pits that demand huge amounts of faculty time and effort to achieve marginal results (Reinheimer, 2005, addresses this issue directly, while many others—see Lee, 2009, for a strong example—accept it as a tacit assumption).

- Online courses create more trouble at the departmental level than they’re worth, because administrators believe—incorrectly—that an online English course is the equivalent of an online Math course, and expect similar savings in time, resources, and scale (Gouge, 2009, offers a politic response to this issue).

Disembodied: robbed of physical existence. Divorced from the “real” world. Formless. Consigned to a shadowy, insubstantial half-existence. Lacking the outward signs of living presence.

Teaching this subject in a disembodied classroom is a tall order, and now, after four sections of the course that spanned a full academic year, I can confidently report that I’ve done it. The accompli is fait. The course lessons, assignments, and assessments are all snug in their database, ready to be repurposed into a new section (or spun into a dozen new sections). The question is: have I done it well? Or more to the point: has this experimental approach to teaching an online course helped my students
hone the skills, knowledge, and judgment that they’ll need to complete their studies and excel in whatever careers they move into from here? That is a different question entirely, one that resists an easy or confident response. In the balance of this chapter, I’ll expand on the general areas that troubled me at the start of this project—and still do—and articulate them into the research questions that I’ll explore in the rest of this document.

Is my online advanced communication course comparably effective?

“Diane” is 22, a Business Management major with ambitions of a career in corporate real estate, but currently working as a leasing agent for a local apartment complex. That’s the only job she’s ever held, and when I ask her to discuss the job application materials she’s preparing for her first major assignment, she expresses deep misgivings over the depth of experience on her resume.

I display her resume for the session attendees to look over, and ask if anyone has advice for her. “Mike” is quick to jump in. He’s in his mid-40s, employed as a Junior Vice President in the commercial real estate division of a multi-national oil company, and is only now finishing his BS in Management. “I’ll be honest. I’ll be blunt. Don’t take this the wrong way. I hire people for the job you want. I wouldn’t hire you with this resume. You need an internship or something. Because you seem nice. You seem like you’d ace an interview. You wouldn’t get an interview with this resume.” Diane is clearly offended, and says so, and I quickly turn the discussion to strategies she could use to present the work she has to the best effect.

Diane emails me three months later to tell me that she’s landed an internship with a law firm specializing in corporate real estate. She believes her career is now on track because of “that mean guy” from the discussion session.

The literature is relatively reassuring regarding the effectiveness of composition courses enhanced by distance education technologies. Writing courses with online components tend to be equally effective as traditional classroom courses (per DuFrene, Lehman, Kellermanns, and Pearson [2009] among others), assuming that

- **Students have moderate-to-high reading and writing skills.** Students who need substantial remedial instruction are generally poorly-served by online courses. Those learners respond best to instructors who are tangibly present and engaged, who can offer consistent, detailed, and timely
feedback, and who can dynamically work to keep students motivated. The asynchronous nature of most online courses makes that kind of instructor involvement difficult to produce and maintain. How does one achieve “presence” when a student’s entire perception of you is as an ephemeral string of text in an email? How does one offer timely feedback, when your student might receive (or choose to look at) your feedback days or weeks later? How does one motivate a student who is invisible, intangible, and whose motivations can only be teased out through painstaking analysis of back-and-forth emails or fragmentary thoughts in a chat window? These questions defy straightforward answers. For example, Boyd (2008) grapples with them, and in the end, only addresses them by reinterpreting the concepts of “community” and “motivation” to describe the diffuse, intangible nature of her online classroom.

- **Students can apply (or are encouraged by their instructor to apply) the course material to** communication tasks in their daily practice. Students are more likely to engage with tasks when those tasks have an obvious, immediate application. As Lutkewitte observed (2009), abstract communication tasks require students to engage in two complex activities at once—the task of composing a response, as well as the task of linking the abstract to concrete practices and contexts—while specific, grounded communication tasks only require one.

Based on those criteria, English 302 appeared to be an ideal candidate for online delivery. The course prerequisites (which include earning a passing grade in the foundational communication classes, or achieving the equivalent through a test-out) largely prevent students who need significant remedial help with reading and writing skills from registering for the course, or at least ensure that those students will have received that help before they get to English 302. In addition, pedagogical methods and practices for building student engagement in business communication course material and assignments are readily available in the literature (*Business Communication Quarterly*, for example, regularly devotes a third or more of its pages to classroom exercises, scenarios, and assignments).
The third main predictor of a successful writing course with online components is an instructor who is engaged with the students and with the material, and who actively interacts with students in all course environments (Ferdig and Topper, 2004; Watwood, Nugent, and Deihl, 2009; California State University, Chico, 2009). The literature suggests that students are more willing to engage and collaborate in discussions mediated through distance learning technologies, and are more likely to demonstrate improved communication technique, when the course instructor models good distance communication techniques and actively encourages broad participation. Similarly, students are more likely to view online participation as a legitimate and valuable (or at least necessary) course component when the course instructor is consistently present and active in online activities.

Based on that criterion, my version of English 302 class also appeared to be a good candidate for online delivery. I prefer an interactive classroom, with extensive dialog between students and between students and myself, and that type of classroom dynamic is also a strong approach in online delivery. Furthermore, because distance learning technologies are readily available at this university (I have a computer lab available for classroom use; I have my choice of courseware systems, within limits; my students and I are fortunate enough to have easy and reliable access to the internet; and anecdotally, I have found my students to have a high degree of technological proficiency, if not literacy) I have made a point of embedding distance learning technologies in my standard pedagogical practice.

In short, my standard English 302 “Business Writing” course should be a strong candidate for online delivery—except that my English 302 course is not a standard “business writing” course. In keeping with the university’s commitment to multimodal communication instruction, I actively integrate written, spoken, visual, and electronic communication practices into my course—and I place a special emphasis on spoken communication. My personal experience from a career in business and industry is that the ability to speak well and persuasively about topics of professional expertise is as critically linked with professional success as the ability to write well. Or, to put it another way: different career paths may place more or less value or emphasis on written communication, but any job, in any career, will require
successful spoken (synchronous, face-to-face) communication. An accountant, working in a cubicle-warren in a Fortune 500 corporation, may well do far more professional writing than professional speaking; an agronomist, working as a traveling salesperson for a multinational agribusiness, is likely to spend most on-the-job time in formal and informal spoken presentations, but only engage in limited, formulaic written communication. Both career paths lead through my class.

All of my students receive university-level instruction in the foundational concepts and skills involved in public speaking, just as all of my students take courses in the foundational concepts of rhetorically-appropriate written communication. However, just as the writing one does in most professional contexts differs from the written tasks in a foundational communication course, so the spoken tasks in most professional settings differ from those involved in formal public speaking. I believe that one of the primary purposes of an upper-division professional communication course is to help students develop strategies for adapting those foundational communication principles to the contexts, demands, and genres of professional communication. A professional communication course that privileges written communication over (or at the expense of) spoken communication serves only part of students’ educational needs. In practice, this pedagogical approach means that, in addition to their written work, I require my students to practice related spoken communication tasks: students in my classes make informal presentations (some prepared, and some extemporaneous) about their work on major class assignments, organize and lead small group discussions, provide verbal feedback on peer work, and prepare and deliver a formal presentation at the end of the semester. I’m not alone; among many others, Gratton-Lavoie and Stanley (2009) note the particular value of spoken interaction (both instructor/student and student/student) in business communication, and Caspi, Chajut, and Saporta (2008) identify active spoken interaction as a key to leveling gender factors (among other differences) in student participation.

I also have a practical reason for integrating spoken tasks with my course curriculum. When I first began teaching university-level courses, the main difficulty I had in my classrooms was “the silent room:” my students rarely spoke in class, and they reacted to my attempts to entice them to speak with an
air of sullen noncooperation. I began attaching spoken tasks to my students’ written work as a more organic way to encourage their participation. Initially, students participate because these spoken tasks are embedded in course activities (graded assignments, in-class lab work). However, in each course, my students quickly warm to the idea of speaking up in class, particularly because I use these assignment-based discussions to model techniques for active listening and constructive feedback. True, there’s an initial period of resistance at the beginning of each semester, while my students get used to the fact that their input is needed, wanted, and appreciated. I correct them when they speak, and often suggest improved ways for them to organize or deliver spoken information, but I also make it clear that their participation won’t be an occasion for public embarrassment. Well, perhaps minor embarrassment.

One side benefit of this focus on spoken interaction is that I can (and do) integrate discussions of ethics into my curriculum. As with my course’s focus on spoken communication, I believe that topics relating to ethics and professional responsibility are necessary components of an upper-division communication course: in professional settings, the rationale and intent behind an act of communication is generally as important as the content or the delivery. I believe that coursework that requires not only production, but also reflection and careful, thoughtful decision-making is the best way to prepare my students to communicate well, and with sound judgment (after Aristotle’s characterization of ethics and judgment as “practical” senses that improve only through use). As such, I build ethical questions into every class activity. Ethical topics are admittedly challenging to introduce and maintain, because they require all participants to risk uncomfortable exchanges for the potential of very productive insights. I find that students who are reticent to speak up in class under normal circumstances are doubly slow to speak up when the topic is emotionally or intellectually challenging or revealing. However, once I’ve fostered an environment where students know that they’re free to speak—as long as they do so politely and with some attention to framing coherent arguments—I find that the most difficult thing is to limit the discussion to maintain a schedule. That’s also a valuable lesson for my students: I present them with agendas, and model authoritative (some might say “ruthless”) meeting-management techniques to keep
the discussion on topic, and on time. I also require them to demonstrate those same techniques when they lead class discussions.

I adapted that pedagogical approach into my online class using video and audio chat technology to facilitate discussion groups, in which my students and I could engage in the types of discussion that might occur in a traditional classroom. The existing literature in composition tends to focus on assessing student online writing and online participation in text-heavy online activities (email, forums, text chat). I’ve found that because my course employs these asynchronous text options only tangentially, those assessment methods provide a weak method of quantifying the outcomes of my online courses. Therefore, the first research problem that I designed my study to address concerns the effectiveness of my pedagogical approach: can I employ a business communication pedagogy that combines a strong focus on both spoken and written communication, as well as dynamic class discussions on communication ethics, in a course delivered via distance education, and produce student outcomes that are comparable to the same course delivered in a traditional classroom?
Is an online advanced communication course sustainable?

“Jim,” 39, stepped away from his Agronomy studies in his twenties to take over the family farm in rural Iowa. He farms corn and soybeans, maintains a herd of sheep (he confides that lamb is the single most profitable product of his farm), dairy goats, and organic eggs. He’s also a paid judge at livestock fairs, a paid consultant and evangelist for three feed companies, a volunteer organizer for two separate chapters of FFA (at his daughter’s high school and son’s middle school; his wife volunteers for 4-H), and is training to be a livestock auctioneer. He tells me that he works seven days a week, twelve hours a day.

This is the first college course he’s taken in 18 years. It’s the first online course he’s ever taken. And, when he comes to my office during the first week of classes, he brings in his new laptop, which is the first computer he’s ever used, let alone owned. “I turned it on last week,” he tells me, “and had my daughter show me how to find the internet. I just don’t know where the class is, and I thought I’d better figure that out right away.”

It takes more than two hours to step him through the basics of computer literacy. When he leaves, he can open his internet browser, log into WebCT, use the courseware features, and create basic documents in MS Word. I’ve also shown him how to access the voicechat client in WebCT, so that he can speak to me without making the two-hour round trip to campus.

I feel a sense of accomplishment, until I note that I have completed nothing on my daily to-do list.

Faculty effort is one of the primary concerns in the literature on online composition courses. More specifically, the literature reflects faculty concerns over the crushing workload that an online course can represent. Online composition courses have a reputation for being much more labor intensive than traditional face-to-face courses, because they combine all of the labor-intensive practices of a traditional classroom offering (lesson preparation and the effort involved in assessing student work) with the effort required to learn, adapt to, and re-envision materials for distance education technologies, as well as the effort needed to interact with students in asynchronous, text-heavy formats (email, forums, chat) instead of synchronous, face-to-face environments (classroom discussion, office hours).

Reinheimer (2005), for example, compared the relative effort involved in offering an online composition course to that of traditional courses. He equated effort to the amount of time instructors spent, per student, on course activities, either directly (in the classroom) or indirectly (preparing course materials, grading student work, interacting with students during office hours or through email), and on
comparison, found that an online course required as much as 185% of the effort of a comparable traditional course. Most of that additional effort went into cumbersome text versions of face-to-face interactions with students; instructors in his study reported spending hours crafting emails and forum posts to address questions as clearly, and with as much nuance, as they could express in a minutes-long class discussion or conversation. The rest was taken up in learning and adapting to the technology. Reinheimer found that instructors could realize time savings as they developed expertise using distance technology (thus reducing the time spent on a online course to “only” 154% of a traditional course), but that those gains were erased by any significant change to their pedagogical method (such as using new assignments each semester, changing the material in a quiz bank, or adopting a new distance technology).

Other noteworthy studies tacitly acknowledge that fundamental problem in online communication courses, and offer workarounds, if not solutions: Sapp and Simon (2005) note that fostering an independent spirit among students can increase their involvement with the course; similarly, Kiefer (2006) advocates a course design that requires students to form their own support community (relieving the instructor of some of the burden of response and interaction). I am not convinced, however, that either approach is likely to reduce the need (or required time commitment) for a course instructor to be an active, lively participant in the course.

Given that observation, let me be frank—when I ask whether an online communication course is sustainable, I mean this: is the level of effort required to deliver this course a good use of my time? And is it at all realistic to think that I could continue devoting that much time to that course, semester after semester, while maintaining my other responsibilities as a faculty member (and human being)? If a communication course delivered by distance education requires 185% of the time commitment to produce results comparable to a traditional classroom, then distance education delivery is not a sustainable option. It is not a course I could commit to teaching, or reasonably expect other faculty members to teach (and certainly not expect faculty to teach and maintain an active role as a scholar or administrator). A “sustainable” distance education course will require approximately the same time and effort to deliver as
a traditional classroom course. To that end, I chose to integrate distance education technologies in ways that I believed would reduce that additional effort.

- I built voicechat and videochat applications prominently into my pedagogy (so that students use those technologies early and often), and encouraged students to use those technologies as the first, best way to communicate with me. Whenever possible, I used these technologies (and their related archival features) in place of asynchronous email and forum posts to communicate complex discussions to my students.

- I selected a modular design to online lessons that allowed me to change or revise the online content with a minimum of rework, and transport those materials to other courseware platforms as necessary. I chose that practice not to eliminate the initial time cost to prepare and produce online materials—I suspect that cost is irreducible—but to control the amount of time lost to the technological and procedural issues that Reinheimer identified.

I believed that these interventions should substantially reduce the extra effort involved in delivering this course. My second research question is: will these interventions practically reduce the extra time effort of delivering an online course, compared to that of delivering a traditional classroom course? Will these technologies make the course sustainable?

**Investigating the disembodied classroom**

During the Fall 2009 semester, I taught two paired business communication courses: one traditional classroom course, and one delivered entirely online. Apart from the delivery method, I used the same course content, the same course assignments, and the same discussion prompts in each course. As I delivered these courses, and in the months following the courses, I collected data on student outcomes, student experiences, and my own time commitment as the courses’ instructor. In the remainder of this document, I will describe these experimental courses and my research method, discuss the data I collected
and that data’s implications, and present recommendations based on that data for designing and delivering future online communication courses.

- Chapter 2, **Toward Disembodiment**, describes the pilot versions of my experimental courses, and discusses some of the institutional and organizational factors that contributed to the final course design for those experimental courses.

- Chapter 3, **A Taxonomy of Disembodiment**, revisits the notion of the hybrid/online classroom as it applies to communication courses, and proposes a more robust taxonomy for describing online communication courses.

- Chapter 4, **The Disembodied Classroom**, describes the course design and content of the experimental courses, and the research methods used in this study.

- Chapter 5, **Learning and Teaching in an Empty Room—Data and Outcomes**, discusses the results of this study’s data collection efforts.

- Chapter 6, **Re-embodying the Online Classroom—Reflections and Recommendations**, extends the observations regarding student and instructor outcomes from the experimental courses into a set of best practices recommendations for continuing, and expanding, a distance education curriculum for communication courses.
Chapter 2: Toward Disembodiment—Pilot Courses and Outcomes

The college’s distance learning consultants are enthusiastic about the idea of an online Business Communication course, and they’re both technologically adept and knowledgeable about instructional design. However, their experiences with other online courses at this university have not prepared them for the special needs of an English course—which comes out in an early brainstorming meeting. “We could start videotaping your lectures this week,” offers the program director. “I can set you up in one of our lecture classrooms, and have a tech run the video equipment…”

“I don’t lecture,” I tell him. “Not for more than five minutes at a time.”

He has the good grace not to look perplexed, though the pregnant pause communicates his feelings well enough. “Maybe it would help if you told me what you do in your class.”

“Mostly, I talk with my students, and I have them talk to me, and to each other. I also have them do a lot of writing. A lot of writing.”

He nods. “We haven’t offered a course like that, yet.” Over time, I come to understand that that observation defines my working relationship with the distance learning staff.

In Chapters Three and Four, I’ll describe my research setting (the two experimental courses in which I collected the primary data for this study), the specific pedagogical interventions I used in those courses, and the data collection methods I employed in the study: the starting point for my study. I maintain, however, that this study is as much a discussion of process as it is of product and outcomes: how my classroom came to be disembodied, and what that’s meant for my students, myself, and the organization(s) that surround us. While I began collecting data in August 2009, the process began a year earlier and involved a three-month development phase, two pilot course offerings, and two pilot data collection phases. These “before” steps, though technically outside the bounds of this study, are part of the final study design—they explain some of the choices I made in the courses I taught during the study, and as I collected data during and afterward. Before I discuss the final course design and data collection methods in this study in detail, then, I’d like to briefly sketch out the initial goals and ideas behind this disembodied classroom of mine, and trace some of the incremental steps that led to this starting point.
Initial Pilot Design Concerns, and Outcomes of the Two Pilots

I took calculus at the same time as this class. I can say that the material and papers we wrote in this class rivaled the difficulty level of calculus. I never thought that possible for an english course.

Anonymous, end-of-semester course review, Spring 2009 pilot course

As I noted in Chapter One, the final course design reflects my negotiation of three tensions: the need to produce an effective business communication course, integrate my (idiosyncratic) emphasis on spoken communication, and do so without creating a cumbersome, labor-intensive morass. It’s more accurate to observe that those are the “refined” forms of three other (much more dyspeptic) tensions that marked the design and pilot stages of this project: Ghostwriter syndrome, Videotape issues, and the tension between department- and college-level curriculum design. In this section, I’ll focus on each one in turn.

The Ghostwriter Syndrome

The Ghostwriter syndrome was one of the first issues voiced in the initial discussions about an online business communication course. It stems from a (perhaps apocryphal) story about “the last time” our English Department attempted an online composition course. In that course, students submitted their work online over the course of the semester and received online feedback from their instructor; as a final project, however, students had to physically travel to a proctored environment and compose a response to a prompt. One student in the class had consistently turned in excellent work—clear, almost poetic prose, encapsulating mature, scintillating insights into each assignment—and then, during the proctored final, produced a borderline-illiterate mess. The problem? His mother had taken the course for him and had composed the bulk of his work. Only the final project was his. (I’ve also heard several different versions of this story. In my favorite, Mom was a middle-school English teacher, which adds a nice intra-disciplinary spin to the disapproving tone of the story: she’s one of us! She should have known better! )
The Ghostwriter syndrome took up the bulk of the discussion in that first meeting, between the college’s distance education specialists, the Director of Advanced Communication, and myself. It was a fundamental, make-or-break issue. A successful online communication course design must incorporate some way to link a specific student to the work they submitted. During that discussion (and in the next few), the first, best idea was to require students to complete proctored assignments at multiple points in the semester. That plan was part of my initial course design—with proctored progress report assignments built into each of the four major assignments—but also one that I abandoned early in the process. Not for any data-driven reason: on reflection, the requirement simply seemed intrusive. In follow-up interviews with pilot students, I found that students universally detested the idea of arranging for and traveling to a proctor site. One student, for example, reported that he had to take proctored exams for an online math course he was enrolled in that semester (at another online university); he had to request and use vacation time to make the three-hour drive to the nearest approved proctoring location and deeply resented that fact. Another student described arranging for her internship supervisor, who was also her aunt, to be designated as a proctor for one of her online classes. She, her “proctor”, and two of her proctor’s employees collaborated on all of the proctored assignments.

Instead of proctored communication events to deal with the Ghostwriter Syndrome, then, I chose to incorporate another suggestion raised at that first planning session: leveraging the University Extensions office’s new videoconferencing platform (Adobe Connect) to allow face-to-face, voice-to-voice real-time teleconferencing. Adobe Connect appeared to be an ideal solution, as it had two capabilities that promised to eliminate the Ghostwriter Syndrome entirely. The first was the real-time video feed: my students and I could see each other just as we would in a classroom, and with no way for a Ghostwriter to pass as a student, I’d be able to ensure that students were doing (and could critically discuss) their own work. The second was a file- and screen-sharing feature that would enable me to watch students compose and revise in real time, as I might in a classroom, and thus give me a working knowledge of each student’s voice and style to compare against their submitted work. Much of my
subsequent course design (including all of my work to preserve the verbal focus of my traditional classroom course) stemmed from the choice to incorporate Connect into the course, and that decision was a response to the Ghostwriter Syndrome.

On the other hand, one unintended side-effect of this technology surfaced during the Summer 2009 pilot version of the course: what happens when increased contact with students, outside of the traditional confines of a classroom, proves that a Ghostwriter is active and present? During the first course module, on resumes, I received an email from “Tyler” asking me to settle a dispute between him and his wife (who’d given him advice that conflicted with the material in my online lessons, and the textbook). I sent a response to his email, and almost immediately received a reply from his wife asking for a clarification. Tyler and his wife shared a family email account. She worked as a high-school English teacher, and over the next few weeks, I learned that she considered it a moral imperative that her husband succeed in her area of expertise, under her watchful eye and guidance. Every videoconference I had with him (from my living room to his), I also had with her, either with her offering off-screen commentary or just as often with her as an active participant, in front of the camera. Based on her emails, I (correctly) observed that her authorial voice had dominated Tyler’s first assignment submissions. When I confronted them about it, she maintained that the best workplace practice would be for a weaker writer, like Tyler, to seek and use revisions from a stronger writer… and as that’s a central part of my own pedagogy, I couldn’t disagree. Instead of forbidding her to do Tyler’s work for him, I required that they submit three versions of each assignment to me: Tyler’s original draft, representing his best, unaided effort; her mark-up of that draft, in which she was to suggest changes using the Comments feature of MS Word but not actually make edits to the text; and a final draft, in Tyler’s own words, using his interpretation of her suggestions. I later incorporated a streamlined variation of that “review and revise” process into the major assignments for the final course version.
In a follow-up interview—with his wife in attendance—Tyler noted that he’d learned and improved more from his wife’s comments than from mine. Having experienced the intensity of her editorial approach (even mediated by the interpersonal distance of the teleconference), I don’t doubt him.

Videotaping the lectures

Developing the initial version of my online course was as much an experiment for my college’s distance education specialists as it was for me, and I would be remiss if I didn’t note that the project involved a certain amount of exasperation on both sides. That observation is not a critique of the specialists at our Center for Distance and Online Learning (CDOL): quite the opposite. All of the distance education specialists I worked with from the college had a deep understanding of pedagogical methods and implementation, were technologically-adept, and were more patient than I had any right to expect. CDOL has an excellent track record of producing high-quality online courses, and supporting faculty through the process of designing and delivering online courses. Their operation is sleek and impressively high-tech—if underfunded and understaffed—and their expertise was invaluable during the planning and design of the pilot versions of my course.

And: they had never produced or delivered an online communication course. Neither had I. The issue of videotaping the lectures, and by extension, the question of what, exactly, I might deliver as course content, emerged out of that shared experience gap.

In the CDOL specialists’ first formulation, the best, most efficient way to capture course content would be to videotape the lectures. They had a studio classroom available for me to use (either on my own, or with help from one of their technicians), outfitted with multiple cameras and audio feeds, an electronic whiteboard with the capacity to record notes and mark-ups in real time, and technicians whose video production expertise would ensure that the end result had an appropriately professional look and feel. Since I was about to begin teaching a new semester of business communication, they could start
recording from the first class onward and capture the entire course content organically as the semester progressed. From there, creating the online course would simply be a matter of providing students with links to the filmed class sessions, and exporting my existing assignments and assessments into a WebCT compatible format. Before I note the problems with this plan, let me reiterate that CDOL had used this method very successfully with other courses. It was, and is, a good model for assembling the content framework for an online remediation of a traditional classroom course.

The problem with that approach is that there are no lectures in my courses to videotape. In a typical 75-minute classroom session in my traditional business communication course, there might be as much as 20 minutes of “lecture” with me standing in front of my students, reviewing and elaborating a key course concept. However, those 20 minutes are not contiguous: my lectures are broken up by a variety of classroom activities (small- and large-group discussions, student presentations, games, free- and directed-writing sessions, etc.), and I plan each lecture to elaborate or complicate a theme that emerges organically from the intervening activity. For example, a lesson plan I commonly use to discuss goodwill strategies for negative messages runs something like this:

- 5 minute lecture: I review the basic organizational patterns for a negative message, as discussed in the class textbook
- 10 minute small group exercise: I provide my students with an example of a negative message that is structurally-sound, but needs supporting detail to be persuasive, and includes numerous errors in register and tone that undermine its effectiveness. Students work in groups to identify the strong and weak aspects of the message. I circulate through the room, offering comments and critique.
- 15 minute presentation and large group discussion: I ask each group to present their recommendations for content-related improvements, but I deflect student attempts to critique the message’s register and tone as “unimportant.” When they object, I ask them to articulate reasons why the message’s expression is critical to its reception.
- 5 minute lecture: I present a brief set of guidelines on using goodwill techniques in negative messages, using the rationale that my students have created as a framework.
- 10 minute small group exercise: I ask each group of students to collaborate on revising a specific passage from the message for register and tone. I circulate through the room, offering comments and critique.
- 10 minute large group exercise: Each group reads their revision aloud. I ask other students to critique each revision, and offer constructive criticism.
• 5 minute lecture: I recap the strongest revision techniques that emerged from the group exercise, and link them to the best practices approaches outlined in the textbook.

• 10 minute individual writing exercise: Students complete an exercise from the textbook, in which they must plan and compose a negative message for an unsympathetic audience. I circulate through the room, offering comments and critique.

• 5 minute large-group discussion: I ask students to articulate the challenges they faced as they completed the exercise (calling on specific students who attempted novel solutions to the prompt). I collect their writing samples, for use in the introduction to the next class.

If one were inclined to videotape this class meeting, what segments should be recorded? The five minute lectures? The first five-minute segment summarizes material directly from the textbook as an introduction to a deeper discussion; without the exercise that follows, it provides no more pedagogical benefit than a word-for-word reading of the textbook. The other lecture segments grow out of the exercise and student discussion, and their pedagogical value stems from their context—as responses, affirmations, and elaborations of points my students have developed and raised on their own (with my prompting… I deliberately plant comments and suggestions during the group discussions that elicit useful responses during the larger discussion)—rather than their actual content. And if one videotaped the whole class session? Participation in an active discussion in which one applies course content has clear pedagogical value; watching people participate in a discussion (assuming that a specific discussion is even audible over the din of a full class, all talking at once) largely negates the possibility for active engagement, and with it, most of the pedagogical value of the session.

With those problems in mind, we explored and abandoned two ways to proceed with this lecture capture method. In the first, we planned to capture the entirety of the class with a “wide-angle” approach to the lecture and full-class discussion segments, switching to a video of one group’s discussion for the group segments (with a separate audio pick-up for that group, to ensure their conversation would be audible). After some consideration, I rejected that plan for three reasons: first, I was concerned that
singling out one group for recording would put undue pressure on them. Second, in order to ensure a “good” discussion for the recorded class session, I’d have to cherry-pick the most active and/or insightful individuals from the class; that made the solution impractical for taping schedule that would start from the beginning of the course, as it can take weeks to identify those students. Third, this plan still didn’t solve the issue of active engagement: watching a good team discussion struck me as only marginally more pedagogically valuable—or interesting—than watching a poor one.

The other method I briefly explored was one that I’d developed and used successfully in corporate training environments: interleave recorded instructor lectures and discussions with discussion exercises for small groups of students. For example, I once created a multimedia training package to teach insurance adjusters (with no medical training) how to read and evaluate a medical history file. Each course module began with a video intro from an expert adjustor, then directed a small group of students to review a sample claimant medical history file (with 40-60 pages of medical information about a fictional claimant) and, as a group, make a series of decisions about the claimant. After each decision point, students would play another short video from the expert, which would talk them through a best-practices decision process so that they could check their work. It occurred to me that, in theory, I could adapt my existing lesson plans to that model: use CDOL’s resources to produce sets of linked lecture/analysis videos with accompanying scenario-based discussion materials, assign online students to study groups, and require them to meet together once each week to work through the lesson and discussion prompts. In practice, however, this model required too much preparation time: it took me almost 30 hours of work to produce two discussion sessions: one week’s worth of class material.

That might be a useful time investment for an online course, considering that one might amortize the time cost in class preparation effort over years of course offerings, and that the time required to produce each segment would improve as one developed expertise and labor-saving templates. However, I decided that, given my other time commitments, that approach was too time intensive to be effective for the experimental pilot phase of a project that might end after only two section offerings. Instead, I divided
my standard class lesson plan into two segments. For the first, I prepared recorded presentations (using Adobe Presenter) to elaborate on my students’ textbook reading assignments. These 15-30 minute-long presentations included my lectures, as well as embedded sample texts and other artifacts with accompanying directed self-study prompts in the recording to talk students through analysis and judgment tasks; I hoped that this solution might combine the pedagogical benefits of the case study model with the labor savings of recorded lectures. For the second, I adapted the “short lecture + group discussion and exercise” framework of my traditional classroom into small group roundtable discussions that I could deliver and moderate through an audio/video-chat client: the Class Discussion Sessions that became the core of both pilots and the final experimental course.

With these two key adaptations, I transformed the question of what kind of content I might offer into a much more palatable exercise in finding ways to remediate the (perhaps idiosyncratic) dynamic, large group discussions and individual presentations of my traditional classroom lesson plans into a more intimate small group setting. In short, I stepped away from reinventing my basic business communication course into a completely new form, in favor of replicating my traditional course (and reworking existing lesson plans) using distance education technologies.

The question of sustainability

As Herrick (1999) noted, personal narratives of subjective workplace experience—i.e., gossip—form a valuable venue through which we, as communication researchers, can examine complex social issues where objective facts do not, or cannot, allow a nuanced analysis. I bring this up only because, as I address the issue of instructor effort and course sustainability and as I attempt to explain how that issue came to be one of the central, defining aspects of this study, this already-subjective narrative must take an even more subjective turn. I have two explanations (some might say “rationalizations”) for this brief diversion into hearsay. First, the issue of sustainability evolved out of the tension between various
stakeholders’ visions for the eventual final version of this course. That tension is the aspect of this project that’s caused me the most personal discomfort over the development, implementation, and delivery of my online course. While an indirect, subjective discussion is perhaps less satisfying or credible than one festooned with hard facts, it’s also the only discussion I’m comfortable committing to paper. Second: I’m not the only participant in this scenario who is uncomfortable speaking directly on this subject. During the pilot phase of this project, I conducted formal interviews with nine experts in distance education pedagogy, technology, and application: Deans and other administrative staff at other institutions that have invested heavily in distance education development, instructors who have developed and delivered online communication courses at other institutions, and software developers at courseware and technology vendors. All of them agreed to speak to me about the politics of this kind of course only on the condition of anonymity: not a reaction that inspires confidence. So, in this discussion, I’ll sketch out the basic shape of a large, intractable problem that, for the purposes of this research project, I will hereafter address—and cheerfully gloss over—under the heading of instructor effort and sustainability. This sketch represents my own, personal, partial understanding: my gossip, about the portion of a much larger context that I’ve experienced, only tangentially, through this project.

The project to create an online business communication course was a joint effort between the English Department and the administrative staff of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) distance learning initiative. Why was I selected as the instructor for this experimental course? Because I had an established track record of creating and delivering professional communication courses with strong student outcomes, because my initial graduate work was in adult education and instructional systems design, and because I had just completed work on another project involving design and data collection on an experimental professional communication course. A better question might be: why was I selected to develop this project instead of one of the department’s tenured, adjunct, or lecturer faculty, or the university’s established distance learning experts? In hindsight, I believe that I was one of a small list of interested candidates who were acceptable to both stakeholders. Few of the English Department’s
tenured or adjunct faculty would have accepted the project under the conditions required by the college (which I’ll explain below), and those who might have accepted also would have likely turned the course into a bargaining chip in the often-rancorous negotiations with the college over budgets, course offerings, and faculty research agendas. For their part, the English Department at this institution has had a long history of resisting external pressures to change the basic form, content, and delivery of service courses (of which business communication is one). That resistance stems from sound research and experience in presenting pedagogically-valuable multimodal communication courses, and is well-founded; it is also often expressed with an intensity that outside observers might mistake for unwavering, uncompromising evangelical fervor. Given that history, the department was unlikely to allow an outside expert to propose or enact changes to a key service course. As a graduate student, I appear to have been a convenient compromise: an English Department instructor with the background and experience to produce an acceptable course, without the motive or organizational power to use this project to advance an agenda within the college.

From the outset, these two stakeholders gave me two different (competing, and in places, contradictory) mandates for the course. The college’s support was conditional on three requirements: the course must be developed within a three month window, so that the first version could be delivered in the Spring 2009 semester; the English Department must offer at least two sections of the course within a two-year period; and, as a development project funded by the college, the copyright on all course materials would pass to the college. The third condition was the most contentious: faculty jealously guard their intellectual property, and with good reason. I’ve since come to believe that the rationale behind the copyright requirement was innocent enough. This university has an active Extensions program, and the materials for a business communication course could theoretically be repackaged into an Extensions product that could bring revenue into the college. As I designed the course content, I arranged the material with that possibility in mind. (That requirement also turned out to be relatively easy to circumvent: in practice, the college only retains copyright on materials that carry LAS or university
branding—logos, colors, etc. At this writing, only the courseware framework for my course is branded; all other materials, lessons, and assignments are not, and remain my personal intellectual property.)

In hindsight, however, I also believe that there was another, unspoken motive behind the college’s support for an online business communication course: the potential for an online offering to allow a larger class size (with more students per section), while reducing the need for physical facilities (large classes need large classrooms, which are in short supply on campus) and the cost in faculty time commitment and salary. Those are reasonable expectations, given the track record of other online courses at this institution and other types of online college-level courses in general. In a subject area where student learning goals center on knowledge-acquisition or cognitive skills (a College Algebra course, for example), one might reasonably record a series of lectures once, and use the automated grading functions common to educational courseware to assess student comprehension of and ability to apply the course material. That approach might well allow course delivery on a very large scale, with no facilities expenses (beyond server/hosting expenses, which are nominal compared to brick-and-mortar facilities) and with little impact on instructor time requirements. Under that delivery model—which I’ll stress is a valid, useful approach for many subjects and courses—it costs the same to deliver a course to 200 students, or 2,000 students, as it does to offer it to 20 students. That’s an attractive prospect.

It is also not a model that works especially well for a communication course. Learner assessment is a key stumbling block: as I noted in Chapter One, while an online communication course may be resource-efficient to deliver to large numbers of students, the effort required to assess and provide feedback to those students does not reduce with scale. Quite the opposite: it becomes more labor-intensive to provide adequate feedback to students, because the asynchronous communication modes that are embedded in online delivery are more labor- and time-intensive to use than the synchronous communication of a traditional classroom. One might theoretically employ Automated Essay Scoring (AES) technologies to reduce that effort, though the research on the subject is far from conclusive. Nivens-Bower, 2002, for example, found no significant difference between human and computer scores
of student writing; Wang and Brown, 2007, used the same research method and AES software to evaluate writing samples from a different student population than Nivens-Bower’s, and found that the AES provided far different—and far less stringent—grading results than did human readers. In general, AES systems show some reliability under very narrow circumstances: with short, formulaic responses to carefully-structured prompts, from students with a relatively homogenous background and writing style. None of those conditions apply to the upper-division communication courses at this institution.

In any case, I spoke with development specialists at two different courseware vendors, and both told me that, glossy claims in glossy sales materials notwithstanding, robust AES systems will not be available for widespread use anytime soon. AES systems are complex and expensive to develop, and there isn’t enough demand for that feature to inspire courseware vendors to undertake the investment. Those that do exist—the good ones, anyway—are also processor-intensive: it takes a good computer to run them efficiently. Most courseware products run on relatively cheap, simple computer platforms; that’s a sales advantage in an industry whose clients rarely have the resources to invest in large-scale, high-end technology infrastructure. Adding an AES to the courseware would make it a much more expensive purchase once the need for more computing power is factored in.

It’s worth noting that there’s another solution to the assessment problem: outsource the work to an outside vendor. I spoke with a Dean who oversaw the implementation of “automated” composition courses in which students submitted their work for grading to an outside vendor; that vendor used a combination of AES systems and human graders to evaluate and provide feedback on student work, and had a staff of writing center faculty available to provide one-on-one tutoring (via email or text chat). The program was initially successful, at least in terms of cost savings. In the first two years, the overall cost to run the program was less, per student, than traditional classroom courses. Student outcomes (measured by standardized tests, and by performance in later coursework), however, were never as strong as those produced by local faculty in traditional classroom settings, and in the end, the cost savings evaporated as well. The price for that vendor’s services increased yearly; in addition to paying for that service, the
university had to invest in local remedial writing programs to address poor student outcomes. My interviewee noted ruefully that the final price tag has become nearly double the cost, per student, of the traditional classroom offerings.

If the costs in time and expertise to evaluate student work are irreducible, can a program still realize facilities cost savings by opening large sections of online communication courses without the need for large classrooms? To a point. Five of my interviewees noted that their online communication courses were successful in that regard, but that without reducing Reinheimer’s (2005) 185% (as described in Chapter One), the courses were unsustainable. All five sources described the same pattern: in the first semesters, tenured and tenure-track faculty jumped at the chance to offer their course online (motivated by the novelty, by the convenience, or by the prestige of being a forerunner in the institution). After a short time, however, those faculty realized that the time commitment was prohibitive, particularly for faculty still pursuing tenure; the additional workload per student precluded other scholarly and administrative activities. (One interviewee also noted that her colleagues quickly began to miss the interpersonal interaction of the classroom. “An online course is all of the work of teaching, and none of the fun.”) At that point, the online courses turned into “hot potatoes” that no one would agree to teach without significant incentives. The courses passed from senior faculty, to junior faculty, to adjuncts and lecturers… and finally, to whoever could be press-ganged into the job. The result is an online course that either costs more per student to offer because committed, dynamic faculty require concessions and/or incentives to participate, or a course whose student outcomes suffer because the only faculty available to teach the course are inexperienced or unmotivated. (Recall from Chapter One: the best online courses, in terms of student outcomes, are taught by active, dynamic instructors who are make themselves a consistent, constant presence in their students’ course experiences.)

There are excellent reasons for offering online communication courses, and online communication courses can produce excellent student outcomes. Anecdotally, however, there are few realistic prospects for obtaining true cost savings by delivering communication courses online. As I
developed my online business communication course, and as I heard each new tale of unrealistic expectations from budget-conscious administrators… well. I was nervous. A unifying theme in all of this hearsay is that, at an administrative level, the decision to pursue online communication courses was made with the assumption that a college course is a college course, and that what works for College Algebra will work for Business Communication. When the promised cost savings fail to materialize—I spoke with a total of seven administrators and faculty, representing six different programs, and none of them described any long term cost savings from online communication offerings—the next assumption is that, if the Math Department is saving money by offering College Algebra online, but the English Department’s online Business Communication course is even more expensive than their classroom courses, the problem is with the English Department and not the delivery method. Let me be clear: I was never told by any LAS administrator or specialist that there was a direct expectation that my course demonstrate any kind of cost savings. I was never told that the college expected anything other than successful online delivery of a Business Communication course (two sections over two academic years). Still. I’d heard enough stories (both from my interviewees, and from my colleagues in the English Department) to make me nervous about the consequences of failing to deliver a sustainable course with a sustainable economic profile.

As my other stakeholder, the English Department’s presented requirements that were superficially simpler to incorporate into my course design. The English Department at this institution has a commitment to multi-modal communication pedagogy: all of the department’s service courses include materials, coursework and assignments on written, spoken, visual, and electronic communication. Through the ISUComm program (the university’s communication across the curriculum initiative), the department has assembled a set of best practices approaches for implementing that multimodal pedagogical approach in service courses, and has a substantial body of research to establish the effectiveness of that approach in terms of student outcomes. I’ve already noted the design philosophy I adopted in order to accommodate this requirement, and I will discuss concrete design choices in more
detail in the Chapter Four. However, for the purposes of this discussion, it’s important to note that while no one from the department directly asked me to adhere to a multimodal pedagogical approach—only to design a good communication course that would reduce the opportunity for academic dishonesty—I made a conscious choice to do so.

It’s also worth noting that, whether deliberately or not, my rigid adherence to this multimodal approach also ensured that the online course I produced reinforced the department’s overall pedagogical strategy (small class sizes, centered on complex, rhetorically-based multimodal communication instruction) at the expense of techniques that might reduce the instructor effort necessary to deliver the course. I might have employed other sound pedagogical approaches that would take stronger advantage of the capabilities of distance education technologies. For example, I might have designed a course with a very large class size in mind: with fewer, larger written projects to centralize assessment efforts; with specific, discrete assignment prompts, rather than open-ended assignment prompts to enable more streamlined efficient assessment of more uniform student responses; with more of an emphasis on formulaic structural communication, rather than a rhetorical, context-based approach (again, to ensure more uniform student responses). I might have done away with spoken communication entirely—many online communication courses do—which would have eliminated the need for direct, synchronous instructor interaction to facilitate delivery and assessment of students’ spoken work. In short, I might have completely reinvented my Business Communication course in ways that, while not directly congruent with the English Department’s historical practices, would have likely reduced Reinheimer’s 185% effort ratio. Instead, I chose to replicate a traditional classroom course with a history of successful student outcomes, but whose practices guarantee that the course would be labor-intensive to deliver. I did so, not because it was a requirement, but because I felt, and still feel, that a new, unique course design would not be sustained by this department.

In addition to commenting on the limited possibilities for cost savings in online communication programs, my interviewees from other institutions noted that these programs best succeed where they are
integrated into the mainstream communication curriculum, rather than separated from it or used to replace portions of the curriculum entirely, and where the program has support and participation from a wide range of faculty, rather than being the responsibility of one or two individual faculty members. I was concerned for the future of this online communication course, on both counts. During the design and delivery of the pilot versions of my course, I encountered some English faculty members who were enthusiastic about, or at least interested in, the possibility of teaching an online communication course. I heard from many others who were resistant or even hostile to the idea: some out of concern for the curriculum changes “that LAS would force on us” if an online communication course proved profitable and/or effective; some because they felt that the compromises necessary to deliver such a course would undermine the department’s longstanding (and hard-won) best practices approaches regarding course content and delivery; some out of distaste for the retraining (in both technology and pedagogy) that would be necessary if online courses became a common part of the department’s offerings. I won’t claim that these concerns are unfounded, either. While I suspect that some of the bile directed at LAS had as much to do with the especially rancorous budget negotiations that were going on between the department and LAS at the time, the department’s last attempt at joint development of an online communication course (a technical communication course, developed in partnership with the College of Engineering) ended—badly, and without a completed course—when the outside partner attempted to dictate the content and delivery of the course.

With those concerns in mind, I believed that the best way to ensure the support and participation of the faculty responsible for the larger curriculum was to ensure that this new online offering followed existing departmental practices. Other faculty in this English Department would be more likely to take up a recognizable, multimodal, rhetorical Business Communication course once my initial involvement ended (with the end of my PhD studies and research, if not earlier), which would increase the chance for sustained online offerings—and which brings me back to Reinheimer and his ominous 185%. 185% more instructor effort would negate any potential efficiencies to be gained from online delivery, reducing
the college’s incentive to invest additional resources in further online communication course development (and, based on anecdotes from my interviewees, increasing the chances that online communication courses might be outsourced instead). 185% more instructor effort would all but ensure that no department faculty would willingly offer this course again. Therefore, in an effort to sidestep both of those design pitfalls, I chose to define sustainability, and focus my research efforts, around ways to deliver a traditional classroom course online while using distance education technologies to manage the instructor effort per student.

Impact of Pilot Versions on the Final Study

I understand that this was an experimental course, and I want to say that I got a lot out of it. But I also want you to know that it was a pain in the ass, and you need to keep experimenting.

“Leo” (Spring 2009 pilot student), follow-up interview.

After the initial design phase, I delivered and refined two pilot versions of this course (in the Spring and Summer terms, 2009) before delivering the final version in the Fall term 2009. While those pilots are not a direct part of the data collection effort of this research study, my experiences in those courses (and the results of student assessment feedback and post-semester interviews with students) resulted in several important changes between my initial course design and the final version that appears in this study. In this section, I will summarize the most consequential of those changes.

Switch to Wimba Live for class discussion sessions

In the two pilot courses, I used Adobe Connect teleconferencing software to facilitate the video-and audio-chat class discussion sessions. Adobe Connect is a professional teleconferencing tool: it’s representative of the kind of high-end teleconferencing software that some of my students may find themselves using at internship sites and in their eventual workplaces. (“Mike,” a participant in the Spring
2009 pilot and an employee of a multinational corporation confirmed that he uses Connect in his own workplace to hold meetings with peers and employees, and with representatives of other businesses. At each class discussion session, and during our post-semester interview, he remarked that my use of Connect was one of the things that convinced him that the course was worth his time.) Connect is a powerful, flexible tool that allows for a wide range of course activities.

However, Connect is also unforgiving of slow internet connection speeds. During the two pilot courses, I found that students with dial-up connections (and some slower DSL connections) experienced persistent problems sending and receiving media through Connect: they were entirely unable to participate using the video feed or the desktop-sharing feature, and often experienced audio-quality problems (both receiving and transmitting) that rendered them effectively unable to participate via audio-chat as well. Connect also seemed to be vulnerable to general internet lag from the server. On several occasions, even users with fast connections experienced notable problems with media (in one spectacular case, Connect queued all of the audio and video feed data, and delivered it to each participant in the session in 20-second cacophonous bursts). When those problems occurred, I was forced to move the class discussion to a teleconferencing service; CDOL discontinued use of that service during the Summer 2009 pilot, which left me with no backup when Connect was uncooperative.

However, during Spring 2009, the university obtained a license for the Wimba Live virtual classroom software, and made it generally available for use through WebCT. After testing out Wimba Live in a Summer 2009 class discussion session, I decided to use Wimba for the final study version of the course. While Wimba is a much less robust tool, and is explicitly tailored to educational environments, it also proved to be much more forgiving of primitive internet connections. In the Summer 2009 test session, for example, one of my students regularly attended class via satellite uplink from the top of a mesa in West Texas (with the equivalent of a quick dial-up internet connection). In earlier Connect sessions, he’d barely been able to follow the spoken conversation, hadn’t been able to send audio, and had to disable the video feed entirely; during a Wimba Live test session, he was able to send and receive both
audio and video. Wimba Live also has an integrated telephone conference feature, so that, if individual students were unable to connect to the audio-chat through their computers, they could still participate in the conversation via telephone.

The switch to Wimba Live required some revision of my class discussion session lesson plans to adapt to a significant lack of flexibility in file exchange capabilities. Adobe Connect enables users to dynamically upload files, so I could direct students to compose free-writing text responses to scenarios, then have them upload their samples for peer review. Wimba’s version of that feature is cumbersome, and proved unreliable in test sessions. I was obliged to break the free-writing exercises down into smaller chunks that would work within Wimba’s text-submission features: free-writing sentences and paragraphs, rather than entire short documents.

“Reserved seating” in class discussion sessions

In the Spring 2009 pilot version of the course, I polled the online students about the days and times when they’d be available to meet for class discussion sessions, used that information to establish a weekly session schedule, and required students to attend a minimum number of sessions over the course of the semester. Predictably, many students waited until the final weeks of the semester to attend sessions; those students experienced a smaller subset of the total course material than did their more proactive peers, and the number of students in the final discussion sessions overtaxed Connect’s ability to deliver simultaneous audio and video feeds. The combination resulted in overcrowded sessions, plagued by persistent media problems, that quickly degenerated into patience-trying chaos. My students offered withering feedback on those sessions.

In the Summer 2009 pilot, I assigned students into small cohorts, and directed them to agree on four dates and times, evenly spaced over the eight weeks of the summer term, when their group could meet. Although generally successful (this method resulted in small, regularly-held discussions, with familiar and supportive groups of peers) it had two drawbacks. First, it proceeded from the fact that
during the Summer, my own schedule as instructor was completely flexible: I could, and did, meet whenever my students wanted to. While that solution worked well for the Summer session, the more complex demands on my time in a Fall or Spring session would make it impractical. Second, that scheduling method was almost universally loathed by my students. They resented being placed randomly into groups, and the very brief scheduling window (a three-day period at the start of the semester) necessitated by the very brief summer term did not give them enough time to reach adequate consensus decisions on meeting times. They complied, but only under duress.

In the final course version, I established a discussion session schedule at the start of the semester (based on days and times that were convenient to my schedule, and on the most popular days and times from the pilots), and required students to sign up for and attend one session during the first course content Module, two each during the second and third content Modules, and one during the fourth Module. My hope was that the more structured approach would reduce the scheduling difficulties I experienced in the pilots.

**Classmate review requirement**

Both initial pilot courses included a review requirement for each of the major Module assignments: to receive full points on the assignment, students had to obtain a review of their work from an outside reader with notable expertise in the genre or content, then use that review to improve their work and discuss the review as part of their self-reflection for the assignment. For example, to receive full credit on the Job Packet assignment (the Module assignment for Module 1), students had to obtain a review of their resume and application letters from an expert in their intended career path, or from someone who regularly reviews job application documents as part of their job (a human resources specialist, for example). That review requirement was unpopular with my students for two reasons: producing a draft in time for an expert review before the due date required a more proactive work schedule than many of them preferred, and (as they noted in follow-up interviews) locating an expert
reviewer required additional effort beyond the appropriate scope of a class assignment. When pressed, however, almost all of my students consistently met the expert review requirement.

However, during the Spring 2009 pilot course, several students in the online section established a pattern of turning in substantially incomplete work; when I returned their work, with failing grades attached, those students protested that they had received glowing reviews from their experts. They hadn’t realized that their assignments were missing components, but if their experts felt that their work was superior (even if technically incomplete), how could I justify returning a failing grade? With that experience in mind, I designed each of the Summer 2009 class discussion sessions to include peer review activities: students had to bring draft copies of major assignment portions to their discussion session, review them during the session, and discuss the assignments with each other and with me. While that practice dramatically reduced the incidence of incomplete work, it added substantially to the time required to hold each discussion session: in practice, the peer review discussions added 45–60 minutes to each session.

As a compromise, I added a classmate review requirement to each major assignment. In addition to the outside expert, each student had to obtain a review of their work from another student in the class. My hope was that this additional review by a fellow expert in the course material and expectations would help improve compliance with the assignment requirements, while reducing the in-class time requirements for peer review and discussion to a more manageable level.

**Switch to WebCT for the paired traditional classroom course**

In the Spring 2009 pilot, I taught two sections of business communication supported by two separate courseware systems: an online section, delivered via WebCT and a traditional classroom section with material and assignments delivered through Moodle. The decision to do so was a practical one, not a strategic one. In the days leading up to the beginning of the semester—i.e., during the December
holidays—I was unable to overcome the technical hurdles necessary to set up two class sections with separate assignments and schedules in the same WebCT course (and was unable to obtain technical support from specialists at the university). With time running out, I set up the online section in WebCT and used Moodle (with which I was much more familiar) to quickly create a course site for the traditional classroom section.

While the dual-courseware system worked well enough, it created logistical inefficiencies that added substantially to the time required for me to deliver both courses. With practice, and with additional time to ask questions and apply the answers, I was able to create a single WebCT course site for both Fall 2009 sections and successfully segregate access to course content using WebCT’s selective release features. I hoped that this single-site practice would result in significant time savings. I was also curious about the possibility of cross-section communication and collaboration.
"Julianne" is a former co-worker of mine: a technical writer turned educator. Shortly before I began my PhD studies, Julianne started an MFA in Creative Writing. She now teaches basic composition, creative writing, and Women’s Studies courses at a small, two-year liberal arts college. We are teacher pen-pals, sharing our best practices—and ignominious failures—in frequent emails.

When I describe this new project, this online business communication class, Julianne hesitates over the word *disembodied*. The word came to me on a whim, and when I say it aloud, I say it lightly, as a nervous joke. Julianne points out that *disembodied* is a creature of dismal habitats—horror movies, Stephen King novels, the evening news, the realm of subconscious fears and permanent, tragic separation. Ghosts are *disembodied*. Victims are *disembodied*. She points out, first as a jibe and later with collegial concern, that my word choice suggests a certain degree of apprehension about this project.

It takes me months to admit that she's right, that I feel cut off from my online students, who I know only as disembodied voices, scurls of chat-room text, and floating heads in a tiny browser window. I feel cut off from my colleagues, many of whom dislike this course (or at least dislike the *idea* of this course), and seize each opportunity to tell me so. *I* feel disembodied in my own classroom, or lack thereof, and I have solipsistically extended that label to the course as a whole. The insight brings me little comfort.

One of the challenges I faced as I designed and built my online communication course stemmed from the way in which our discipline constructs the nature of a technologically-enabled learning environment, using the concept of the *hybrid classroom* (after Gouge, 2009, among others). This notion of a hybrid classroom as a traditional classroom supplemented by electronic tools and resources that partially dissolve the classroom walls naturally leads to a vision that positions the “hybrid” classroom along a continuum of learning environments, running from *less* technologically-integrated to *more* technologically-integrated. Though a useful conceptual tool, I believe that the idea of classroom hybridity is ultimately limiting in ways that reify some of the more intractable issues related to communication instruction in distance learning environments. In this chapter, I’ll first provide a rationale for complicating the taxonomy of the hybrid classroom, in which communication instruction, learning, and practice is supplemented by technology. In the balance of the chapter, I’ll propose alternative means of discussing online communication courses, and communication courses in general: in terms of the temporal distance between participants in the course (the immediacy of the interactions between instructors and students on
a range from purely asynchronous to purely synchronous), the pedagogical focus of the course (the
course’s learning goals, and how those goals dovetail with students’ educational and career goals), and
the types of interactions that take place between participants in the course.

What is a Hybrid Classroom?

There are many technological marvels on display during the first live online class
discussion session in the first pilot offering of my course: the teleconferencing software;
the suite of computers, cameras, and microphones that the distance ed folks put at my
disposal (as well as the expert assistance to operate them); the simple fact that we twelve
people, scattered by thousands of miles, are all present and participating, and that our
telepresence has been achieved with relatively little trouble or fuss.

However, the “technological” feature that strikes me as most representative of this whole
production is sitting behind me: a trio of potted plants that the distance ed folks filched
from a nearby office. I am presenting my class from the distance ed maintenance bay, a
workshop filled with computers in various states of repair, but my students see only my
face framed by those plants—an organic illusion that belies the drifts of cables, open
computer cases, and hardware that festoon every off-screen surface.

I have chosen Gouge’s (2009) conceptualization of the hybrid communication classroom to frame
this discussion of my own disembodied classroom for two reasons. First, Gouge’s article on “Hybrid
Courses and the Future of Writing Programs” appeared by editorial invitation in the NCTE’s flagship
journal, College English, in a themed issue on the future direction(s) of composition pedagogy in the
academy. I therefore advance the notion that her discussion of the current trends in composition pedagogy
and practice is an attempt at articulating a disciplinary standard for technologically-supplemented
classrooms: an instantaneous reading from a sounding line, meant to take the measure of an issue whose
position and depths are (at best) challenging to mark. Second, the issue of College English in which
Gouge’s article appears was published as I was deep in the process of designing and delivering the pilot
versions of my experimental business communication courses, and her arguments struck me at the time as
being particularly relevant to my own situation.
In her article, Gouge outlines a disciplinary policy for “institutionalizing hybrid modes of course delivery” (343) in university-level writing programs. Following the recommendations of the “Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction” special interest group of the NCTE, she defines hybrid courses as taking place “both in a traditional classroom and in a computer lab/classroom (often done as a one-day-on/one-day-off arrangement),” (359) and/or courses in which 30-80% of instruction takes place online (341). Citing trends in secondary education and educational legislation, she argues that university-level communication educators need to explore, embrace, and control the implementation of hybrid course models. She describes a variety of advantages to hybrid courses: the “flexibility of time and location for both students and faculty;” (345) the requirement that students learn and practice techniques for independent, lifelong learning (as well as valuable, marketable computer skills); the intensive writing practice that students receive in courses that depend on text-based interaction. Alluding to the disadvantages of hybrid courses, she observes that only

“a few obstacles have been noted: the complex administrative structures required, scheduling challenges, technical training and access for involved faculty and students, lack of agreed-on ‘best practices’ and methods of program assessment, and feelings of resistance to new technologies.” (348)

She ends her discussion with the mildly cautionary note that in the (potential) shift toward hybrid classes, writing and communication faculty need to carefully preserve the pedagogical value of communication courses: the technology must serve the learning goals, rather than the goals the technology.

I confess that, as I designed my online course, I found Gouge’s article deeply comforting. I did not (and still do not) share her blithe optimism concerning the “few obstacles” of hybrid and distance courses—those minor administrative obstacles strike me as vast, unbridged chasms across the path of course implementation. (I believe, however that they are only significant impediments to the broader implementation of hybrid courses across the curriculum, not the design and delivery of a single-section course offering; though the administrative assistant who spent weeks gnashing her teeth over scheduling my single online section might argue differently, as might the IT staffers whose patience was tested to the
limits, time and again, by my technological fumbling.) Still, Gouge’s overall view was valuable during the course design process: hybrid courses as necessary additions to the pedagogical repertoire of the communication curriculum, and as a natural extension of the continuum of communication pedagogy, rather than a new approach to education that must be materialized out of whole cloth. Toward one end of this continuum (refer to Figure 1), one might envision a physical room with desks and chairs, paper textbooks, pens and tablets: a tangible, physical locus of communication pedagogy. Toward the other end, there is a pure distance learning environment whose physical presence, if indeed it can be said to possess one, is dispersed into fleeting wisps of digital texts and virtual interactions; the locus, the classroom, is a context or intent rather than a physical place. This formulation is both attractive and useful, in that it allows one to position a wide variety of pedagogical approaches in relation to each other: a correspondence course in business communication, delivered in printed documents by return of post, is directly analogous to

![Diagram](Figure 1: Hybrid communication classrooms fall along a continuum of technological presence)
a business communication course presented electronically through email, and is similarly positioned
toward the more hybrid end of the spectrum. A traditional classroom course with no computer lab
component, but with a pedagogical approach that leverages students’ fascination with texting, Twitter,
and other incarnations of social media might compare to a blended classroom in a more formal computer
lab setting, toward the center of the spectrum. In my own case, this framework provided an easy way to
envision the path between my existing traditional classroom course (face-to-face, less hybrid, but
supplemented by technology) and the new hybrid course I was developing (more hybrid, entirely
embedded in technological settings).

Later, as I delivered my pilot courses and as my understanding of the realities inherent in a hybrid
communication course matured, I began to find this continuum of technological hybridity unsatisfying for
two reasons. The first reason—and the most predictable, given that this continuum sketches a simple,
linear relationship between vertices of a largely artificial dualism—is that one can easily cite applications
that strain the descriptive power of the framework’s taxonomy. Where, for example, might one place a
course (as described by Foster [2007] or Clark [2010]) taught in a classroom in the Second Life virtual
environment? The environment in which learning takes place is purely technological (the classroom exists
only as data on a server and images on a computer screen) but the method of instruction mirrors that of a
traditional classroom, with whiteboard, textbooks, and a telepresent instructor avatar at the front of the
room speaking with/to a group of telepresent students. Is this an example of more hybridity, as the
experience takes place entirely through computer-generated means? Is it less hybridity because, virtual
reality aside, this technologically-saturated experience is indistinguishable from a traditional classroom
that’s free of any technology more complex than a chalkboard? And if this Second Life traditional
classroom integrates other forms of technology (an online writing lab, a digital library, an online forum)
even as it otherwise faithfully remediates a traditional classroom experience, is it then situated at multiple
positions on the continuum, involving multiple levels of hybridity?
Setting aside that extreme example, how might I describe the pilot courses for this study using this taxonomy of hybridity? One of my courses met in a traditional classroom with a weekly computer lab session: a hybrid classroom, in Gouge’s taxonomy, but positioned toward the less hybrid end of the scale due to the 50/50 split between traditional classroom and computer lab classroom. The other course was an online-only course, delivered primarily through a course website but supplemented with video- and audio-chat sessions in an online teleconference application: also a hybrid classroom, albeit one closer to the more hybrid end of the scale. As an instructor, I experienced the two pilot courses as being distinctly different, and could describe the largest of those differences using the basic taxonomy as above; but I also found it difficult to express the fine distinctions between the courses, and within each course, as points on a simple scale of technological hybridity. That difficulty arose because I might as easily position either course at different points on the spectrum depending on how my students and I perceived and used technology in the course.

For example, in the Spring 2009 pilot offering of my courses, students in the traditional classroom course more often spoke with me one-on-one via the text and audio chatrooms that I’d established for the students in my distance course. After the third week of class (when I gave my traditional students the option to reach me via chatroom or audiochat application), I rarely had a traditional student initiate a face-to-face meeting: not before or after class meetings, not in my office. Rarely, meaning twice. According to my field notes from the pilot study, from the third week of class to the last, I held exactly two face-to-face discussions initiated by students in the traditional classroom as compared to 47 synchronous text chat and voice-to-voice audiochat sessions initiated by those same students. Is that traditional classroom course still a less hybrid classroom (based on the content and mode of our classroom meetings), or has it drifted into the realm of a more hybrid online classroom (as the key interactions between students and instructor take place entirely within online technological environments)? As another example, consider that, because of the specific discussion sessions that they chose to attend (refer back to my discussion of the pilot courses in Chapter Two), certain students in the
distance class experienced the course as a *more* hybrid classroom with activities structured around access to and use of computer technologies and digital media; while other students, in the same course, experienced sessions involving round-table discussions, formal oral presentations, and directed writing workshops that (barring the technological interface) would be indistinguishable from activities in a *less* hybrid, traditional classroom with no access to computers. Using this taxonomy, there’s a strong argument for placing the course at multiple points on the spectrum depending on which particular student’s experience one wishes to describe.

That fluidity points toward my second reason for reevaluating this taxonomy of hybridity. It is a framework that defines the practice of pedagogy in terms of non-human actors: the spaces, tools, and environments that comprise the boundaries within which education takes place, that enable and constrain interactions between students and between students and instructor, and that shape the ways in which all the participants ultimately interpret and apply the core course concepts. That definition runs counter to my own classroom experiences, in which place and tools are largely incidental (and when they are not, feature as obstacles to overcome rather than integral parts of a whole). When I think about the courses I teach, and when I describe them to others, human actors and actions are the defining characteristics— *Who* is the class, as students and instructor? What do we talk about? What do we do as part of the classroom experience? What are our strengths and weaknesses, as writers and speakers? What are our relationships?

Gouge engages with that same tension in her article. She positions her argument as a way to engage with, and respond to, earlier observations by Anson (1999) and Selfe (1999) regarding the reticence of communication faculty to fully engage with the applications and implications of technology. In separate articles, Anson and Selfe observe that humanist faculty resist the mechanization of communication pedagogy into hybrid forms out of concern for the social impact that these hybrid classrooms might have on students and instructors. Anson, for example, notes that
Writing teachers arrange and participate in small groups in the classroom, talk with students before and after class, walk with them to other buildings, meet them in offices, and encourage students to respond to each other instead of through the teacher. Distance learning has yet to overcome the virtuality of its space to draw all students into such interpersonal relationships. Teachers often report feeling detached from the students at the distant sites, unable to carry on "extracurricular" conversations with them. (273) He notes that that sense of detachment, in which the same technologies that connect disparate learners and students into a distance education classroom also create interpersonal distances that reduce or alter the impact of communication pedagogy, is a reason why the composition community views “computers as poor substitutes for old-fashioned forms of human interaction” (271) and resists ceding control of classroom space to those technologies. Selfe frames much the same argument in terms of the communication instructor’s ethical responsibility to promote critical literacy to and with their students. Incorporating technology into the communication classroom is not simply a matter of helping students work effectively with communication software and hardware, but, rather, also a matter of helping them to understand and to be able to assess—to pay attention to—the social, economic, and pedagogical implications of new communication technologies and technological initiatives that affect their lives. (432) Both Anson and Selfe also emphasize the economic disparities that hybrid classroom and distance learning technologies introduce (or emphasize) in educational settings, noting that economically advantaged institutions are more likely to invest in higher-quality technologies and higher-quality support for instructors, and that economically advantaged students are more likely to have access to the technology required to participate in hybrid and distance courses, so are more likely to benefit from those educational opportunities. They conclude that communication faculty should cautiously integrate these technologies into the curriculum, with an eye toward ensuring that the technology does not overshadow the vital social and ethical role that communication coursework plays in the overall educational experience. Gouge reaches much the same conclusion, though without the explicit emphasis on the democratizing power of critical literacy.

Gouge also engages with a component of Selfe’s argument that I believe is critical to any discussion of hybrid communication classrooms: the problem of technological transparency. In the
preamble to her argument, Selfe notes that “technology is either boring or frightening to most humanists” (412) not because technology is necessarily alien to the practice of communication, but because the practice of communication is so closely enmeshed with technologies that those technologies are rendered transparent.

When we use the more familiar technology of books, for instance, it is mostly within a familiar ideological system that allows us to ignore, except for some occasional twinges of conscience, the persistence of print and our role in this persistence. It allows us to ignore the understanding that print literacy functions as a cultural system (413) It is these “twinges of conscience,” magnified by the view that the human actors in a pedagogical setting are “made of much finer stuff than the machine(s) in our midst” (414) that encourage communication faculty (and humanist faculty in general) to view other technologies—the technologies that make hybrid and online classrooms possible—as transparent, unimportant features of the classroom that may be safely relegated to the background of the disciplinary conversation.

We now think of computers, for instance, as a simple tool that individual faculty members can use or ignore in their classrooms as they choose, but also one that the profession, as a collective whole—and with just a few notable exceptions—need not address too systematically. (414)

Selfe’s response to this disciplinary tendency to ignore the technology is to call for active attention to the implications and uses of these technologies, to forestall a discipline-wide drift toward a technologically-driven classroom that both dehumanizes communication pedagogy and disenfranchises economically-vulnerable student (and faculty) populations. I see Gouge’s framework of the hybrid classroom, or rather, the disciplinary framework that she distills and articulates in her article, as a direct attempt to respond to Selfe’s admonition regarding the consequences of allowing technology to be “a simple tool.” This framework places technological choices at the center of the discussion; it focuses disciplinary attention on the technological characteristics of the classroom by defining the communication classroom in relation to technology.
I would submit, however, that while this framework has value as a means of describing the relative presence (or absence) of technology in a communication classroom, it still falls short of addressing Gouge’s (and Selfe’s, and Anson’s) core concern:

The degree to which using [distance learning technologies] has the potential to create more efficient programs and increase student learning opportunities depends entirely on how they are used. There is currently no empirical evidence that definitively suggests that any specific Web-based communication tool guarantees a higher level of competency or efficiency, and so the subjective, human element is still a very important variable in the implementation of courses and programs. (357)

As I noted in Chapter One, those “subjective, human elements” (student engagement, context-rich course material, and instructor engagement) are precisely the factors that determine the relative success of an online communication course (or any communication course, for that matter); and as I discussed in Chapter Two, converting a traditional, less hybrid course into an online, more hybrid course is not simply a matter of capturing course content and delivering it online. Rather than discuss and design communication courses using a single variable (more or less technological hybridity; physical classroom, online classroom, or hybrid blend), I propose a broader taxonomy that includes those three humanizing elements as a means of more completely addressing Selfe’s goal of attention: to classroom technology, but also to the human impact of technologically-mediated learning.

**Student Engagement: Time and Immediacy**

I took this class online because I didn’t want to attend classes at a certain time and place. I don’t think you understand what an online class is.

Anonymous, mid-term course review, Summer 2009 pilot course

In their assessments of the pilot versions of my course, my students overwhelmingly identified two features that “do not belong” in an online course: synchronous course events (such as the online class discussion sessions), and assignments, such as the pilot course’s team project, that require students to communicate with each other using synchronous means. That student perception points toward a tension
that must be addressed in any online communication course, between synchronous and asynchronous interactions. Both types of interactions are useful in a communication classroom, whether traditional, hybrid, or online; either, in an online class, will require a significant investment of instructor time and effort to incorporate well. As such, the balance between the two is a crucial design question, particularly for a course adapted from an existing traditional classroom offering in which a blended approach is more natural and less labor-intensive to achieve.

It is also a question that is largely independent of technology: both forms of interaction, and blended forms, are supported by commonly available hybrid and online classroom technologies. As illustrated in Figure, the distinction between asynchronous and synchronous interaction instead represents different approaches to building and directing student engagement with course content and practices. The asynchronous end of the spectrum includes activities and practices that de-emphasize time dependency by giving students control over how and when they participate in the course. That temporal flexibility comes at the expense of immediate contact and interaction between students, and between students and

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Figure 2: Synchronous and asynchronous features form a continuum of student engagement and investment with course practices and schedules
instructor. The synchronous end emphasizes immediate, continuous discourse between course participants, but imposes a more inflexible schedule to ensure that all participants are able to engage in a coherent dialectic.

For example, one might create an asynchronous communication course with all course content, material, and assignments delivered via DVD/ROM; students could complete course content and assignments in their own time, on their own schedule (and receive credit for the course when they completed assignments linked to list of target learning goals), with the whole process supported by an online forum (for supplemental instruction and peer review) with a faculty moderator. That type of course might also be freed from the standard university schedule, making it a strong choice for the non-traditional students with non-traditional time commitments that are more common in distance learning settings. Similarly, one might deliver a purely synchronous course (such as Carter’s [2010] Second Life course) in which all or most activities take place in a physical, telecast, or digitally-simulated classroom environment. Students might engage in discussions, activities, and compose and deliver texts in a live setting with a high potential to encourage interaction and collaboration, but with as much or more time-dependence as a traditional classroom.

As with the continuum of technological hybridity, neither end of the spectrum exclusively correlates with a “best practices” approach to course design or positive student outcomes. Rather, the literature supports an individualized approach to asynchronous and synchronous features, based on learning goals and student population. A study by DuFrene, Lehman, Kellermanns, and Pearson (2009), for example, observed that while specific technologies in hybrid or distance business communication classrooms did not correlate with successful student outcomes, students engaged best with technological tools and classroom implementations of those tools that were deliberately selected to engage specific student interests and learning styles. Similarly, several recent articles discuss ways to combine student activities and interests with asynchronous, synchronous, or blended approaches to heighten student engagement with the course. Patch (2010), for example, describes using Wikipedia as a tool for
asynchronous course research and composition, as well as an aid for hybrid classroom activities; though McCaffery (2010) offers a cautionary take on the topic, noting that students may engage more with the meta-requirements of the course structure than with the actual practice of engaging with Wikipedia’s discourse community. Strasma (2010) describes using Google documents as a means of introducing synchronous communication tasks to asynchronous settings (and for addressing issues of critical technological literacy in the communication classroom); and Clark (2010) notes ways to incorporate a blended approach, including offering students the choice of both synchronous and asynchronous means to respond to and engage with classroom activities.

Course Content: Abstraction, Situation, and Contextual Engagement

I liked that I could decide what I wanted to do for most of the assignments, because that way I could use this course as part of my internship. Like, I could be in a meeting and say “Sure, I’ll write that report,” and then know that I could do it for the class, too. It made me use the lessons to get my work done. … If you can do that with the assignments, why don’t you do that with the book and the lessons? I don’t want to read about fund-raising letters, because I’m not going to do that. I don’t want to hear about brochures. That’s not relevant to me.

“Simone,” follow-up interview, Spring 2009 pilot course

Most of the students in my pilot courses responded well to the open-ended nature of my course’s major assignments. They were pleased that they could choose topics, audiences, and purposes that were directly relevant to their personal and professional interests, or of direct use in their job sites or internships. While they noted that the assignments were complex and made substantial demands on their time and attention, those negatives were offset by the fact that the assignment products were useful outside of the class. That said, a vocal minority expected brief, formally-structured assignments with narrowly-defined instructions, objectives, and grading rubrics (for example, one student said that she’d prefer an assignment to write a persuasive letter to a given audience, about a given topic and with clearly-defined persuasive goals—she noted the chapter problems in the textbook as good examples—over the
assignment that asked her to write a persuasive letter on a topic of her choice, to an audience of her choice). In follow-up interviews, these students explained that they associated such assignments with online courses, and appreciated the certainty of a narrower, but less situated topic over the ambiguity of a more open-ended assignment structure. Such assignments support a more flexible time commitment on the student’s part, and can be completed in the absence of any instructor support (one student noted that she was surprised at how easily she could reach me when she had a question about course assignments, but resented the fact that she had questions because she “didn’t know what I wanted”). This dichotomy points toward a key design consideration for any online communication course: how situated or abstracted should the course material and assignments be?

As noted in Chapter One, situated, contextualized course material and activities are associated with strong student outcomes in online communication courses. In their study of how specific distance learning technologies impact business communication student performance, DuFrene, Lehman, Kellermanns, and Pearson (2009) correlated the strongest outcomes with activities and materials that were linked to student interests. The nature and context of assignments and the way(s) in which those assignments were linked to student learning styles were far better predictors of success than the technologies used in the course. Similarly, Carpenter (2009) notes that students in contemporary communication courses already possess substantial genre knowledge and rhetorical awareness (as well as skill using technological media); he suggests that the best practice in hybrid communication courses is to help students situate that knowledge and awareness with content and activities that lead them to apply course material in their (extensive) daily communication practices. Carpenter frames his argument in terms of foundational communication courses, though he cites Carter’s (2007) discussion of more advanced communication pedagogy; Carter’s recommendations (and the observations of a linked study by Carter, Ferzli, and Wiebe [2007] on apprenticeship genres in academic / professional communication) make the same argument for business and professional communication courses: students respond best to communication tasks that are situated in professional or disciplinary practice. As one practical example,
refer to Yu (2010), who advocates supplementing traditional assignment academic assessment methods in business communication courses with workplace assessment genres (performance reviews, self-assessment reviews, critical incident reviews) as a way to link course activities with actual professional practices, and encourage students to critically engage with those practices.

Based on those arguments, one would be tempted to assume that, on the continuum of contextual engagement illustrated in Figure 3, the best practices for an online communication course lie toward the more situated end of the spectrum. Certainly, some of the most powerful professional communication pedagogies involve situated learning, and these pedagogies might adapt well to online or distance learning environments: an online communication course delivered to a learning community of students employed at a specific co-op location, for example, or a course limited to students completing an internship (with course assignments and assessments drawn from tasks at each internship site). However, the pedagogical features at the more abstracted end of the spectrum, which emphasizes more generic course materials and activities over individualized instruction, offer several attractive advantages for online communication courses. Instructor workload and time commitment are reduced at that end of the spectrum, as both
course development and delivery are simplified under this model: course content can be developed once and delivered to a wide audience of students (rather than the individualized, labor-intensive practices necessary for highly situated pedagogies), and concrete assignments with fixed responses (though abstracted from individual students’ actual experiences) lend themselves to automated assessment means. This kind of course offering might be effective, for example, as part of a Communication Across the Curriculum approach to professional communication pedagogy in which generic communication instruction (such as basic rhetorical awareness, basic genre knowledge, and orthography) supplements situated, communication-intensive coursework in individual disciplines.

**Instructor Role: Presence and Absence**

“Troy” is a student in the Summer pilot offering. Late one evening, he contacts me on Skype to ask a question about a lab assignment. After I answer his question, he hesitates, then asks, “Are you ok? There’s nothing wrong, I mean, in your life—is there?”

I am taken aback by the question. I have never had a student make such a personal observation, and certainly didn’t expect it from a student I’d only met through a one-inch square video window. I assure him that I’m fine, and ask why he thought I wasn’t. He tells me that he’s listened to the last few online lessons, and that my voice was deeper on them than it was on the first lessons. He thought I sounded depressed, or sick. I am neither, but I’d recorded the last lessons using a cheap microphone that cut out the treble tones from my voice and added a slight reverb: the net effect is a mildly somber-sounding timbre on the online lessons.

In a follow-up interview, I ask Troy if he usually feels comfortable asking his instructors that kind of personal question. He tells me he doesn’t, but he felt that—because of all the time he spent listening to me talk to him through his headphones, and because he could call me on Skype anytime he wanted—he thought he knew me better than most of his professors.

In follow-up interviews to the pilot courses, my students told me that in past online courses, most of their interaction with the course instructor was through email, posts on the class forums, and through class-wide announcements in WebCT; being able to see and speak to an instructor in an online course is a novel experience for most of them. The amount of direct contact is a new experience for me as well. In a
traditional class, I see and speak to my students during class meetings and in fixed office hours; although I have posted specific office hours for my online class, I leave Skype open in the background whenever I work on my computer, so, practically speaking, my office hours extend from dawn through the late evening. As such, I receive student visits throughout the day.

In Chapter One, I noted that a third predictor of student success in online communication courses is instructor involvement: the more engaged and present an instructor is in the online environment, the more likely students are to invest time and effort in the course, and the stronger their outcomes are likely to be. That observation is largely independent of which technologies are used to deliver a hybrid course, as an engaged instructor may be a consistent, moderating presence in an online forum, an insightful commentator in blog comments or emails, or an active facilitator in a chat application (whether text or audio/video). Nor are other defining features of traditional classrooms absent from online hybrid classrooms: DePew and Lettner-Rust (2009), for example, note that the ways in which students and instructors construct authority and interpersonal distance in online communication classrooms are directly comparable to those in traditional classrooms; and Mueller (2009) offers a taxonomy for defining and directing student underlife and backchannels in online communication classrooms. Instructor presence is as important in online hybrid classrooms as it is in traditional classrooms, and the amount and type(s) of instructor presence must be a critical component of online communication course design.

Figure 4 (on the next page) illustrates a continuum of instructor presence in online communication courses, ranging from more integrated settings in which (in the most advanced cases) the course instructor functions as a peer mentor in active dialectic with students, to more diffuse settings with little direct interaction between students and instructor (including course delivery methods in which students do not experience the presence of an instructor at all). As with course content, it is tempting to assume that a more integrated, more situated instructor presence is an ideal goal for online
communication courses; a course design with frequent, synchronous communication between course participants (including the instructor), or one in which students have the opportunity to (or are required to) work one-on-one with an instructor or tutor in an online writing lab setting have obvious potential benefits (as do settings, such as that suggested by Pennell and Miles (2009), in which students are required to engage in team-based knowledge building and feedback that can distribute the authority of an instructor throughout the class). More diffuse instructor presence in an online communication course, however, offers other, potentially attractive prospects that can be weighed against the benefits of a direct interpersonal relationship between instructor and students: a diffuse instructor presence is a way of conserving instructor time and effort. This approach need not take the simple—and undesirable—form of an unresponsive instructor. In an online setting, for example, it is possible to have multiple instructor presences that distribute the course workload among multiple faculty: one instructor might undertake the effort of creating dynamic course content, while another might respond to student assignments. Similarly, in a course with a very large student population, students might attend lecture sessions via live-video stream from a lead instructor, but interact directly with a secondary instructor or TA in a linked text chat session.

Figure 4: Instructor role and presence falls along a continuum from diffuse (or absent) to integrally partnered with students.
From Hybrid Classroom Pilot to Multimodal Online Course

With this expanded taxonomy in hand, my business communication courses become much simpler to describe and compare. Both courses share a student population with similar demographics, backgrounds, and learning needs, and both employ similar approaches to addressing those needs through the available technologies.

In terms of time and immediacy, both courses are situated toward the more synchronous end of the continuum. Both courses feature a structured system of time-limited assignments, arranged on a framework of time-dependent lessons. The students in my distance course may experience those lessons in the place or time of day of their choosing, but also experience them in the same order and distribution as the students in my traditional classroom; and while their direct, synchronous classroom experience (in the class discussion sessions) involves less actual time spent in a synchronous environment than the traditional students, the smaller, more intimate class discussion settings ensure that each individual student has the same (or more) opportunity for face-to-face interaction with their peers and me, mediated through the technology of the Wimba Live virtual classroom.

In terms of course content, both courses employ a blend of situated and abstracted content and activities. I must deliver both courses to an audience of students from widely disparate disciplines, with widely varying career paths; as such, the course material (in the form of my lectures, as well as ancillary materials such as the textbook) must necessarily fall toward the more abstracted end of the continuum. However, in both courses, I’ve chosen a structure that empowers students with the responsibility of situating the course for themselves and their peers—by selecting the content, audience, purpose, and contexts of their major course assignments (and sharing those assignments with the class), and by contributing artifacts and scenarios from their individual practices and career paths for the class to discuss.
Finally, in terms of instructor presence, I have deliberately designed both courses so that I am a blended instructor and can draw on both ends of the continuum. Because an engaged, interactive instructor is part of a strong communication course—and because, frankly, I would not find a course enjoyable if it lacked direct interaction between students and myself—I have designed both courses around opportunities for interactive dialectic, both within structured class settings and in one-on-one settings outside of scheduled course events. My students have multiple means of communicating with me, both synchronous and asynchronous, and their access to me (through online means, at least) is relatively unrestricted. However, I have elected to adopt certain aspects from the more diffuse end of the continuum in order to reduce some of my workload as the course instructor: I provide direct, personalized feedback to individual students on a subset of assignments (the major course assignments only) and use streamlined rubrics and best-practices exemplars to provide feedback for other assignments en masse; I use the recording and archival features of the course website (shared between the two courses) to answer questions and clarify course concepts and assignments; and I encourage students to seek out instructors within their discipline and career paths who can offer more targeted communication advice.

With those similarities observed, I can return to the question of hybridity with more confidence. Both courses involve hybrid classrooms, and both, in the end, contain a blend of online and traditional face-to-face instruction. The principal difference between the courses is the proportion of online to face-to-face instruction in each course, and the technolog(ies) I use to deliver those face-to-face experiences to my students. In the remaining chapters of this document, I will attempt to assess whether those differences had an impact on my students’ learning outcomes, and—still mindful of Selfe’s admonition to pay attention to the technologies I use in my courses—how the different technologies I employed in these courses impacted my students’ understanding of the course, of the material, and the relationship of both to their professional and personal lives.
Chapter 4: The Disembodied Classroom

“Karen” and “David” are parents: each has a three year old in the house, and both routinely bring their children to class discussion sessions.

Tonight, Karen and David have asked me to attend a team meeting for their semester project (a group project). Their group plans to finalize the organizational structure for their report at the meeting, and they want my input on their decision. While the team uses the voice and video chat channels of Wimba Live to hash out their plans, I offer comments and ask questions through the text chat channel.

In Wimba Live, the camera follows the microphone: the system displays the camera feed for whoever is currently speaking. As David begins to respond to one of his teammates’ questions, his daughter climbs into his lap and begins mugging for the camera. In moments, Karen has picked up her son and put him on camera too.

The two toddlers are enchanted with the videoconference. They chat with each other, and eventually break into song, while the adults take their discussion to the text chat window without missing a beat.

The intent of this study is to compare the outcomes of two Business Communication courses; I designed the two courses involved in this study to be as similar as possible (in terms of content, course activity, and assignments). In the descriptions that follow, I will describe the content and structure that both courses hold in common, and note where the courses differ significantly either from each other or from the standard template for English 302. Note that Appendix A includes complete assignment sheets for all of the Major Assignment prompts. This chapter concludes with a description of my experimental method: the data collection implements I used to investigate my research questions for this course.

Content Delivery

While the content and activities I present in the two courses are nearly identical, the method and organization of my content delivery is one of the major differences between the two courses. In the traditional classroom course, I focus on a combination of focused lecture (usually directed around a specific artifact or example from the text), small group discussion, and call-and-response style review. In the traditional classroom section, I hold class twice each week for 75 minutes per session (with time leftover for questions, or for in-class organization of team projects work). Each week includes one session
in a computer lab, and one in a classroom setting; during the semester in which I collected data, I held the lab session each Tuesday and the classroom session each Thursday. Typically, I introduce major topics in the first part of the lab session, direct students through discussions (individually and in small groups) of artifacts and scenarios available via online sources, ask students to begin work on the week’s lab assignment, and end with a class discussion of strategies for completing the lab. During the classroom session, I present variations on the primary course topics, introduce more complex discussion scenarios, and require students to present (individually or in small groups) on their responses to those scenarios. In both sessions, I often begin by displaying and discussing examples of student work (on labs, on draft materials they’ve prepared for assignments), which enables me to provide feedback to the room, and to require students to practice providing feedback to their peers.

Students in the online course experience the same topics and activities, divided between two delivery mechanisms. I provide most of the lecture and artifact-discussion content in the form of recorded online lessons, with directed self-study activities built into each recording. In each pre-recorded lesson, I begin with a brief orienting review of module concepts, followed by the same focused lecture topics (generally supported by the same artifacts) and directed analysis exercises (in which I ask the student to stop the recording, analyze an artifact, and restart the recording for commentary). Individual and group discussion activities (including peer feedback sessions and presentations) take place in 90-minute class discussion sessions linked to each weekly topic, and held in the Wimba Live virtual classroom. I work with students in variations of the same small group discussion topics during synchronous class discussion sessions, along with brief student presentations (either spoken presentations, or spoken presentations supplemented by presentation graphics delivered through the teleconferencing software). Students in the online course are required to sign up for and attend only six class discussion sessions over the course of the semester, so they experience fewer interactive activities than their peers in the traditional classroom; however, the more intimate teleconference setting (I limit attendance to no more than 10 student participants) means that individual students receive more individual attention from me and their peers,
and that I can elicit more individual contributions to the discussion from individual students than I can in the larger classroom setting. Students in the online course may therefore experience the activities in a different time order than their peers in the traditional classroom. It’s common for the distance students to attend a class discussion session, engage in group discussions and other activities, and then access the online lesson for the lecture portion of the class.

Example of Content and Activity Delivery

I’ll illustrate the differences between these two content delivery modes with a concrete example: the class content surrounding the content and organizational strategies for resumes. In the traditional classroom setting, I’ll introduce the session by directing students to read the chapter on resumes in the textbook, and asking students to prepare a draft copy of their own resume and bring it to class. At the class meeting, I:

- Ask the class as a whole to identify questions or concerns about the resume genre, and record those questions on the board.
- Break the class into small groups, assign a resume content area or planning topic to each group (header block, education section, work experience, resume audience, etc.), and direct each group to develop a set of best practices advice, based on their reading and experience. I then ask each group to present their advice to the room, while I act as a moderator.
- Present 2-3 sample student resumes to the room, and moderate a group critique of each. We identify strong points, weak points, and strategies for revision (or for repurposing each resume to a different audience/job).
- Return students to their groups, and direct them to exchange and peer review resumes using the best practices advice they’ve developed and the techniques I’ve modeled in the larger discussion. I also ask each group to select one resume to share with the room; I circulate and “help” each group choose a resume that will advance the class discussion, or point toward an answer to one of the class’ questions from the start of the session.
- Moderate a full class discussion: each group presents one resume (using the document camera) and leads the class in a critique, while I offer corrective or complicating commentary.
- Conclude the class by leading the class in a brief discussion to answer any unresolved questions from the start of the session.
Thus, in the traditional classroom, I structure my lecture time around a group-based knowledge creation model, in which the students contribute major points and I offer additional shades of meaning or complicating observations. For example, one of the sample resumes I use in step 3 contains a certain amount of puffery, which leads to a useful class discussion on the ethics of positive emphasis in resume writing; in step 4, I nudge the groups to select student resumes with similar complicating issues for their class presentations. All students receive some peer review experience (both giving and receiving) as part of the class session, though only a small subset of students (4-5 in each class meeting) have the opportunity to receive peer feedback from the full class (and from me).

In the online course, I deliver steps 2 and 3 as a recorded online lesson that includes a brief overview of the major topics (the lecture), sample documents with directed and self-study critique, and the same sorts of complicating observations that I add to the traditional classroom activity. During the class discussion session that’s linked to this online lesson, I moderate up to 10 students through steps 1, 4, 5, and 6 (with room for a variation on step 2, in which I separate students into break-out groups and ask them to find online resources that add to, contradict, or complicate the class readings and lesson, and present those resources to the room). Because of the smaller, more intimate setting, every student who attends this session has an opportunity to present their resume to the class (by uploading the document to WebCT, or displaying it using the desktop sharing application) and receive feedback from other students and me. However, as students may choose to attend a different session in the same module (in Module 1, for example, a student might choose to attend a session focusing on cover letters/emails, or a session on interviewing techniques) not every student in class will have the opportunity for group review of their work. They can still seek out and receive resume reviews as part of the Job Packet major assignment, but those peer reviews are unlikely to include a dialectic group discussion.
Basic strategy and modular course content

Given the diverse background and intended career paths of the students enrolled in these courses, I designed the course material around general principles of professional communication, and require students to learn and demonstrate facility with standard, generic professional genres (memos, emails, letters, reports, proposals). The major course assignments, however, are open-ended: in each of the major assignments, I require students to choose topics, genres, audiences, and rhetorical situations from their own majors/career paths and use the assignments to practice specific ways to apply these general principles in individually-meaningful ways.

In general, my course design addresses the basic requirements established for English 302 in the ISU Manual for Advanced Communication. I have arranged the course material into four modules:

**Module 1: Job Search Communication.** In addition to focusing on specific written and spoken genres related to the job search process—job advertisements, resumes, cover documents, interviews, follow-up communication—this Module also introduces the core course concepts of audience analysis, rhetorical analysis, goodwill, and the principles of visual design. I prefer to handle this module at the beginning of the class for several reasons: first, the subject matter is immediately useful to students, which makes it more likely that they’ll engage with it (and the course). Second, the specific genres involved in job search communication (resumes, cover/application letters, interview question/answers) are relatively fixed and relatively well-understood by many students, which allows me to introduce the basic course principles in an accessible way. Third, these genres also allow me to focus on basic business composition techniques (brevity, lists/outlines, specific supporting detail, mechanical correctness) using genres in which there’s an established social / cultural expectation that those techniques will be in use.

The Module assignment for this segment of the course is the Job Packet (one resume and two cover letters, targeted toward a specific job advertisement).

**Module 2: Basic Professional Communication Techniques.** The overall learning goal for this module is for students to learn, articulate, and demonstrate a complex, rhetorical approach to professional
communication: identify potential audiences, purposes, contexts, and media, and practice transforming messages to meet the exigencies that those categories require. This module includes a more detailed discussion of audience analysis and rhetorical analysis, techniques for building goodwill, and techniques for assessment and revision (including basic principles of usability and audience-centered design). During this module, I direct students through analysis activities of communication scenarios, reverse-analysis of written, spoken, and visual communication artifacts, and guided revision exercises.

The Module Assignment for this segment of the course: Informative Report (a 2-3 page formal report, or the equivalent in another medium or genre, tailored for the specific needs and purposes of a primary audience in a specific rhetorical situation). This assignment also requires students to conduct an interview with a subject matter expert, to supplement information they gain from secondary sources. I actively encourage students to select topics and audiences from their daily practice: subjects, people, and purposes from their internship sites, from organizations in which they participate, from hobbies, and from other classes, with an eye toward making the assignment product into a living act of communication for a real audience in a real context (outside of the simple context of the classroom).

Module 3: Basic Message Strategies. This module introduces organizational and rhetorical techniques for framing basic positive and negative messages. During this module, I direct students through detailed analyses of artifacts, and require them to structure and compose messages (written and verbal) in response to given scenarios. My intention is that students develop and demonstrate an understanding of effective organizational strategies for professional messages, and articulate ways to adapt those strategies to accommodate the exigencies of professional settings. This module also includes material on basic persuasive techniques (for both written and spoken communication), and on organizational and rhetorical strategies for larger formal communication efforts (formal presentations, formal reports and proposals).

The Module Assignment for this segment is a collection of Three Messages (three formal business letters: one positive, one negative, one persuasive/sales), supplemented by related spoken
communication tasks in class/class discussion meetings (revise a written document into a spoken text—a phone call, the opening turn in a conversation—on the same topic). I require students to choose topics and audiences from their daily practice: people and subjects that they can usefully address with basic business letters. I also ask students report back to the class on any responses they receive to these messages.

**Module 4: Presentation and Delivery.** This module includes more advanced topics in visual design (page layout and the visual display of information), verbal delivery of information, and strategies for linking written, spoken, and visual information. During this module, I challenge students to re-envision prose or tabular information as visual communication, to practice formatting visuals to highlight specific messages, analyze visuals for ethical communication issues, and practice using basic page layout techniques (chunk/label, text emphasis).

The Module Assignment for this segment is an Information Sheet, a one-page document employing the techniques of visual design to present a topic tailored for the specific needs and purposes of a primary audience in a specific rhetorical situation. I encourage students to repurpose the work they’ve already completed for the Module 2 Informative Report into this new format for a new audience, or to use this assignment to produce a presentation handout for their group project presentation assignment. Again, the intent behind the assignment is for students to practice these techniques on a topic, context, and audience that is familiar and meaningful to them.

**Amount of required writing**

I designed the courses around five major assignments: four assignments linked to four major content modules (completed individually), and a semester-long group assignment. Each individually-completed assignment involves a 3-4 page primary product (examples: a targeted resume and two cover letters; three formal business letters) and a 2-3 page analysis and reflection memo; the semester-long
group project includes a 2-3 page proposal memo, two 1-page progress report emails, and a 10-12 page formal report.

Students also complete shorter written lab assignments each week (12 over the course of the semester). These assignments involve 1-2 pages of written material, and are often directly linked to the major assignments; for example, one lab during Module 2 requires students to analyze the primary audience and rhetorical situation they plan to address with their Informative Report assignment. In addition, students in both classes complete short in-class written assignments (as noted below).

**WOVE emphasis**

In addition to the written work noted above, my course integrates spoken, visual, and electronic communication into the curriculum, in accordance with ISUComm best practices guidelines.

**Oral Communication.** I integrate spoken tasks with each written task the students complete. Students present progress updates, discuss their analysis and assessment practices, and provide feedback on other students’ work in both large-group and small-group settings. (All of these “minor” presentations are in addition to the formal group presentation they prepare and deliver as part of their semester-long project.)

Due to scheduling and technology limitations, students in the online course practice oral communication in small groups only (discussion sessions with no more than ten participants at a time), but deliver formal presentations in asynchronous formats that allow for review and feedback from larger audiences.

**Visual Communication.** Many of the written assignments in these courses have visual tasks embedded in them (page layout and design requirements; requirements for integrate specific types of visuals—such as data tables, flowcharts, Gantt charts, images—with the text). In addition, the fourth module assignment focuses on visual design; and one frequent challenge I issue to students during class discussions is to remediate written or spoken texts into visual formats. Students in the traditional
classroom course do so using the resources in the computer lab, chalkboard/whiteboard, and document camera; students in the online course can use the whiteboard features of the teleconferencing software, as well as desktop and file sharing applications.

**Electronic Communication.** Electronic communication is embedded in both courses. Students communicate with each other and with me using electronic means (email, discussion boards, video/audio chat), and major assignments include electronic communication as part of the assignment goals (in the Job Packet assignment, for example, students compose a formal written cover letter, then revise it into email format and discuss the revision strategies they employed).

**Revision**

I have embedded assessment and revision techniques are embedded in the course in several ways.

**Reviews and Revision.** Each of the five major assignments requires students to seek out multiple reviews of their primary products, use those reviews to improve the assignment before submission, and reflect on that practice. The specific review requirements vary by assignment. In the Job Packet assignment, students must obtain a review from a peer in the class (so that students practice giving as well as receiving feedback), and from an expert outside the class (someone with some expertise in judging applicants in their specific line of work, or someone—such as a human resources specialist—with general expertise in judging job search communication). This activity also includes the possibility of cross-section communication: many students request peer reviews through the discussion boards in WebCT, which are available to students from both sections.

**Conference and Revision.** Each student is required to hold one revision conference with me over the course of the semester. The student prepares all of the material for a module assignment, meets with me (in my office, or via video/voice chat), and uses our discussion to revise their work before submission.
Revise and Resubmit. As part of the final exam for the course, students have the opportunity to revise and resubmit one of the four module assignments, along with a discussion of how they employed course material to improve their work, for reconsideration (and a nominal increase in the assignment grade).

In-class writing

In addition to writing that they do in the lab, students in my traditional classroom course complete in-class writing assignments as part of daily discussions of course materials (these in-class writing assignments may be individual assignments, group assignments, or a combination). Students in my online course complete in-class writing assignments as parts of class discussion session exercises, which they submit either through text-chat applications or through the file and desktop sharing applications in the teleconferencing software, as well as timed writing assignments through the class site.

Collaboration

My course involves student collaboration on several levels.

Peer Review. As noted under Revision, above, students are required to seek out reviews of their work. One of the required reviews for each major assignment is a peer review from another student in one of my sections of English 302. I encourage students to use the email and discussion board features of WebCT to locate peer reviewers and exchange assignments; I also set up a text-chat room and Wimba Live classroom for students in both sections to use to discuss their work.

In-class Collaboration. Students collaborate on case studies during class meetings (or class discussion sessions, for the online students); they work together in teams to analyze communication situations or artifacts, devise solutions to communication problems, and present the results of their analyses to the class.
Semester-long Group Project. Students complete a team project over the course of the semester, in which they must collaborate on a research and analysis effort, then work together to formulate a series of recommendations based on their findings and prepare and deliver those findings to the class.

Most of that collaboration takes place outside the scope of the course. I do, however, provide students with a nominal amount of time in the lab session (for the traditional classroom students) and the class discussion sessions (for the distance students) to use for organization and planning activities.

Study populations

It’s just like a real course. Except I can take it during dinner.

“Karen” (Fall 2010 distance student), class discussion session.

The two sections involved in this study have comparable student populations. (Refer to Table 1, on the next page, for details). They represent a relatively even mix of genders (with a slight predominance of female students in the traditional section, and male students in the online section); a similar mix of class standings (students in the fourth or later year at the university predominate in both sections), and a similar mix of student majors (though Liberal Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies majors are much more common in the online section than in the traditional classroom section). The most significant differences in the two sections are average student age (based on self-reported data, the average age in the traditional classroom section is 22; the average age in the online section is 30) and career or job experience (again, based on self-reported data, 12 of 24 students in the traditional classroom section have held jobs or internships in their intended career path; 22 of 25 students in the online section have held jobs or internships in their intended career path).
Table 1: Student Populations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th># of Students</th>
<th>Class Standing</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Area of Study (#)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Classroom</td>
<td>24*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>25**</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
* 20 students consented to participate in the study.
** 23 students consented to participate in the study; two consenting students later withdrew from the course, and only contributed an induction response to the study.
Three primary research protocols

Out of three pilot sections and both experimental sections, “Darren” is the only student who has ever asked me to clarify the research protocols documented on the informed consent document, or to articulate the research method and goals. He’s majoring in a hard science, he is a junior author on six published research studies, and he aspires to become a tenured faculty member with his own research lab.

I outline the basic methodology, and as I begin to describe the overall goal of this research—to evaluate this new pedagogical method and formulate potential future implementation paths—he stops me. “So it’s not real research, then. It’s more like quality control.”

My proposed research study involves three data collection protocols: two quantitative methods, designed to investigate my primary research questions, and a qualitative method designed to provide a clarifying/complicating perspectives on the quantitative data.

This study was approved as an exempt study by the ISU Institutional Review Board. I describe each of these data collection protocols below; refer to the research protocol (approved under IRB ID: 08-498) in Appendix B to review the data collection instruments.

Evaluation of student progress / outcomes

Students responded to a pair of writing prompts, one administered at the start of the course, and one administered during the final exam period. In each prompt, I ask students to:

Write as a professional, for the benefit of a professional audience, using a professional communication genre.

Introduce themselves: provide their audience with an overview of their interests and pertinent biographical information, as well as a self-assessment of their communication ability.

Discuss their career plans and interests: What line of work do they intend to pursue? Why?

In the pre-course sample, I also ask students to reflect on their previous experiences with online classes and online course delivery, and to forecast the role (if any) that this business communication course will
have on their academic and professional career. In the post-course sample, I ask students to reflect on their experience with the online course content in this course, and identify the ways (if any) in which they feel the course material applies to their academic and professional lives. Refer to Appendix B for the full text of the writing sample prompt.

I compiled these student responses into a pair of packets for independent rating; to preserve participant anonymity, I replaced student names in these documents with generic pseudonyms (Sam Student and Sarah Student), then assigned a unique numerical code to each student before submitting the set of documents for rating. My students’ work was evaluated by a team of three raters: all non-academic professionals with extensive experience creating and evaluating professional communication.

My team of raters used a modified version of the protocol and rubrics developed by ISUComm for evaluating student progress in multimodal communication courses at ISU. I made two primary modifications to the basic ISUComm rubric:

- The categories on the basic rubric are Content, Organization, Register/Style, and Mechanics. I added Visual Appeal to the Organization category, and directed my raters to consider visual rhetoric and visual design choices as part of their evaluation of each document’s organizational effectiveness. (In my pilot data collection efforts, I added Visual Appeal as a separate category, but found that my raters had difficulty evaluating visual rhetoric separately from overall organizational techniques.)
- The ISUComm rubric includes six possible ratings. I reduced that number to five, combining the Beginning and None categories, and simplifying the descriptive rubric text to clarify the distinctions between the other categories. I also supplemented the basic rubric with a pair of decision-tree rubrics. (Again, in the pilot data collection effort, my raters had difficulty articulating the difference between the rubric ratings and applying those ratings consistently. My changes to the ISUComm rubric text, and my “cheat sheet” supplements, were developed from post-rating interviews with my pilot raters.)

Refer to the Appendix C for a complete copy of the rating rubric and ancillary materials.

The rating process began with a brief interview with each rater (conducted via teleconference and/or videoconference), in which we discussed the rating rubric, rating criteria, and rating process. I then conducted a norming session with each rater to ensure that they understood the rating process and could
apply the rubric in a uniform way. I provided each rater with three student responses (drawn from student work submitted during the pilot courses), asked the rater to evaluate each document using a speak-aloud protocol, and discussed their rating and their application of the rubric with them. I also conducted three additional norming sessions (with one norming response apiece) with each rater during the rating process: one norming session after they completed the 20th induction response, one before they began rating the outgoing responses, and one after the 20th outgoing response. In addition to their numeric ratings, I also asked the three raters to provide qualitative assessments and comments of the student responses. Refer to Appendix C for the rating materials (including the rating rubric) I provided to each rater.

Follow-up interviews

During the semester following completion of the course, I conducted follow-up interviews with students to determine their perceptions of the course, the course material, their experience with course protocols and pedagogical methods, and their self-assessment of the course’s value in their academic and professional career. I initially asked students (during the end-of-semester course review) to identify whether they would be willing to participate in a brief follow-up interview regarding their experience in the course; however, out of 25 students registered for the course, only two indicated interest in participating in an interview. In February, 2010, I repeated the request in an email to all of the student participants from the distance course. An additional nine agreed to participate in a follow-up interview (including two students from the traditional classroom section), for a total of 11 scheduled interviews.

I conducted each of the interviews by phone, recording the conversation (with my participants’ permission) and taking notes during the discussion. The interviews involved an open-ended discussion format, beginning with a basic set of discussion prompts:

- Describe an experience you had using the course website. How did the website impact the way(s) in which you approached and completed assignments?
- Describe an experience you had using the course lessons on the website / ancillary materials on the website. How did those materials impact your approach to the course?
• Describe an experience you remember from one of the course meetings / voicechats. How did course meetings impact your approach to the course?
• Describe an interaction you had in with another student. How did your interactions with other students impact your approach to the course?
• Describe an interaction you had in with the course instructor. How did your interactions with the instructor impact your approach to the course?

Refer to Appendix B for the complete interview protocol.

Comparison of instructor effort

Beginning in August, 2009 and ending in January 2010, I maintained a log of all time spent preparing and delivering the two courses, communicating with students, and evaluating student work. I based my log on the protocol developed by Reinheimer (2005) to compare the overall time and effort required by the two courses. The primary difference between my log and Reinheimer’s is granularity: for example, Reinheimer had a single category for Course and Class Preparation; my log breaks preparation tasks into content-related tasks (preparing lectures, class activities, and discussion prompts) and software/technical tasks (adding or maintaining content in WebCT and Wimba), distinguished by course. The intent behind these modifications is to replicate Reinheimer’s method while discerning more precisely where my time, as the course instructor, was spent in order to frame stronger recommendations for future efforts.
Chapter 5: Learning and Teaching in an Empty Room—Data and Outcomes

“Tyler” and his wife “Janice” participate earnestly in the post-semester interview. They both have pointed observations about the course and my pedagogical approaches. At the end, when I ask if they have any questions, Janice—a high school English teacher—asks about my methodology... what kind of data I’m collecting, how, how I’ll ensure validity. She is clearly skeptical, particularly of my qualitative methods, but she observes that with such a small research population, I probably need something else beside numbers to say anything meaningful.

Then Tyler asks when I’ll find out whether the experiment was a success or not. I start to respond, but Janice jumps in and answers for me. “It’s education,” she tells him. “It doesn’t work that way.”

I collected data from the two experimental courses during and after the Fall 2009 semester. In this chapter, I’ll summarize my principal findings for each of my three data collection efforts (independent rater reviews of student work, post-semester interviews with students, and instructor time-accounting logs) then discuss the major implications for each.

Student Work: Were the Courses Effective?

I administered the pre- and post-instruction data-collection instruments (as described in Chapter Four) to students in the paired experimental courses: the pre-instruction assignment during the first week of the course, and the post-instruction assignment during the final exam. I collected 47 pre-instruction memos (24 from the traditional classroom course and 23 from the online course) and 43 post-instruction memos (23 from the traditional course and 20 from the online course). I removed identifying information from the memos, assigned each memo a unique identifying number, and assembled each set of memos into rating packets for my independent raters. My raters evaluated each memo on the author’s performance in each of four categories—Content, Organization and Visual Rhetoric, Register and Style, and Grammar and Mechanics—assigning a numerical rating of 1 to 5 in each category (from least to most...
appropriate/professional). I also evaluated the two data sets using the rubric, to establish a baseline set of data to test rater reliability.

In this section, I’ll discuss the validity and reliability of this data collection method, and then present an analysis of the results of the independent raters’ evaluation of student outcomes in both courses.

**Raters, the rating process, and rater reliability**

I employed three independent raters to evaluate my students’ work.

- The first rater is a technical communicator, with 22 years of professional experience. Though she currently specializes in MIS Project Management documentation and auditing, she has worked as a professional communicator in the financial services, manufacturing, and retail sales industries. She completed the rating process for both data sets in a single, five-hour session. In this section, I’ll refer to her by the pseudonym “Writer.” Table 2 contains a summary of Writer’s mean rating overall, across each data set and category, and as compared to the baseline and the other two raters.

- The second rater is a human resources manager for a temporary staffing agency, specializing in filling contract positions for technical and professional jobs. She has managed a department with 15-20 employees for the past eight years, and has a total of 14 years of professional experience. She completed the rating process in two three hour sessions, separated by a week. I’ll refer to her with the pseudonym “Recruiter.” Table 3 summarizes Recruiter’s rating performance.

- The third rater manages a team of 31 sales, marketing, and professional services employees in a commercial real-estate management company. He has held that position for three years, and transitioned into management from a 10-year career in sales. He completed the rating process in two separate sessions on subsequent days, in three hours
for the first data set and two and half hours for the second. I’ll refer to him by the pseudonym “Manager.” Table 4 summarizes Manager’s rating performance.

I assembled these raters based on their qualifications as professionals with substantial experience creating and evaluating business communication, and based on convenience: the first two raters are former co-workers of mine, and the third was recommended by the first. I compensated these raters for their services via barter (for example, I “paid” Manager by helping his son prepare a resume and application materials for college internships).

After completing the rating process and receiving their data sets, I compared the three raters’ results with the baseline set to test for overall reliability. On the advice of a statistician, I analyzed the data using a t test for independent samples (mean baseline rating across all categories vs. mean rating across all categories for each rater) to evaluate whether the raters applied the analysis rubric in a uniform manner. I considered a difference to be significant at $p < .05$ (indicating a probability greater than 95% that substantial differences between rater responses are not due to chance). I also compared the raters’ data with each other to determine inter-rater reliability (over the entire data set, and for each individual category), using a $t$ test for independent samples (the mean rating, by rater, in each category). Again, I considered a difference to be significant at $p < .05$.

**Discussion**

Two of the three raters (Writer and Manager) appear to have applied the assessment rubric in a manner consistent with the baseline and with each other, while one rater (Recruiter) was at variance with the baseline and the other two raters, rating all samples lower, on average, than the baseline and the other raters). All three raters also varied from the baseline in the category of Grammar / Mechanics, rating the samples more negatively than the baseline; both Writer and Manager rated the samples marginally more negatively in that category than the baseline, while Recruiter rated the samples considerably more negatively. (Manager’s overall mean rating also varied from the baseline, but a more granular analysis
shows that Grammar/Mechanics was the only category in which his ratings varied significantly from the baseline. As with Recruiter, Manager also rated the samples somewhat more negatively than the baseline in that category.) In post-assessment interviews, I discussed the rating process and their evaluation strategies with each rater to help clarify the sources of rater- and inter-rater variance.

Table 2 - "Writer": Rater Application of Assessment Rubric, and Variance Between Raters

|                      | “Writer’s” Mean rating (scale of 1–5) | Baseline | Variance from (p > |t|) | Recruiter | Manager |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|------------|-----------|
| Overall (all sets, all categories) | 3.1388 | .2603 | <.0001 | .1397 |
| Pre-Instruction set | 2.8031 | .9159 | <.0001 | .0001 |
| Post-Instruction set | 3.6860 | .1743 | <.0001 | .1164 |
| Content | 3.0111 | .3099 | .0005 | .4380 |
| Organization | 3.4889 | .0770 | .0002 | .2777 |
| Register/Style | 3.2222 | .6033 | .0003 | .0602 |
| Grammar/Mechanics | 3.1777 | .0064 | .0010 | .0492 |

Significant results are highlighted.

Table 3 - "Recruiter": Rater Application of Assessment Rubric, and Variance Between Raters

|                      | “Recruiter’s” Mean rating (scale of 1–5) | Baseline | Variance from (p > |t|) | Recruiter | Manager |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|------------|-----------|
| Overall (all sets, all categories) | 2.9716 | <.0001 | <.0001 | <.0001 |
| Pre-Instruction set | 2.6010 | .0006 | <.0001 | .1169 |
| Post-Instruction set | 3.5687 | .0002 | <.0001 | <.0001 |
| Content | 2.8222 | .0010 | .0005 | .0002 |
| Organization | 3.3222 | .4488 | .0002 | .0034 |
| Register/Style | 3.0666 | .0858 | .0003 | .2997 |
| Grammar/Mechanics | 3.0444 | <.0001 | .0010 | .6399 |

Significant results are highlighted.
Table 4 - "Manager": Rater Application of Assessment Rubric, and Variance Between Raters

|                             | "Manager's" Mean rating (scale of 1–5) | Baseline | Variance from (p > |t|) | Recruiter | Manager |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------|---------------------|-----------|----------|
| Overall (all sets, all categories) | 3.0914                                | .0169    | .1397               | <.0001    |          |
| Pre-Instruction set         | 2.6436                                | .0075    | .0001               | .1169     |          |
| Post-Instruction set        | 3.75                                  | .8280    | .1164               | <.0001    |          |
| Content                     | 3.0666                                | .7509    | .4380               | .0002     |          |
| Organization                | 3.4333                                | .3871    | .2777               | .0034     |          |
| Register/Style              | 3.1222                                | .2591    | .0602               | .2997     |          |
| Grammar/Mechanics           | 3.0666                                | <.0001   | .0492               | .6399     |          |

Significant results are highlighted.

The discrepancy between Recruiter’s evaluation and that of the other two raters appears to be related to a difference in how each rater envisioned the rating task. In the assessment rubric instructions, I advised the raters to evaluate each memo as if it had been written from a co-worker or direct report. For example, the instructions state that a rating of 3 indicates that “This is acceptable work. As a supervisor or co-worker, you’d expect this quality of work from a co-worker or employee, and you’d accept it with few changes.” In post-assessment interviews, both Writer and Manager described the rating task in terms of evaluating peers’ work. In describing her overall observations about flaws in register from the sample memos, Writer noted

Writer: I used to work with a guy who’d write like that. He’d over-share, even in formal emails with clients. He’d tell them about his kids and his pets, sometimes about his lawn. I’d have to come in behind him and fix everything he wrote so people wouldn’t think the whole company was like that… You have to watch for that kind of tone from a co-worker.

MS: Why a co-worker?

Writer: You can’t change how your boss writes, so I don’t look. And I wouldn’t let a report write like that. I’d point to the style guide and say “Tone. Fix it.” But it’s different between equals. … I’d look for these things, and note them, and pick my battles, because some people are sensitive.

And in her summative evaluation of the post-instruction samples, Writer explained that she applied the rubric by asking herself
How would I bring this problem up with a co-worker? If it’s a “you might want to try this” problem, then that’s a three. If it’s “you need to do it this way,” that’s a two.

Similarly, Manager observed

The way I see it, these are supposed to be new people on my team. I have a team, but we’re all working together. I’m in charge, I’m the coach, but if I don’t play my part, we don’t win. If they don’t play, we don’t win. So it’s not about my way or the highway, it’s about being on the team, doing things like the team does, like me, or like this person, this person, or this person. As long as it works.

In contrast, Recruiter alternately described reviewing the memos from the perspective of a manager evaluating a subordinate, or in terms of submitting a new potential employee to a client for consideration.

For example, as part of her summative evaluation for the pre-course data set, Recruiter described her strategy this way:

Before I send a new prospect to a client, I sit them down and I ask them to sum up their qualifications to me, as if I were interviewing them. I want them to tell me who they are. If they hedge, or they’re not clear, I work with them or I make the decision and don’t send them. These memos are just like that, they cover the same ground. Three or higher, I’d submit those people, but I’d want to work over anything lower.

In a post-rating interview, when I noted that her ratings were somewhat more negative than other raters’, she observed

Maybe that’s because [the other raters] are used to working with experienced people, so they assume people are competent and that mistakes are flukes. I only get paid when my people get jobs. If I read a resume and there’s a spelling mistake, I can’t bet my paycheck that this person can land a job.

But, describing the post-instruction memos, she noted

I hire entry-level people, and they’re the same as these students. They’re the same age, they have the same majors and no experience. They write like this. I wish I could just hang numbers on their emails and phone calls like this, but instead I have to mentor and manage all of them.

In short, it appears that Recruiter looked at the memos from the perspective of having to personally mentor or “fix” any problems that emerged from the work, and was therefore more critical of the samples overall. The other two raters appear to have taken a more collegial approach, looking at flaws in my students’ work as points to discuss (perhaps more diplomatically) than problems to fix. In any case, while Recruiter’s evaluations were significantly lower than the baseline and the other raters’, my statistician
observed that they did not deviate far enough that her data required an adjustment to ensure an accurate analysis of student outcomes: Recruiter’s mean rating across all criteria in both data sets was 2.97 (of 5.0), compared to a baseline mean of 3.17, Writer’s mean rating of 3.13, and Manager’s of 3.09.

Similarly, all three raters diverged from the baseline in the category of Grammar / Mechanics: compared to a baseline mean rating of 3.34 (of 5.0), Writer produced an overall mean rating of 3.17 in that category, Recruiter a mean of 3.04, and Manager a mean of 3.06. In post-assessment interviews, all three raters noted that they considered orthographic errors to be a primary indicator of overall poor quality (Manager: “There was one with the first word spelled wrong. It wasn’t a bad memo, but that doesn’t matter. No one’s going to get past that.”), and expressed some difficulty separating the categories of Grammar/Mechanics and Register/Style. For example, Recruiter assigned one memo a rating of 1 in both categories, while the baseline was 1 for Register/Style and 3 for Mechanics/Grammar. The memo features profound errors in register (the student discusses his deeply-held religious and political beliefs at length, demonstrating active disdain for contrasting views in the process) but contains two minor spelling errors and otherwise acceptable usage; when we discussed her process for rating the memo, she explained

Recruiter: This one was exasperating. He has no judgment. He can’t spell. He doesn’t care about how I’m going to read this or how other people will read this.

MS: But is that a problem with how he’s representing himself as a professional, or how well he’s writing?

Recruiter: They’re the same thing. If he acts like he’s Godzilla and everyone else is Tokyo, or if he spells every other word wrong, or if he walks into an interview and sneezes in someone’s face, it’s the same result.

Later in the same interview, she noted that she judged the two categories together and only differentiated them where there was an obvious, compelling reason (“one might be well-written, but have a spelling mistake, so I’d give them the same number but take one back from the Grammar column”). Writer and Manager described similar strategies, which suggests that the evaluation criteria should be clarified to further differentiate the categories for a future use of this rubric.
Ideally, the rating process might also be controlled for time as well, to ensure that all raters complete the process in comparable ways. I suspect that that variable was not significant in this case (for example, Writer completed the rating task in one session and Manager completed it in two sessions separated by a day, and the difference between their mean overall ratings was non-significant) but, in a larger data collection effort, with additional raters, the differences might be magnified. Similarly, an ideal rating process would involve additional raters to produce a more robust data set. Overall, however, the three raters were able to use the evaluation rubric in a comparably uniform manner, which suggests that the data should present a reasonably accurate assessment of student outcomes in the two courses.

**Student outcomes**

After reviewing the data for rater and inter-rater reliability, I evaluated the data to determine student outcomes in the two courses. On the advice of a statistician, I analyzed the data using a series of *t* tests to compare the mean ratings from the pre-instruction sample to those in the post-instruction sample (as well as mean ratings pre- and post- in each category); I also compared the results from the two courses. I considered a difference to be significant at *p* < .05. I have summarized the results in Table 5 (on the next page); Appendix D contains more detailed data tables.

**Discussion**

Based on the assembled data, student performance in both courses demonstrates significant improvement across all categories, which suggests that students in both courses derived some pedagogical value from the course experience. Comparing the outcomes for the two courses yields similar observations; while student performance improved in both courses, the magnitude of that improvement was not significantly different for students in either course. In summary, both courses appear to have been effective in terms of positive student outcomes, and neither course was significantly more or less effective than the other.
Some minor points of interest emerged from the data (indicated by weakly significant $p$ values, slightly larger than .05). While student outcomes in both courses were not significantly different in any of the four categories, students in the traditional course showed a slightly larger margin of improvement in the category of Register / Style, while students in the online course demonstrated a slightly larger margin of improvement in the category of Grammar / Mechanics. (One might also observe that students in both courses showed the most improvement in that category.)

Table 5 - Summary of Independent Rater Assessments of the Experimental Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall (across all categories)</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Register/Style</th>
<th>Grammar / Mechanics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Traditional Classroom</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean pre-instruction rating</td>
<td>2.751</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean post-instruction rating</td>
<td>3.7148</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean $\Delta$</td>
<td>.9639</td>
<td>1.015</td>
<td>.717</td>
<td>.984</td>
<td>1.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
<td>.0015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online Classroom</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean pre-instruction rating</td>
<td>2.6666</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean post-instruction rating</td>
<td>3.5972</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean $\Delta$</td>
<td>.9306</td>
<td>.759</td>
<td>.648</td>
<td>.8148</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
<td>.0008</td>
<td>.0073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compare Both Sections</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difference in Mean pre-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>.1207</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>.1123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in Mean post-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>.5991</td>
<td>.6435</td>
<td>.5806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference between Mean $\Delta$'s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
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<td>.1195</td>
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<td>.3181</td>
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<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.946</td>
<td>.4546</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The relevance of this data might naturally be improved with a larger sample size, either from additional concurrent sections of the course or from an aggregated data set of courses over time. Similarly, a data set that included more than two sample documents per student, per course (samples collected at regular intervals during the course duration, for example) might return a more robust picture of student outcomes over the course of instruction. Still, based on this data set, it appears that not only were both courses effective, but (as suggested by DuFrene, Lehman, Kellermanns, and Pearson (2009)) the difference in delivery methods—and particularly the use of distance education technologies in one course section—had no significant impact on students’ ability to apply the course material within the fixed context of the data collection prompts.

**Student Experience: How did Students Respond to the Courses?**

Given those quantitative observations, a better question might be: how, and how well, did students engage with the course and course material? After the semester ended, I conducted 11 interviews with students from the two experimental courses; I structured the body of each interview around five main discussion prompts (derived from interviews with students in the pilot courses), regarding:

- The course website in WebCT
- The materials on the course website
- The course meetings / class discussion sessions
- Interactions with other students
- Interactions with the course instructor

Each interview followed an open-ended discussion process (that is, I did not discuss all five prompts with all eleven students). The interviews resulted in approximately eight hours of recorded conversation. I used voice recognition software to compile a rough transcription of each interview, evaluated these draft transcriptions for major themes, and followed with a full transcription of selected segments. The final data
set consisted of 63 pages of transcribed text. In this section, I’ll identify and discuss some of the major themes that emerged from these interviews.

**What is an online course?**

As the course instructor, I had a very clear perception about the differences between my traditional classroom course and my online course: the physical presence of my students. Though my traditional classroom course was a hybrid course in which half of our class meetings took place in a computer lab, still, we met. During the experimental course semester, I physically met only one of my students (and that was a chance meeting, in a grocery store; my student heard me speaking with a store employee, recognized my voice, and introduced herself). All of our interactions were mediated through a computer interface—I saw my students through a one-inch square video window, I heard them through headphones—and were divorced from any physical presence. My online class was disembodied.

However, one theme that emerged in the pilot courses, and again in the experimental courses, is that my students do not share (or do not universally share) that clear distinction between traditional, hybrid, and online classrooms. For example, in their post-instruction memo, some students in the traditional classroom section characterized their course this way:

- I have to say that my experience with this online course was the best I have seen since I have been at Iowa State.
- Overall, I had a very positive experience with this online class. The only part that occasionally threw me off was the Saturday due dates for labs and weekly quizzes.
- Taking this class online had some different experiences compared to being in a class. Overall the information in the online lectures was good. With online classes I usually find it hard to pay attention to the material that is being presented because there are multiple distractions.
- I was very glad this class was online… I think it is a wise idea to have an online class and I know many students prefer that as well.

Note: these responses were from students in the *traditional classroom* section. All four of these students met with me and their peers in a physical classroom or lab twice a week; none of these students had access to a significant amount of online content (such as recorded lectures or study aids) beyond the
course assignment sheets. Similarly, in the post-semester course review, a student from the distance section observed:

I would really have appreciated more lab time in class. I think only once did we get to work on the lab during class. I talked with other students in different sections [of English 302], and they said they got to work on their labs all the time during their lab day.

And another wrote in her post-instruction memo:

I liked meeting in our classroom, and speaking to everyone face-to-face. It’s a refreshing change from my other classes this semester that are so large, I don’t think anyone even knows I’m there.

Again, these are students who never met with me or their peers in a classroom, and who never had a lab day. During the post-semester interview, then, I explored this question with my students: what constitutes an online course?

For students in the distance course, the distinction between an online course and a classroom course was primarily one between asynchronous and synchronous course structure, and the place of the course in their daily routine. “Dan,” for example, compared the online section of English 302 to the online courses he was taking at the time I interviewed him:

They’re all online, I mean, I don’t have to go to Ames, I can just turn on my computer. When I work on Biology, I can do it whenever, wherever, but with your class there was a time and a place. I had to plan to be somewhere to take the class.

Another online student, “Alison,” observed:

Alison: I take an online class and it’s all online, you know? I read lectures online, I post online, I take quizzes online, I send my professor emails online. But this class [English 302] was live, because we signed into the classroom and talked to each other. I could see people talking.

MS: So the class discussion sessions made the class a live class?

Alison: Yes, because that’s where everything interesting happened. No offense, the lectures and everything were interesting, but the classes [class discussion sessions] were where I got things out of this class. We talked about how we’d do this, why we’d do this, and that made it clear. The other stuff in the class was just about listing out this, this, this, not about using it.

Alison went on to note that, after the first class discussion session, she always waited to read the material in the textbook or work through to the online lectures until after she’d attended a discussion session, even when that meant doing the other coursework out of sequence, or turning work in late. She described the
scheduled class meetings as “what I marked on my calendar, so I could plan my schedule,” rather than the actual due dates for course assignments as noted in the syllabus.

Similarly, both Dan and “Karen” articulated a clear distinction between the schedule of activities and assignments that I delivered in the online version of English 302 and what they expected from an online course. Dan noted that

When I take an online class, I can do my work when I want to and turn it in when I want to. That’s one of the reasons I take my classes online, because my job [Dan is a long-haul trucker] doesn’t let me work to someone else’s schedule. You had some work like that, but you had a lot of work where I had to meet with people in your classroom, like on the group project. I don’t think those parts of your class were really online. I remember being on the phone, waiting in that classroom [the Wimba Live virtual classroom] for my group to show up—and they never did!—and saying, “this isn’t an online class. This is not why I take my classes online.”

Like Dan, Karen is a traditional distance student who is taking all of her courses online. During her interview, she consistently made a distinction between English 302 and “my computer classes.” When I asked her to articulate that difference, she laughed and said

I do my computer classes on Saturday morning. My kids don’t need the computer for their homework then, so I can use it all morning and get my college done. But with your class, I used to do it in the afternoons before I went back into work [Karen owns a restaurant/bar; several times during the semester, she noted that she was “in class” while her business was closed between the lunch and dinner seatings], so I could do the classroom meetings and talk with you and my group, and still have dinner with my kids. And then I’d do the work for you at work, after closing, because I was always doing your assignments for my work anyway.

Karen went on to explain that, because she used tasks from her business as the main components for her major course assignments, it made sense to her to make my course part of her work day rather than separate from it (as her other “computer classes” are). “David,” another student in the distance course, offered a clarifying insight during his interview. David works as an IT technician for the distance learning center of a community college; he suggested that the distinction between an online class and a traditional class is one of time, and time commitment.

Your class takes up time, and the other online classes I take don’t. Not that I don’t spend time on my classes, but I do them while I’m doing other things. I can work for half an hour, then read my psych lecture, then work for twenty minutes, then take a quiz. I didn’t
do that with English, except at first. The way you do your class, I had to make time for you. I never have to do that with an online class.

An online class, he concluded, has a more diffuse “time footprint” than my course did, as opposed to a class, which has a distinct temporal locus of activity. By that standard, my course was a class taught online rather than an online class.

That characterization dovetails well with what my traditional classroom students said about the course, and about why they might consider it an online class: while the bulk of the course activities took place in classroom meetings, “important” course events such as submitting assignments, and receiving direct feedback and grades took place online, via the course website. “Chelsea” put it this way:

Chelsea:  I’ve never had a class, and especially not an English class, where we did everything on the class website.

MS: Everything? What about the work we did in class?

Chelsea:  You know what I mean. All of the assignments were on the website. I didn’t have to print anything out and bring it to class. I could just turn everything in online, and then look there and see your comments [on her work] … And with everything due on the weekend, I didn’t have the stress of having to rush and do it and bring it to class. Sometimes I’d get to class and I’d panic because I didn’t have my assignment to turn in, and then I remembered I already gave it to you on the website. I could relax and just concentrate on the class!

Later in her interview, Chelsea added that, in most of her classes, the course website (if there is one) is a document repository:  it may be a valuable source of reference materials, but is functionally no different than a course textbook (and, according to Chelsea, is used as infrequently). An online class is different because “you have a course website that we have to use, as part of the class. We can’t do the class without going online to use the website, so your class is an online class.”  Her class colleague, “Rohit,” had a contrasting view. As an MIS major with a plan to work in the software industry, Rohit said

I take many classes where I have to send my work to my professors on their website, or through email. Those classes are not online classes because that’s the only good way to do that work. It would make no sense for me to write a program, and then print it, and give it to my professor! But in English, it makes sense both ways, because it works to print it out or to submit it online. Your class is an online class because you have the choice, but you chose to have us work online.
In both of these formulations, an online class is defined by the role that online components play in the course: not the mere presence of a functional course website, but the way(s) in which that website figures in students’ experience of the course. An online class is one in which important activities (in the subjective experience of each student) take place online, and the subjective nature of that definition suggests that students in the same course section, experiencing the same course features, might view the course as a traditional classroom course or an online course depending on which features they considered more central to the course and their course experience.

Later in his interview, Rohit reaffirmed that the traditional classroom section of English 302 that he attended was an online course, but that his other traditional classroom courses (in computer science and MIS) were not—even though he used their course websites to submit assignments and receive grades, even though he received course material through those websites (in greater quantities than he did in my class), and even though he communicated with his instructors through those websites as he did through mine. The deciding factor, in his estimation, was my choice as the course instructor:

My roommate is taking [English 314] this term, and he must print out every assignment. When he wants to talk to his professor, he has to wait after class or walk across campus for office hours. His professor has a website, but it is not an online class because there is no use for [that website]. In my English class, I used the website for all those things. In [my programming classes], the professors have a website because there is no other good way to do the class except online. Online is part of what that class has to be. You can do an English class without a website, or with one, and those are both good ways to do the class. Because you used your website for all those things instead of doing everything in class or on paper, that is what makes your class an online class.

Rohit then asked me whether I chose to make his class an online class only because I was teaching “the other students over the internet” (in the online-only section that was paired with his course), or whether I also did that in semesters when I only taught “normal” students. I told him the truth, that I’d specifically chosen to make his course as similar to the distance course as possible; he urged me to keep all of my courses online because “it makes the class more real. At my internship, no one prints anything. Everything is online [on his internship’s intranet].”
How did students use the course materials (and what makes a usable course)?

I invested a great deal of time and effort during the design and implementation phases of this project attempting to implement the STTAR (Superior Teaching and Technology Application Recognition) best practices approaches to online course design advocated for use with distance learning courses at ISU (based on a rubric developed by California State University, Chico, 2009), with an eye toward making my online course materials as usable as possible. That process was remarkably labor-intensive. From the perspective of overall course sustainability, I was interested in identifying which best practices are most critical to a positive student experience; that is, identifying the STTAR design elements on which I, as a communication course designer and instructor, should invest my limited time and effort to ensure that my students experience my online course as a “good” course. During the post-semester interview, then, I explored this question with my students: how did you use the course website and course materials, what features enhanced your ability to learn the material in this course, and what practical features of an online course do you look for in a good online course?

The most consistent response from students (and one that underscores a key STTAR recommendation) concerned the overall organization of the course: students described an online course as good when the course materials were organized consistently and that organization was readily apparent. “Keri” is a traditional student who took all of her courses online that semester to accommodate her internship in another state. Her response to the topic was representative:

I appreciated that everything in [English 302] was easy to find. All of the quizzes were in one place, all of the assignments were in one place, and you had everything linked in those folders [WebCT learning modules] so that it looked just like the syllabus. I never had to look for anything.

Similarly, Karen said a good course would have “everything right where you can find it, with no surprises hidden anywhere,” and “Darren” (another traditional student, also taking online courses to accommodate a distant internship) observed that a good course has “a good table of contents, so I don’t have click everywhere to get to my assignments. All I really want is a list: what’s due when, with links to take me to
everything.” My interviewees reported that the one feature that they appreciated most about my online course was my use of the table of contents feature in WebCT’s learning modules: while they preferred using the shortcut menus (in the main user interface) to go directly to content and assignments, the tabular lists in my learning modules gave them an easy way to check that they’d done everything.

Similarly, when students described a “bad” course, the one consistent feature they identified was a disorganized course structure. Keri contrasted English 302 with another course she took that semester:

[That course] was a mess! He had some lectures listed by the topics in the syllabus, but some were just attachments to assignments or quizzes so you never knew what you were getting into. I’d sign in and think “I’ll just do this quiz before work,” and there’d be a 30 minute podcast attached to it! And the quiz would be timed, too! He had quizzes listed in two different places, and you’d never know about it unless you looked through the whole site. And he’d add new things in all the time!

Alison (who’d taken all of her recent college courses online) observed that I can tell if a course is going to be a bad one as soon as I log into WebCT. If the professor has everything in a big pile, it means I have to spend my time figuring out what the schedule is going to be. I have to look at everything up front before the class starts, because if I don’t, then I’ll miss something sometime and get lost, or get a bad grade… What’s worse is when there’s nothing there. Then you know the professor is going to add [material and assignments] as you go, and you’re at their mercy.

She concluded that a usable course site is one where she did not need to spend any time “figuring out what’s going on” with the organization. She described courses with material and assignments organized alphabetically, or by source (exercises from the textbook were grouped separately from exercises derived from a “virtual company” application), or by viewing/submission method, and noted that any of those schemes might be useful

…If you tell me what I’m looking at up front. Don’t give me a page of podcasts listed by number, and then expect me to just know that I’m supposed to do the odd numbered ones before I do the reading and the even ones after. I did it wrong for two months!

She noted that she’d thought there was a problem with the way she’d been using the course material in that class; when I asked whether she’d ever asked the instructor to clarify how she was to use the course site, she scoffed. “I know how to use WebCT. If the professor doesn’t, that’s not my problem.” These observations correlate with the best-practices approach described by the STTAR course design model.
While many of the STTAR best practices represent a substantial investment in instructor effort, basic organization does not. In WebCT, for example, one can quickly assemble a “table of contents” style learning module (as I did) using drop-down menus—or assemble multiple views of the same course content in different learning modules, to enable learners with different approaches or interests to access the material in individually-meaningful ways. Compared to the effort required to create or select the online content (and establish a syllabus!), meeting the organizational expectations that my students described requires a trivial level of effort on the part of the course designer.

I also asked my students about some of the other, more labor intensive best practices in the STTAR model. STTAR recommends adding aids (such as tutorials) to help students use the courseware technology. My students’ responses suggest that those additions are not optimal uses of instructor time:

Keri: I never use tutorials. If I can’t figure out how to do something in WebCT, I’ll ask someone.

William: I know you had instructions for using the video [the Wimba Live virtual classroom software] but I never read them. I signed in and clicked buttons until it worked, and that worked fine.

Karen: No, I don’t think you need any tutorials. What would they be about? I know how to use WebCT already.

Even students who were new to the courseware, or to the idea of courseware, expressed little preference for online tutorials. “Jim,” a returning student who had never used WebCT before he started my course (and had also never taken an online course), observed:

Jim: Sometimes the software caused me problems. With the quizzes, I didn’t realize there was a second page of quizzes. I just thought there were ten, and I missed the button at the bottom of the page that took you to the next page. I only figured that out when I started seeing the zeroes in my grades!

MS: Do you think it would help students like you if I included a WebCT tutorial at the start of the course?

Jim: No. (laughs) I don’t think I would have read it. Besides, I learned it pretty quickly as soon as I missed those quizzes.

Similarly, STTAR recommends that instructors create more extensive supporting materials for online course assignments and assessments (including discussions of learning goals, strategies, and methods) than they might in traditional classroom course; these supporting materials are intended to
facilitate independently-motivated learning behaviors by enabling students to contextualize course activities in the absence of an instructor. I invested a great deal of time expanding my assignment prompts to include that information; when I asked my students about those materials, they noted:

William: Your assignment sheets are too long. There was a lot of extra material on every assignment, and sometimes it confused me.

Alison: If I had to complain about something in your class, your assignment sheets are too long. I just want to know what you want, how the points break down. I think you were trying to hold our hands too much. Like with the report [Major Assignment 2: the Informative Report], you don’t need to tell me how to do an interview. That’s in the book. You don’t need to tell me what I’m going to learn. That’s in the lesson. Maybe some people need that, but I thought it was annoying.

Darren: I guess I thought the assignment sheets were more complicated than they needed to be. We had to pick our own subjects and audience for the [major] assignments anyway, so how much space does it take for you to say that? Just tell us what you want from us, and give us a rubric. Then maybe you can put the rest in a help file or something.

One exception was the review segment I added to each recorded lesson: in the first 2-3 minutes of each recording, I summarized the previous lessons and contextualized the material in terms of the rest of the course content, and in terms of the activities I was asking students to complete. Several students noted that they appreciated that segment, and one explained

Rick: Some parts of your lectures were confusing, and I guess I kind of skipped them at first. Then I figured out that you always started with a recap. So I opened all of the lessons for the whole course, and listened to all of the recaps and took notes. Then I started over, and all the parts made sense because I knew where you were going with it.

MS: Can you give me an example?

Rick: Like the part about audience. I didn’t see why that was important, so I skipped through that lesson after a few slides. But then I did the recaps and found out it was part of everything else. In every lesson, you came back and said “now, you’ll be putting your audience description [audience analysis] to work here.” So I went back and listened to the audience lesson again, and that was the best thing I did in the class, because audience description is really important! (laughs) Without the recaps, I wouldn’t have seen that.

STTAR also recommends a multi-modal approach to material and activities: provide students with a variety of forms of materials, exercises, activities, and online experiences to accommodate a
variety of learning styles and interests. In contrast, my students’ responses suggest that the best use of instructor effort in the course design is to

Alison: Pick something and stick with it. Do forums, or do journals, or do presentations, and just do that. Don’t tell me we’re doing forums this week, and quizzes next week, and something else in two weeks. When I see that, I think [the instructor] is making it up as they go.

William: I like that you only have a few different things to do in your class. That way, I can learn how to do that kind of assignment early on, and then I can just concentrate on doing the work after that.

And a more measured response:

Keri: The best class I’ve taken online had a lot of different kinds of course materials, but they were all optional. There’d be 20 different things for each week, a few websites, and a few articles, and few videos, and you’d have to pick five for your reading assignment. I’d rather watch videos, so I could do that, but my roommate was also taking that class, and she liked the articles instead because she could print them all out ahead of time.

But the worst class I’ve had did the same thing, except with the assignments. The professor wanted us to do lots of different kinds of work, and I understand that now. But then it was like the professor was just doing one of everything that WebCT can do, and it was annoying. I spent half of every week trying to figure out how to do the assignment instead of doing the assignment. You didn’t do that in English [302], and that was good, because your assignments are hard enough!

I asked each of my interviewees for a final assessment of how usable the course materials were:

whether the course website and materials were good. I’ll discuss how my course fares on a formal STTAR assessment in the next chapter; however, my students’ estimation was that the course was well-organized, and that the online materials were a positive part of the course experience.

How did students perceive the community of the course, and the role of the course instructor?

As I noted in Chapter One, two of the strongest predictors for a positive student outcome in an online course are an engaged, motivated student, and an engaged, motivated, accessible instructor. Boyd (2008) examined this phenomenon in her own online and hybrid communication courses, and observed that successful students expressed a sense of engagement by forming ad hoc learning communities in which “[the students] perceived themselves to be part of such a community, one that is focused on similar
curricular goals, and … valued the ways the other community members (i.e. students) helped them move toward their individual writing goals.” (237) Following Boyd, I chose to look at this issue as a function of student perception of the course community, particularly in the online course. As I converted the in-class content of my traditional classroom course into small-group content for my distance course, I did so with the intent of facilitating direct interaction between students as well as between students and myself; I also designed the course to provide students with multiple means of interacting with me (some asynchronous, in the form of comments on their work and static announcements on the course site, some synchronous, in the form of extensive office hours in multiple locations). As the instructor, I perceived these interventions as successful: the dialog between students in the class discussion sessions seemed richer and more productive than that of comparable group work in courses I’d taught in previous semesters, and the wider array of venues for office hours meant that I had much more direct contact with students in the experimental sections than with students in previous courses. During the post-semester interviews, I asked my students to reflect on their interactions with each other and with me, to obtain a sense of how they perceived the course community.

In general, students in the distance course had two major observations about their interactions with other students. The first was that those interactions were helpful in contextualizing the course material, and particularly in formulating stronger responses to course assignments. Alison observed that

Alison: I liked hearing how other people solved problems [lab and discussion assignments] in your class. You talked about how there’s not just one way to solve a problem, but until I see how other people do it, I only know what my way is.

MS: Can you give me an example of what you mean?

Alison: I remember when we were talking about the smelly microwave problem [an exercise where students create and communicate an organizational solution to a problem involving poor office hygiene]. I wanted to be direct and just tell people “don’t heat up nasty food in the microwave,” because that’s how I’d want someone to say it to me. When we talked about it, this other girl [Karen] said what if I made them mad when I said it that way? She told us about a time when she did the same thing where she works, and it only worked because she asked people to take charge of it instead of telling them what to do. I thought “hey, that’s smart.” So I tried the same thing with my negative message [the negative message portion of the Three Messages major assignment] and it really worked!
Similarly, Dan noted:

I never had time to do the peer reviews [written peer reviews for the major assignments], but I don’t think I missed out because we did that in class. You always had us give each other advice on what to do with our papers, and that helped. Sometimes they had advice that was plain wrong, but that was good too, because then I had to explain why I wrote it the way I did.

Other students from the distance course noted a related pattern: they’d receive peer feedback from (or establish some other connection with) students in a class discussion session, then seek those students out for more formal peer reviews before submitting class assignments.

Darren: You paired me up with [two other students] in that first peer review session in class, and we stuck together for the rest of the term. We weren’t in the same group, and I don’t think I ever saw [one of the students] in another class, but we clicked.

Rick: After class sessions, I’d try to follow up with one of the people from that session for my reviews. They already knew what I was trying to do, so I didn’t have to explain it again. They could read and see right where I’d made changes, and I could do the same for them.

William: I worked with [another student] for my reviews, because we talked after one class and found out we had a lot in common. We have the same major, and we want to work with the same people. I figured that she would be better to read my stuff than someone with no idea.

Karen: [Karen owns and operates a restaurant] This one kid kept sending me his assignments about the restaurant he was going to open, and he was so off base. I wrote him back to explain it, and he wanted to keep swapping assignments. So we did. (laughs) He got more out of it than I did, but that’s good, I guess. He needed it more.

As an aside, the student Karen “swapped assignments” with was enrolled in the traditional classroom section; he’d initially posted a request for a peer reviewer on the (joint) class forum, and a student in the distance section had seen his topic, remembered Karen’s discussions from class, and recommended her to him.

When I asked students to compare this kind of review and revision experience with peer review experiences from other courses, they observed that this experience was more organic and collegial.

Keri: I don’t normally like peer reviews, because they’re mostly just busywork for when the professor doesn’t have something planned for that day. But in [English 302] it wasn’t some random thing, it was every time, so I’d go in thinking “I know I’ll be on the spot anyway, so how can I use the class to help me finish this assignment?”

Alison: I did peer reviews in my [online] Econ class and it was a joke. The TA only checked to make sure we did it, so we’d open up [our classmates’] work for five seconds
and click Done. I thought that’s what your class was going to be like, too. (laughs) I was 

wrong. You made us work for it.

David: The way you did peer reviews was more like what I’m used to at work. I got 

my reviews from people who knew what I was trying to do, so they could say something 

more useful than “looks good.”

Later in his interview, David clarified his remarks. In previous classes, his peer review experiences had been situated within the context of the classroom: on the occasions when student reviewers looked at his work with any diligence, they only reviewed it for successful completion of course goals—would the 
course instructor like it? Conversely, David felt that in English 302, he could select reviewers with the knowledge and perspective to examine his work at a more rhetorically-complex level—would his work be successful in context? He noted that the class discussion sessions were a key part of that process:

“Talking with these folks, I got a good sense of who had something useful to say. That’s hard to do in a forum.”

The second major observation that my students had concerning the class discussion sessions was how novel they were, compared to other forms of student/student interaction in online courses.

Dan: I’ve never had to speak to other students in an online class.

Karen: I write to students in some classes, like in emails or on the class website, but I never had a real class in any of those classes.

Alison: I do that same [forum] assignment in every class, and it’s worthless. You sign on and read one post, then post your own little bit. “Yeah. I agree.” Who cares? They just grade those things by who actually signs on and posts. With yours, we had to talk things out and you never let anyone get away with just “Yeah.” So we had to pay attention to you and everyone else.

David: I’ve never taken a class with live class meetings before. I don’t think anyone here is doing anything like this, either. [David works as an IT support technician for the distance learning center at a community college].

That sense of novelty didn’t translate into enthusiasm, particularly for the synchronous requirement that students attend meetings at specific times. My interviewees articulated an understanding of the rationale behind the synchronous discussion sessions (Keri, for example, said “the class was about writing and speaking on the job, and I don’t see how you’d do that with just email”) but paired that understanding
with requests for other, less-time dependent solutions: video or audio blogs; voluntary, optional, or extra-credit participation; proctored face-to-face meetings.

Students also noted that having easy access to me was a unique experience, and a useful aspect of the course. During the experimental semester, I established combined office hours for the two experimental courses (midday on Tuesday and Thursday) during which I was available in my campus office for face-to-face consultations, and during which I also logged into the Wimba Live classroom for video or text chat with online students. I also provided my students with my Skype ID, and opened a Skype session whenever I worked at my computer (business hours on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and frequently in the early morning and early evening hours throughout the week). In follow-up interviews, students noted that my availability as an instructor was both welcome and unusual for an online course:

Alison: I should have been talking to you from the beginning, but it’s usually not worth my time. [In an online class] I send an email, and if I get an answer, if it’s from the professor and not some TA, if I get it in time to do me any good… it’s not worth my time.

Dan: I have a professor this term who doesn’t answer anything. We make jokes about it on the class website because it doesn’t look like the professor has ever been there.

William: I think I was lucky to have you as my professor because I could call you up anytime [William usually connected to Wimba Live using his cell phone, not a computer] and get an answer. My girlfriend is taking a math class online, and it takes her days to get an email back when she has a question. And then it’s just ―look in the book.‖

Darren: I really appreciated that you had flexible office hours. In my other classes last semester, I had to do everything by email because of the time difference [Darren completed the course while at an overseas internship site]. I talked to one other professor, once, and it was a big pain. I had to take time off from work, and then I had to call her office again and again because she wasn’t there…. With you, I knew I could just hit Skype, and if you were green [Skype displays a green icon next to any contact who’s online and available], I could talk to you anytime.

When discussing other instructors who were not as easily-reached as I was, most of my students expressed a combination of understanding (Alison: “I know a teacher can’t be online all the time, so I expect some delays”) and irritation at the lack of presence. In contrast, Keri shared an instructive anecdote about taking an online course with a “fantastic professor, who always responded right away
when I had a problem with a concept, or an assignment. I had a great relationship with that professor. I really felt like I knew him personally.” When I asked about the aspects of that professor’s communication style that helped build her sense of rapport, she clarified:

Well, mostly it was just hearing his voice on the lessons all the time, the same as yours. That made it feel personal to me. I never talked to him personally, though, but his TAs were really good. He had one to answer questions about the readings and the lessons, and she always emailed back really quickly. I’d ask something and be nervous that it was a stupid question, and she’d always send back “no, everyone has that same problem!” That made me feel better. And his other TA who did the grading, she gave out her cell number and she’d talk with me for as long as I needed to understand exactly what she was looking for… The whole class was personal, and that made it special.

Keri concluded by noting that when either TA responded to her through the course email function in WebCT, they signed the email with their supervising faculty member’s name; she then explained that, for most of the duration of my course, she’d assumed that “the TA” who’d been answering my email had done the same.

In general, these student responses affirm Boyd’s observations and the STTAR guidelines: that students respond positively to online environments that facilitate active interaction between students, and between students and instructors. These ad hoc learning communities appear to be a critical component of a positive student experience in an online course.

**Instructor Experience: Is the Course Sustainable?**

Keri’s anecdote about the personal rapport she felt with the team of instructors responsible for her online course is instructive: it underscores the amount of effort required to deliver an immersive, personalized experience. Keri’s instructor addressed the issue of sustainability and instructor effort by dividing the effort among multiple instructors: one to design, author, and deliver course content, one to assess student work, and one to provide remedial help directly to students. However, courses offered by the ISU English Department are not currently structured to employ that division of labor: English courses
at ISU have one instructor, responsible for all aspects of the course; a sustainable online English course must be deliverable by a single instructor, at a level of commitment that could be maintained over time.

To evaluate whether my online section of English 302 is sustainable (that is, whether the collection of effort-reducing technologies and processes I’d adopted for the course reduced the instructor effort, per student, to a sustainable level), I adapted the method from Reinheimer’s (2005) study of instructor time commitment in online courses. Acting as a participant-observer, I maintained a detailed log of the time I spent on the two experimental courses from the weeks before classes began, during which I reset my course website in WebCT from the previous semester, through the start of the following semester, when I finished addressing the last administrative issues from the experimental sections. My log includes the time spent, per section, in each of Reinheimer’s five categories of instructor time investment (464):

- Class contact (lectures and other in-class activities)
- Conferences (one-on-one conferences on process drafts held both inside and outside the classroom)
- Communication (phone calls, face-to-face meetings, email, etc.)
- Corrections (assessment of exercises and essays)
- Maintenance (updating and debugging Web pages, setting permissions, etc.)

It should be noted that my data collection effort differs from Reinheimer’s in an important way. Reinheimer’s participants recorded data for different subsets of his five categories, depending on which course section they taught: his traditional classroom data reflects time spent on Class Contact, Conferences, Corrections, and Communication (with no Maintenance, presumably because the traditional classroom course he observed had no online presence), while his online classroom data includes only Corrections, Communication, and Maintenance (as the online classes he observed had no synchronous class meetings or student/instructor conferences). I include data in all five categories, for both courses in my time accounting log.
I have summarized the results of my time accounting data collection log in Table 6. Note that, as in Reinheimer (464-65), I have normed my results by presenting the time spent in each course, in each category, as a function of time spent per student enrolled in each section.

Table 6 - Instructor Effort, as a function of time spent per course, per student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recorded Instructor Effort, in Minutes</th>
<th>Traditional Classroom Section</th>
<th>% of Time Spent</th>
<th>Distance Section</th>
<th>% of Time Spent</th>
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<tr>
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<td>43.3</td>
<td>3804</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>1355</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>2205</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Minutes</td>
<td>7287</td>
<td></td>
<td>9204</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Students</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Minutes/Student</td>
<td>304</td>
<td></td>
<td>368</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of significant points emerge from this data. First, a flat comparison of the time invested per student in each course generally confirms Reinheimer’s findings that communication courses delivered via distance education technologies require more time investment per student from the course instructor than do traditional classroom courses: in my study, the distance section required approximately 21% more time to deliver the same content and interaction per student than did the traditional classroom section. The most sizable differences between the two courses are in the areas of Class Contact (the traditional classroom, predictably, required considerably more time investment than did the distance course), Conferences (I spent approximately 19 minutes/student over the semester in direct, one-on-one conferences with students in the traditional classroom section, compared to 49 minutes/student in the distance section), and Maintenance (the distance section required more than twice as much time investment in content and courseware maintenance as a percentage of total effort as did the traditional
classroom section). However, these differences may stem from intrinsic differences in the two sections, rather than overall differences in the effort required to deliver the courses. For example:

- I spent considerably more time on individual student conferences in the distance course than in the traditional classroom course. However, my notes indicate that a sizable portion of that time was dedicated to a single student in the distance course who required remedial assistance, and who proactively sought out that assistance from me. If I remove that student’s conference time from the data set, it reduces the time spent on conferences in the distance course from 13.4% to 9.2%—still larger than the amount invested in the traditional classroom course (6.4%), but by a smaller margin.

- My technological intervention (introducing audio- and videochat as a means of reducing the time commitment required for student/instructor interactions) does not appear to have been effective, at least not in reducing time investment: the distance section still required considerably more time than the traditional classroom section. I suspect that while that intervention may have reduced the time per interaction, it also increased the frequency of interactions; because I offered my students extended office hours, and because audio/video chat interactions proved convenient, my distance students appeared to be more willing to contact me. (Students in the traditional classroom section had access to direct means of contacting me online, but did not do so, at least not to the extent that students in the pilot section did. During the experimental section, I recorded 14 online conferences with students from the traditional classroom students, of which 11 were with the same student. In comparison, I recorded 41 instances of student-initiated one-on-one conferences with traditional students, either before/after class meetings or in my office.)

- The difference in Maintenance time between the two courses is entirely due to my use of Wimba Live in the distance section. If I remove time spent creating, testing, and
maintaining content in the Wimba classroom, and (more to the point) time spent troubleshooting problems with the Wimba Live application, the Maintenance time for the two courses is nearly identical (234 minutes in the distance section, compared to 210 minutes in the traditional classroom section).

Averaged over the entire 17 week span of the semester (15 weeks of course meetings, plus finals week and the preparation week prior to the start of the semester), the weekly time commitment required by my two courses is comparable: approximately 7 hours/week for the traditional classroom course, and 9 hours/week for the distance course. Described in terms of overall difference, however, the distance course required an additional 34 hours to deliver overall—approximately a full week of extra labor. In context, I believe these results suggest that while the distance course I taught was more sustainable than Reinheimer’s results might predict, the extra time investment is still significant and would likely render the course unsustainable over time, or for another instructor with different time commitments (such as a heavier teaching load, or ambitions beyond classroom work).

This is obviously a small data set (two courses, taught in one semester, by one instructor) and is not likely generalizable into larger contexts. Longitudinal data collection over a number of iterative course offerings would help to alleviate this flaw (and allow a stronger comparison to Reinheimer’s longitudinal data), as would including data from additional instructors to help control for differences in instructor work processes. My data also represents the effort required to deliver a mature course, in which the bulk of the course materials, lessons, assignments, and website architecture can be carried over from previous course iterations. A new course, or a course taught by a new instructor without those resources, would likely diverge significantly from my results.
Chapter 6: Re-embodying the Online Classroom—Reflections and Recommendations

“Stacey” is a traditional student who took all of her classes online this semester, in order to accommodate her internship at a PR firm in Chicago. She also had problems during the first third of the semester: she missed assignment deadlines, submitted incomplete work, never attended class discussions, and never responded to my emails. In the first week in October, however, her performance changed completely. Stacey finished every remaining assignment ahead of schedule, actively participated in Discussions and team assignments, and submitted thoughtful, well-crafted work. It was as if she were a completely different student. Alert to the potential for academic dishonesty, I suspected exactly that possibility.

When Stacey arrives at my office during finals week—to request a chance to revise her first, and worst, major assignment—she shows me the cause of her improved performance: a Franklin Covey planner, filled with meticulous scheduling notes for her online classes. They’re even color-coded; my course appears in four shades of blue. There is a stern dedication handwritten inside the front cover: Disorganized people DO NOT SUCCEED.

Stacey glumly explains that her internship had been so overwhelming that she’d literally forgotten about her online classes. The planner was a gift from her internship supervisor, who’d discovered her poor academic performance after Stacey left for lunch without closing the WebCT session on her office computer. The gift worked: it helped her develop the organization and structure she needed to succeed as an online student. (The gift, along with her supervisor’s periodic demands to see her course grades.) As she leaves my office with my permission to revise and resubmit her first assignment, Stacey recommends that I add a day planner as a required textbook for my course.

At the beginning of this study, and of the narrative that surrounds this study, I articulated three research questions: 1) is my online course effective (in terms of student outcomes), 2) is it comparable to a traditional classroom course (in terms of student experience), and 3) is it sustainable over time (in terms of instructor resources). The answers to those questions, derived from the data and results I presented in Chapter Five, are simple and relatively unambiguous—yes, yes, and no—which both confirms the overall trends in the literature about online communication courses and suggests that the issues at the heart of these questions are less complex than I had supposed when I began work on this project. In that sense, I have come to see my own time in the disembodied classroom as successful: I have addressed my original questions and concerns, and I have gained enough knowledge and experience to look ahead to future
iterations of this course with confidence. That confidence will be necessary. In her monograph, Gouge (2009) explicitly steps away from the claim that the “turn to formalized hybridity is inevitable” (339). I do not. I agree with Gouge that hybrid and online delivery models for communication courses are unlikely to entirely replace traditional classrooms, but, based on my own experiences and those of the instructors, administrators, and industry professionals I’ve spoken with over the course of this project, I believe that “a turn” toward increased hybridity and online delivery of communication courses is inevitable. Whether that turn is driven by expectations from students, the requirements of institutional administrators, or by the broad disciplinary inquiry that Gouge, Selfe, Anson, and others have long advocated, still, the turn will come. As instructors, we must be prepared to teach in disembodied classrooms, and teach well. As faculty in educational institutions, we must be ready to address the unique challenges that the disembodied classroom brings to our curriculum, preferably before changing exigencies force us to act with more haste than deliberation. As a discipline, we have the opportunity to respond to Selfe (1999) and Anson’s (1999) challenges and find mindful ways to construct our disembodied classrooms around critical pedagogies. In this final chapter, then, I will discuss the potential ramifications of my findings and my personal experiences, along with my recommendations for future work in online business communication pedagogy (and online communication pedagogy in general).
“William” is taking my online course while he works an internship for his future graduate advisor at another large state university. He is a dynamic and insightful participant in spoken exercises during class discussions, but his written work is at the low end of remedial. (Later, one of my raters will single out William’s pre-course essay as evidence that I’ve manipulated the sample, arguing that no one with such poor written skills could get into college, let alone make it to the end of an undergraduate program.)

William is a model remedial student. He schedules weekly appointments with me to discuss strategies and drafts for his assignments. He drafts, re-drafts, and revises, and he can articulate clearly—though sometimes through barely-concealed frustration with himself, and me—what he needs to do to improve his work. He tries, and he appears sincere and dedicated in his attempts to improve. And, by the time I prepare my midterm grades, he has improved: but not by enough to pass the course. I counsel him to speak with his academic advisor about dropping, and taking the class again when he’ll have better access to remedial services.

I tell myself that I could help him if he were not a distance student. I could send him (or take him!) to the university writing center, the student success center, or to the intensive-English program. I could work with him one-on-one. I could schedule longer or more frequent sessions with him. But: he’s a thousand miles away from any campus resources I have available. Wimba’s cumbersome screen-sharing application turns our one-on-one drafting sessions into painful exercises in patience. William’s pay-as-you-go cell phone plan limits the duration of our long-distance consultations. I want to help him, and I’m at a loss as to how I might actually do so.

William ignores my advice and helps himself: he begins working with the writing center at his host university. He completes all of his class readings and assignments under their watchful eye. The writing center consultants dutifully forward their contact reports to me, and his (and their!) time investment is astounding. He sometimes spends as much as ten hours a week with them. William passes my class, and I believe that I had little to do with his success.

This section deals with best practices advice for communication instructors looking to begin teaching a hybrid (and especially an online-only) communication course. In this section, I’ll focus on strategic planning and decision-making, rather than on specific pedagogical approaches or technological solutions. If my attempt to recreate my traditional (if idiosyncratic) classroom pedagogy in an online environment has any broader implication, it is the observation that, with creativity and an intrepid spirit, any pedagogical approach might be modified for online / hybrid use. Similarly, following DuFrene, Lehman, Kellermanns, and Pearson (2009), I submit that beyond ensuring the technologies employed in an online communication course are usable by instructors and students and serve the material and
pedagogy well, specific technological interventions are matters of personal choice rather than defining issues. With those limitations in mind, as well as the inherent limitation that these recommendations reflect my own experiences and those of my students, I present six general practices that I believe can smooth the transition from traditional classroom to disembodied classroom.

These best practices are also grounded in two primary assumptions. First, these strategies apply best to the traditional delivery model for a communication course, where a single instructor is responsible for all content, communication, and assessment tasks in the course. However, since online delivery can facilitate more exotic methods—for example, a multi-instructor section where division of labor enables instructors to serve a large student population—these strategies might be easily adapted to other formats. Second, my personal experience during this project has convinced me that sustainability and instructor effort must be the first concern in the course design process (barring instructor-less self-paced study scenarios in which a course is entirely automated). The ultimate goals of a communication course are to facilitate positive student outcomes, and strong student responses to course learning objectives. Those goals are predicated on the presence of an engaged, active instructor with the time to respond to student communication, facilitate pedagogically valuable course activities, motivate students, and provide feedback (and remediation) to help students improve their communication efforts. If the course instructor does not have the time to invest on those activities, student outcomes are likely to suffer. The first, best practice, then, is to recognize that a workable course design with a sustainable level of time commitment for the instructor will ultimately be the strongest course design for students.

**Plan with “online time inflation” in mind**

In the course of this study, I designed and delivered an online communication course with the intent of challenging the findings of other researchers that online communication courses require substantially more time commitment, per student, than traditional classroom courses do. While the time-saving interventions I employed appear to have reduced that online time inflation somewhat, this fact
remains: it took 21% more time to deliver the same material and pedagogical value to my distance students than to my traditional classroom students. I maintain that in any complex endeavor, there is room for continuous methodological improvement that will result in increased efficiency, and that continuous improvement may (and should) be the subject of future research efforts. With that in mind, however, a fundamental best practice is to realize that an online course will place more demands on its instructor than a traditional classroom equivalent will, and plan accordingly.

While it is impractical to simply cut 20-30% of the course material and activities from a traditional classroom course, one might:

**Compartmentalize (and condense) learning goals and assignments**

Wherever possible, look for ways to combine learning objectives into a smaller number of assignments. The observation may seem obvious, but scheduling fewer assignments has two concrete benefits: it reduces the complexity of the course from students’ perspectives, and it reduces the administrative time necessary to evaluate student work and record comments and grades in a courseware package.

**Example:** My experimental course design included paired minor assignments for each class lesson: a lab assignment in which students produced a text (spoken, written, visual, or a combination) in response to a prompt, and a discussion assignment in which students reflected on their own personal and professional communication practices or discussed an ethical problem related to the lesson. I chose to make these linked assignments into separate submissions to better match the online section with the traditional classroom section—the two assignments map to activities in the traditional classroom section that I’d complete on separate days, so it was natural to consider them separate tasks.

Why combine them? I found that, on average, it took 15-20 minutes to record a set of 49 minor assignment grades in WebCT. Longer, if internet lag slowed my home computer’s connection to the campus WebCT server. That’s not time spent reviewing student work; that’s only time to record grades and feedback in the courseware. If I had combined the 26 lab and discussion assignments into 13 assignments (without changing the amount or type of work I’d asked my students to do), I’d have saved an additional 3.25 hours in administrative mouse-clicking over the course of the semester.
Example: One of the learning goals for my course is that students will “Establish designs/visuals for effective documents.” While I incorporate a requirement for basic visual rhetoric in all of my course’s major assignments, I dedicated one of the pilot and experimental sections’ major assignments (the Information Sheet assignment) entirely to visual rhetoric and the visual display of information.

In a future version of this course, I might reorganize the course material to cover visual rhetoric in the opening module, distribute activities and assessments for the topic throughout the course, and eliminate the Information Sheet assignment entirely (or merge it with another Major Assignment).

**Employ labor-reducing assessment techniques**

In my experimental courses, time spent on what Reinheimer (2005) categorized as corrections (assessment of exercises and essays) formed one of the largest blocks of instructor time investment. As such, assessment is a ripe target for time saving efforts: even minor or incremental reductions in the time it takes to respond to student work can add up to substantial time savings over the term of the course. For example, most courseware packages support some type of rubric or grading form assessment method. It is easy (and tempting) to overlook these features, as they are often time-consuming to set up and use, and, when used poorly, offer little pedagogical advantage. However, the time invested in creating a robust grading form has the potential to repay itself quickly. A standardized form, even one with a complex set of useful and pedagogically valuable feedback embedded in it, is much faster to use than writing or pasting comments directly into student work or into a feedback window. A standardized rubric also provides students with a concrete framework in which to interpret comments and incorporate them into future work, thus reducing the need to communicate for further clarification.

Example: In the initial pilot course, I directed my students to submit all of their work in MS Word documents, embedded my assessment comments and revision recommendations directly into their files using the *Track Changes* feature of MS Word, and returned the files to my students for their use. I sped this effort along with a text file of standard comments for each assignment; I could respond to most issues with these standard comments, and write personalized comments for unique or more complex issues. With that method, it took an average of 18 minutes to read each student’s major assignment, respond with comments, and record my evaluation in WebCT.
During the summer pilot section, I created a grading form in WebCT for one of my course’s major assignments. I built all of my standard comments into the grading form, and used the comments field on the form to record personalized comments for students. When necessary or helpful, I also recorded editing marks in my students’ original drafts and appended those to the grading form. That assessment method required an average of 12 minutes per major assignment to complete. Had I used similar rubrics for all four major assignments in the experimental section, and realized similar time savings, I would have saved approximately 19.6 hours on grading major assignments over the course of the term.

I did not use WebCT grading forms during the experimental courses, because I did not have time to create and test them before the term began. In this case, proactive time management on my part might have spared me a considerable amount of effort.

It might also be valuable to look for ways to consolidate assessment efforts. For example, most courseware packages enable one to assemble students into groups. Rather than respond to each student assignment in detail, one might review students’ assignments, group them according to their pedagogical needs, and compose a personalized response for each group.

**Example:** In the pilot sections, I responded to each student lab assignment with an individual assessment (drawn from a text file filled with standard responses to that type of lab activity). On average, it took me about 170 minutes to assess two course sections’ submissions to a single lab assignment.

Beginning in the summer pilot, I changed to a single-response model: I downloaded and reviewed all student work, selected several responses that represented strong (or novel) approaches to the lab scenario (as well as approaches that illustrated common student errors), annotated each of those exemplars with my comments, and compiled them into a single lab solution key document that I posted to the course forum. I then assigned grades using a simple grading form on a check, check-plus, check-minus scale, and referred students to the solution key for detailed comments. On average, it took 65 minutes to respond to a single lab assignment (including time spent moderating student discussions and responses on the forum). Had I not implemented that same approach in the experimental sections, I would have spent an additional 22 hours grading labs over the course of the term.

*Build “time buffers” into the schedule*

In a traditional classroom course, there’s a demonstrable need to schedule activities and content continuously throughout the term: in that setting, instructors have a limited number of opportunities to interact with students, resulting in a certain pressure to use each moment in a pedagogically valuable way.
Most online instructional models, however, have a certain degree of asynchronous flexibility, and the course instructor can take advantage of that flexibility by establishing regular gaps in the course schedule. These gaps, in which no course activities are scheduled, serve two valuable purposes: they give the instructor uninterrupted time to respond to student work in a thoughtful, unhurried manner, and they give students the means to better fit the demands of the course around their own schedules (by working ahead or catching up, or simply as a place to schedule activities without needing to keep course deadlines in mind).

**Example:** I tied my experimental online course’s schedule to my traditional classroom’s schedule: I had my distance students complete their lessons during the week I covered that material in my traditional classroom, and had them submit their incremental assignments on the same due dates. My students’ activity log in WebCT, however, shows that most of the students in the distance course completed and submitted their lessons and assignments in bursts: multiple weeks’ worth of work over the course of an afternoon.

Had I planned on that usage pattern from the beginning, I might have reduced the length of each course module by a week, and left that “empty” week in between each module to give myself time to assess and respond to my students’ major assignments before asking my students to begin work on the next set of course tasks. (I might also have found the extra workload of teaching an online course less burdensome with a large, uninterrupted block of time in which to work.)

**Organize before the course begins**

When I asked my students to identify the strongest and weakest features of the online courses they’d taken, nearly all of their observations had to do with overall course organization (or the lack of organization). The simplest way to build a usable, sustainable course is to develop a fixed schedule and assessment methodology from the beginning and make that information clear to course students. Many instructors do so in their traditional classrooms; but while the practice is largely optional in a traditional classroom—where the instructor will ideally have ample time and opportunity to communicate schedule changes to students—it is critical in online-only courses where students may check in infrequently, or randomly (and where some students need to plan the course into their schedules far in advance, and may not be able to reschedule to accommodate a change).
Example: Like many instructors, I include a schedule of course activities in my syllabus: I match class activities, readings, and due dates to a calendar. In post-semester interviews, my distance students reported that that practice was particularly helpful to them; of my nine interviewees, seven described creating some kind planning document (a calendar or day planner, an electronic schedule, or in one case, a set of handwritten weekly to-do lists) early in the term to ensure that they met my deadlines. That same syllabus list formed the outline for the learning modules I created to organize my online content in WebCT.

In the weeks leading up to the start of my first pilot course, I received persistent requests for scheduling information from my distance students. Beginning with the summer pilot and continuing through the experimental courses, I prepared a pre-semester email to send to my distance students a month ahead of the course start date, and again at a week before the course started. I included a copy of the syllabus and schedule, and assignment prompts for the first course activities. My students’ responses to that pre-course email were overwhelmingly positive.

Having a clear schedule in mind will also reduce the effort required to create an organized, consistent courseware platform for course content and activities. It is easier and more time efficient to compose a course schedule in a word processing program or calendar application and replicate it in the courseware—particularly if the course schedule includes a complex set of interdependencies (course items that are dependent on other course goals, and are only accessible to students who have met those goals), or any amount of segregated content (content that’s only available to certain students)—than it is to draft directly in the courseware. Even courseware with a simple, intuitive course-design interface can be complex and time-consuming to use, with convoluted error-recovery processes that may involve substantial rework.

Example: I drafted the course schedule for the initial pilot version of my course directly in WebCT, and used that schedule to create the calendar for my syllabus. In the course of creating my syllabus, I found a scheduling error: I’d used the wrong dates for Spring Break, which meant that I had to change the due dates for the lesson and assignments for that week and for several weeks previous and following, as many of my assignments were dependent on students completing earlier work. That change meant opening the definition for every item and manually changing the dates... a process that cost me several hours of rework, and several shavings off my sanity.

For the summer pilot, I began with a detailed calendar with all of my lessons, assignments, and activities laid out by date. Using that template, I was able to set up my course site in an hour or so, without need for rework.
Take a sensible approach to course design models (or: STTAR… to a point)

ISU advocates using a STTAR-compliant course design method to produce strong, learner-centered online courses. During my initial course design process, and in the subsequent redesigns that led to my experimental courses, I attempted to build my course to STTAR specifications; on review (using the STTAR assessment rubric as designed by California State University, Chico, 2009), I found that my course met the STTAR requirements for an Effective rating in five of the six STTAR categories. I also found that incorporating the STTAR design model was time-consuming and labor-intensive, and that it introduced time-consuming, labor-intensive practices into my courses’ day-to-day delivery. Based on that observation, I have two primary recommendations for any instructor attempting to design a new online course using STTAR (or a comparable design model).

Start at Baseline, and work up from there

While higher STTAR ratings (Effective and Exemplary) are certainly desirable, and represent many of the best practices for a distance or online course, a course that incorporates all of the Baseline STTAR rating recommendations will be robust and usable from the start. Rather than look at an Exemplary rating as an immediate goal (and an overwhelming one at that, particularly for novice online instructors), focus on incorporating one or two Effective or Exemplary STTAR criteria and develop the rest of the lessons, assignments, and course processes to meet STTAR Baseline goals. Effective or Exemplary features might best be added to future iterations of the course, once the course instructor has a better sense of how to manage the time commitment required by an online communication course. A sustainable Baseline course that can be taught term after term is better than an Exemplary course that will never be taught again.

Example: Based on my experiences, and my students’ responses, I’d recommend focusing on Category 2 (Online Organization and Design) and Category 3 (Instructional Design and Delivery) STTAR guidelines for the first iteration of an online communication course, and phase advanced elements from the other categories into
future iterations of the course. Categories 2 and 3 involve organizational and planning processes that support positive student outcomes and experiences with immediate results; the recommendations in the other categories are best addressed as one gains experience with online pedagogies and methods (Categories 4, 5, and 6), or as an element in a larger, program-level approach to online pedagogy within the curriculum (Category 1).

\textit{Work from a limited palette}

Several STTAR recommendations concern the use of multiple forms of learning materials, activities, assessments, media, and delivery models within a single course to accommodate the unique learning styles of a wide range of students. These are tempting goals for online communication courses, particularly the basic service courses taught by the English Department at ISU: they speak directly to the ISUComm mandate for multimodal pedagogies in communication courses, and they help address the problem of students with wide-ranging backgrounds and wide-ranging communication interests, talents, and needs. However, I recommend taking a much more limited approach: choose 1-3 different types of media for course materials (at least to start with), and 1-2 different types of assignments / assessments per course offering. These limits are important for two reasons. First, they help to reinforce a sense of uniformity and predictability to the course experience, which, based on my students’ responses, is essential for maintaining a positive student outcome to the course. Second, a limited palette of course activities and media is also essential to reducing instructor time commitment.

\textbf{Example}: While it is relatively simple to deliver multiple types of media to students in an online course (one can simply upload or link most sources to the courseware) it may be more beneficial to select a limited set of resources and use them thematically to reinforce the course organization. In my experimental course sections, for example, I used a total of three types of source media: the textbook, as a source of general information on weekly topics (linked directly to the major course assignments); my recorded lectures, as a more detailed or nuanced commentary on weekly topics (linked directly to minor, iterative course assignments); and web sites and pages, used as exemplars and discussion prompts in class discussion sessions.

Course activities and assessment opportunities are much more problematic. Each different type of activity requires a different assessment method or rubric (and thus requires a substantial amount of pre-course preparation time). Each will require instructions, tutorials, and communication with students to ensure they can use the software or complete the task successfully. I assumed, for example, that my students
would be able to complete multiple-choice assessments without supervision or substantial instructions. That assumption proved quite naïve. WebCT requires two actions to complete a quiz (save responses to questions, and submit the quiz for grading); my students frequently omitted one or the other, resulting in a failed quiz. Each will also require you to demonstrate expertise with whatever software of technology you use to deliver it; in my pilot and experimental courses, my students considered me their first, and in most cases, only, source of technical support. In short, look on each different type of course activity as a significant time investment on your part, and invest that time carefully.

In my experimental course, I used four different activity models: document (or media) creation and upload, for major assignments and labs; online text entry, for discussion assignments; automatically-scored quiz assessments, for online lesson review; and synchronous class discussion sessions, for small-group activities, directed peer review, and dynamic communication exercises. Were I to teach this course again, I would redesign my assignment structure to use no more than two of these formats (document submission and synchronous discussion), and revise my quiz assessments into those formats.

**Tailor the course to students’ needs**

As I prepared my online courses, I found that a common theme in the literature on online communication courses (and a major thread in resources like STTAR) is the notion that online courses provide ideal venues to customize specific pedagogical interventions to the needs and learning styles of course participants. Although I’ve touched on this subject above in my discussion of STTAR and similar course design models, I have two additional recommendations regarding content and course customization that I’d like to expand on here. While course customization has the potential to be an enormous undertaking for an instructor, adopting these simple means will enable one to deliver some degree of content customization and course customization with very little extra investment in time and effort.

**Use conditional content**

One challenge I’ve faced as an advanced communication instructor is the heterogeneity of my students. In a given business communication course, I might see ten different academic majors represented among my students (11 and 12 among my two experimental sections), with a number of
different career paths among each major—each one with a different set of expectations as to what constitutes professional communication and a different blend of communication skills and genres that will be meaningful in their professional lives. I found that problem is magnified in an online communication classroom. Not only does the class encompass a variety of career paths, but many individual students are spending the semester embedded in a specific setting in their individual career paths, with different needs and contexts than another student with similar career goals: an accounting major working an internship at a waste management company is engaging in a different set of communication tasks, and applying the course material in different ways, than an accountant working as a financial-planning volunteer with rural farmers in the Black Hills. As an instructor in a traditional classroom, I might present a variety of examples while emphasizing commonalities in discussions with the whole class; in an online class, I am limited to the examples my students see in the text, as samples in my online lessons (constrained by space, and bandwidth), and in their own practice.

That said, online communication courses also have a valuable tool available that, with a nominal investment in instructor effort, can provide some of the benefit of customized course content without requiring a fully-customized course: conditional content, the ability to choose which students view what course material. Using conditional content flags in WebCT, for example, one could easily divide the students in a course into groups based on career path or major, then designate certain content as shared in common and other content as specific to a group. All students might complete the same exercises and basic readings, but accountants could focus on supplemental readings on explaining GAAP conversion to clients, elementary education students on composing readable teaching plans, and agriculture majors on writing soil tilth reports.

**Example:** In my summer pilot course, I experimented with a conditional content solution for one of my recorded lessons (on Reports). I prepared a generic lesson for the class as a whole, but created a special lesson for agronomy, agriculture, and ag. sciences students—I chose sample texts related to those fields, recorded an alternate lecture segment for those segments, and exported the custom lesson as a separate media file. In WebCT, I created a group for my targeted students and made the alternate lesson visible to them alone; the custom lesson required about 20 minutes extra time investment (not counting
the time it took to find and evaluate the custom samples). That experiment also resulted in a rich conversation in that week’s class discussion session, as my students realized that their peers had seen different content.

In WebCT, one might accomplish a similar goal on a larger scale using Learning Modules: create separate learning modules for different tracks in the course, each with customized content but the same course activities and assignments, and each only visible to students in that track.

Adapt the course schedule to students’ usage patterns

A traditional classroom has an implicit usage pattern: the course meets at a specified time and place, and students “use” the course by being present and participating at that time and place. The hybrid or online components of a classroom-based course likewise have implicit usage criteria, generally linked to the classroom schedule of the course; the online lab assignments for a hybrid course with a weekly computer lab session might be designed for use during or adjunct to that lab meeting. The components of many online-only courses (all but the most synchronous course models) have no implicit usage pattern, or rather, one in which students construct a unique patterns based on how the course fits into their individual schedules. A simple way to build student engagement is to make the fixed schedule of an online course responsive to student needs: ensure that the course usage pattern fits your students’ schedules to make it as easy as possible for them to meet course requirements.

Example: I detailed the various means I used to schedule class discussion meetings in Chapter Two. I ultimately found that students had a more positive attitude to my class discussion sessions—the most intrusive part of my courses—when they had some measure of control over the sessions’ schedule.

I had a comparable experience with the other assignment due dates in my course. I set a Friday, midnight, due date for all assignments in the initial pilot of my course, working from previous experience: in the past, my students always complained bitterly about assignments that “ruined” their weekend. During the first month, I noticed a pattern: almost all students in the traditional classroom course met the Friday deadline, but a large portion of the distance students (as many as 60%, for some assignments) turned their work in late, on Saturday. I used the activity log feature of WebCT to investigate, and found that most of the distance students (even those who submitted their work on time) primarily accessed the course site only on the weekends. Those distance students who accessed the course during the week often only did so to check the course email and submit assignments. With that in mind, I extended the due dates for all assignments to
Saturday, midnight, and immediately had a remarkable improvement in on-time submissions along with a strong, positive reaction from my students.

In subsequent semesters, I asked my distance students, as a class, to tell me which day of the week they’d prefer for their assignment due dates: Friday, Saturday, Sunday, or Monday. The students in all three semesters chose Saturday, and I incorporated that preference in my course schedule.

**Balance synchronous / asynchronous communication**

Part of the intent behind my experimental business communication course was to impose a synchronous component (my class discussion sessions, to preserve my traditional classroom’s focus on spoken communication) on what I believed was a largely asynchronous pedagogical environment. As I noted in Chapter Three, I have since come to see online classrooms as much more fluid environments, and to understand the question of synchronous versus asynchronous components as a descriptive element of a learning environment rather than as an inherent aspect of online pedagogy.

My experience in my online business communication course is that synchronous course elements, particularly those that enable a dialog between my students, and between my students and myself, such as my class discussion sessions, were an invaluable part of my course’s pedagogical value. Even students who expressed open distaste for the discussion sessions (I’m thinking specifically of one student from the spring pilot course who remarked on several occasions that the required discussion sessions were a violation of his civil rights) admitted in post-semester interviews that the sessions were helpful, and provided pedagogical value that they would not have derived from the course’s asynchronous elements. That said, I would be remiss if I didn’t observe that the synchronous components were easily the most challenging part of the course for me as the instructor, because:

- Moderating a discussion in a multi-channel virtual classroom application is exhausting, especially over extended periods of time. I spoke with one instructor who said it was easy to run online class meetings in Adobe Connect—and who, in his Adobe Connect sessions, also employed a team of graduate TAs to read, respond to, and moderate the
text students typed into the course text chat queues; he also designated one TA to chat with students who had “raised their hands” using the status update feature, answer simple questions, and pass more complex or interesting questions to the room. As the course instructor, his only responsibility during discussions was to sit on-camera and speak. In my class discussions, I did all these jobs solo, simultaneously, and “easy” isn’t the word for it.

- Although both Adobe Connect and Wimba Live (and their equivalents) are relatively easy to use, they both introduce extra hardware and software into the online course experience, and thus increase the odds of significant technical difficulties. As the course instructor, I frequently found myself having to walk students through basic technical support issues (such as hardware installation, manual software updates when automatic updates failed, and resolving conflicts between the courseware and the newly-released Windows 7 operating system) that I was not remotely competent to resolve… with unfortunate, if predictable, results.

- In addition to client-side problems (improperly-installed microphones and cameras were the most common), any web based audio- or video-chat application is vulnerable to server-side problems (such as unscheduled restarts) and general internet difficulties (lag spikes, for example) that can result in spectacular disruptions of the learning environment, and over which the course instructor has no control.

All of these issues improve with experience, but never resolve completely. Synchronous online class meetings, in summary, are valuable additions to an online communication course and are not to be entered into lightly. Beyond that observation, I have two major recommendations for managing synchronous and asynchronous elements of an online communication course.
Include both asynchronous and synchronous components

In their post-semester memos and interviews, my students overwhelmingly associated online coursework with asynchronous learning environments: occasional text-chat sessions aside, their expectations for an online course was that it be an entirely individual experience, tied to their individual schedules, with no fixed times and places for direct interaction with their instructors or fellow students. Some students in my distance classes even remarked that having due dates for assignments was too much of a synchronous imposition. Nonetheless, I maintain that building a mix of asynchronous and synchronous elements into an online course is a critical component of building strong student outcomes, particularly for an online communication course. In addition to Boyd’s (2008) observations that synchronous communication avenues are a powerful way to build a sense of community within the course, and that building a sense of community is itself a means of improving student outcomes, the material and learning goals of a communication course lend themselves to a blended temporal pedagogy.

In a different subject area, where the course material and goals are simply iterative, one might reasonably employ a strictly asynchronous (if also strictly sequential) course methodology. In a college algebra course, for example, in which learning goals focus on acquiring knowledge and demonstrating that one can use that knowledge to perform concrete tasks, the temporal element arguably plays a reduced role. So long as students master the entire course of instruction, and do so in the prescribed order (as one concept builds on the next), the amount of time they take to work through each segment of the course material or the time between segments is unlikely to be significant. Whether a student completes the entire course in one afternoon, completes half of it in the first week of the term and half in the last, or completes it in one-hour increments spread out over a full semester, the final student outcome is likely to be the same. (I mean that student outcomes are likely consistent within the framework of the course; I suspect that retention over time might be a different matter entirely.)

In contrast, the learning goals in communication courses (at least, communication courses that rely on a rhetorical, multimodal pedagogy as those at ISU do) are not only productive, but also dialectic:
in order to demonstrate proficiency, students must communicate with an audience as well as to an audience. Ideally, that pedagogical approach requires the presence of synchronous interlocutors, with whom our students can communicate and from whom our students can elicit and receive feedback to help them improve. As I noted in Chapter Three, one might design an entirely asynchronous online course with synchronous, self-directed student activities (or activities completed in a larger pedagogical framework, such as a learning community or internship site); however, for practical purposes—primarily assessment, but also the ability to detect and respond to academic dishonesty—I believe that the best practice is to incorporate at least one form of synchronous interaction into any online communication course, even one that is otherwise entirely asynchronous.

**Example:** During my initial course design, I decided to focus on synchronous communication over asynchronous. I incorporated two primary forms of asynchronous communication: course email, and assignment submissions (WebCT allows two-way asynchronous communication on assignment submissions in the form of comments). A third form of asynchronous communication, via discussion forums, emerged during the pilot courses, and I maintained it into the experimental course. I also incorporated four forms of synchronous communication: audio/video chat (in class discussions, via Adobe Connect and Wimba Live), audio/video chat office hours and one-on-one consultations (via Skype, and by appointment through Adobe Connect or Wimba Live), text chat (via WebCT), and face-to-face meetings in my physical office.

My experience was that the vast majority of the communication I had with students took place via email, and adjunct to my class discussion sessions. In a future iteration of this course, I would limit the scheduled synchronous communication venues to class discussion sessions, offer office hours before and after each discussion session, and allow students to arrange other options by appointment. I might also establish a discussion forum for asynchronous student communication, and privilege it over email for general questions (to reduce the time spent responding to similar questions, multiple times).

**Establish realistic guidelines for synchronous participation**

Although I believe that the unusually large amount of synchronous communication built into my online course (in the form of class discussion sessions) and the wide array of synchronous communication opportunities I made available to my students were helpful, and represent a strong pedagogical choice, they also made my online communication course more labor-intensive to deliver than it might have been otherwise. In hindsight, there were two general reasons for that issue: I deliberately chose a pedagogical
style in my class discussion sessions that enabled a multimodal discourse that was (perhaps) effective, but very difficult for an individual instructor to moderate; I also chose to eliminate as many boundaries as possible between myself and my distance students in order to foster more extensive dialog. While I found I preferred using synchronous elements in my course, I would recommend that other communication instructors carefully consider how they wish to incorporate synchronous communication in order to retain the pedagogical value of these practices while reducing their impact on instructor time commitment.

Both Adobe Connect and Wimba Live (as well as comparable teleconferencing software) enable participants to communicate, simultaneously, in multiple channels. The Wimba Live classroom, for example, includes an audio/video channel, a text-chat application, a status bar (which allows participants to communicate simple messages: agree/disagree, raise hand, various emoticons), a whiteboard, and various configurable activity options (such as quizzes, surveys, and composition windows). Adobe Connect, which is a more robust and customizable application, enables all of those options plus the ability to create multiples of each. One might, for example, have four simultaneous text-chat sessions running concurrently with the audio/video channel and a pair of whiteboards. Although the pedagogical possibilities for these interfaces are rich, they can quickly become overwhelming for moderators (who must choose between being an active participant in one channel, or a diffuse presence throughout) and participants (who either choose one channel and ignore the others, or are stunned into nonparticipation by the din). Based on my experience in my own courses, I believe the best practice is to privilege one or two channels in these synchronous environments, establish a specific protocol for using each, and introduce other channels only for specific activities.

**Example:** At the start of my first pilot course, I made all of the communication channels in Adobe Connect open to my students, who generally took full advantage: the discussions were information-dense, but chaotic. In the summer pilot, I imposed a strict protocol: anyone might use the text-chat application or status bar, but the other options (including the audio/video channel) were available only on request; except during the open-microphone round-table portion of each session, students could only speak to the room if they set their status to “raised hand” in the status bar. The net result was that students ceded the audio/visual channel to me, and participated through the text-chat
application… even during round-table discussions, where the audio channel would frequently only capture the sounds of rapid typing.

During the experimental courses, I inverted that protocol: I used the text-chat channel for much of my own routine interaction with students in class discussions, and actively encouraged students to use the audio/video channel. The net effect was a much stronger small-group discussion environment.

In retrospect, I might have accomplished the same effect from the beginning by disabling or restricting access to all of the channels except audio/video. I’d recommend that a novice online instructor do just that, and slowly phase in other communication channels over time as one develops the skill needed to moderate multiple simultaneous communication channels.

As I taught my experimental courses, I made myself available to students via Skype whenever I was sitting at my computer; in effect, my office hours extended from early morning into the late evening. My students eagerly embraced those extended hours, contacting me for brief (2-3 minute) spoken consultations in place of emails. The practice certainly eliminated a substantial amount of email between my students and myself, and resulted in valuable pedagogical exchanges. For example, I encouraged my distance students to bring scenarios from their workplaces to class discussion sessions; after discussing a workplace communication scenario, I’d frequently receive follow-up calls from students as they put the insights from the Discussion session to use. On the other hand, my students’ easy access to me resulted in a much more intimate classroom experience than I’d previously had with students in a traditional classroom: I had several students in the pilots and experimental courses who would call just to chat (about sports teams, television programs, the weather…). My overall recommendation for online instructors, and especially for online communication instructors, is to establish much broader online office hours than one might for a traditional classroom course, but also to establish fixed limits: scheduling morning / evening hours on one or two days per week.
Use the medium to explore critical pedagogy

All of my preceding recommendations are essentially procedural issues, specific interventions that an instructor might adopt to ease the additional time commitment that online communication courses impose. My final recommendation concerns the content and focus of an online communication course. In hindsight, I recognize that my online business communication courses represented an enormous amount of effort on my part. I also recognize that much of that extra effort resulted from my own naiveté: I made choices, both from ignorance and from a sense of experimental curiosity, that produced a much more labor-intensive experience than was necessary. However, I regret only one choice I made as I designed and delivered my course: I focused so intently on the process of creating and delivering an online communication course, and of faithfully replicating the content and goals of my traditional classroom course, that I ignored the potential power of a distance learning environment to explore issues of critical pedagogy. As Anson and Selfe (and Gouge, in a roundabout way) have observed, traditional communication pedagogy reifies the essential transparency of technology to communication practices; the ultimate goal of a technologically-integrated communication curriculum, they argue, should be to help students develop a critical approach to communication technologies as they develop a critical approach to their own communication.

As I have taught my very traditional business communication course online, I have watched my students engage with the technological media enmeshed with my course material as a means to solve the communication problems in my course activities. I asked my students to compose their assignments in word processing programs and submit them online; why not also ask them to become aware of the different ways in which readers engage with electronic and paper texts? I asked my students to create texts suitable for online transmittal and publication (emails and web page text); why not also ask them to consider the impact of online transmittal and publication on their composition practices? I asked my students to make spoken presentations in virtual conference rooms, and watched as they acclimated to the peculiarities of a live environment with time-delayed audio and largely non-existent non-verbal
communication; why not also ask them to reflect on the implications of those technologies for the present and future states of social discourse? In short, why teach a traditional business communication course online, when the medium offers an extraordinary opportunity for students to develop a critical appreciation for the way(s) in which technology shapes the discourse within their professions, and their professional lives?

My final recommendation, then, for individual communication instructors is to recognize that while it is possible to faithfully recreate the dynamics of a traditional classroom in an online environment, an online environment offers remarkable potential for critical technological inquiry that would be difficult to replicate in a traditional classroom. A best practice approach to online communication course design would seize that opportunity and turn it to productive use.

For Programs/Departments: The Online Communication Curriculum

Late in the Spring semester after my experimental courses have ended, the English Department’s Foundational Communication program hosts an expo of their own experimental courses, which include two online/hybrid sections. I ask the graduate TAs who were the courses’ instructors about their experiences, and their replies match my own: a lot of work, a good experience, different than a traditional classroom course, great opportunity to experiment with new technologies and pedagogies. When I ask them whether they’d want to teach the course again, they each give me the same reply. No.

Why? Primarily because they missed the interaction with students. The easy camaraderie they were used to in their traditional classrooms is much harder to achieve in half (or less) of the face-to-face time. Behind that answer is another, however, which they allude to with careful euphemisms and sideways glances—mindful that their supervising faculty, and at least one Dean, are circulating around them. The challenge of teaching a hybrid / online course and completing graduate-level coursework was more than they wanted to take on again.

In her monograph on the state of online and hybrid communication courses, Gouge (2009) observes that the primary disadvantages of hybrid and online courses are administrative ones, at the program and curriculum level:
the complex administrative structures required, scheduling challenges, technical training and access for involved faculty and students, lack of agreed-on “best practices” and methods of program assessment, and feelings of resistance to new technologies. (346)

I confess that, as I designed and delivered my online business communication course, I deliberately avoided confronting these issues except as necessary to resolve immediate challenges in my course: partially because those difficulties were daunting enough without adding the challenge of establishing policies and procedures for a (currently non-existent) online communication curriculum, and partially out of a sense that it was an inappropriate time to request a program-wide initiative to define the role, scope, and practice of distance education in ISUs communication service courses (given the disastrous financial hardships and the far-reaching staffing and curricular decisions with which the department and the college were engrossed at the time). None of the other stakeholders in this project took up these challenges either, at least not in any organized sense. As a result, I do not believe that ISU’s communication programs are in a position to establish and maintain an online communication curriculum on a significant scale (that is, beyond single-section, special-purpose offerings, delivered on an irregular basis); but I am convinced that the Department of English, the ISUComm program, or both in tandem, should act to create curriculum-level policies and procedures for distance education with an eye toward proactively establishing a working, sustainable distance curriculum. This section contains my general observations about what those policies and procedures should entail in order to best ensure a successful, pedagogically-robust distance education curriculum for advanced communication courses (and, ideally, foundational communication courses as well) at ISU.

My first recommendation centers on who should be involved in establishing that program. Over the past two years, I have spoken with English faculty members about the future of distance education in the ISU Department of English, and I have encountered two general viewpoints in those conversations: that any future distance education program should be administered through ISUComm and the faculty members who oversee the Foundational and Advanced Communication programs; or that a future distance education program should be established and maintained as part of a post-doctoral fellowship
established by the department, and acting under the supervision of the graduate faculty. While I recommend the former solution, there are strong arguments in favor of the latter. The first is financial: given the current economic climate, it would likely be easier to obtain funding for a post-doctoral fellowship than a new tenure-track line (or the course-releases necessary for a tenured or tenure-line faculty member to oversee a distance program). As in my own case, a post-doctoral fellow would also occupy a neutral middle ground between an English Department disciplinary specialist and an LAS distance education specialist, while still possessing some of the ethos of a faculty member (as I did not).

A third argument is that a single, talented, and energetic post-doctoral fellow might be able to enact more creative and sweeping changes than a committee would, over a shorter time-frame, and as that person built a distance curriculum, would be more likely to motivate other English faculty to experiment with distance and hybrid pedagogies. (And, more to the point, motivate other faculty to seek out training in new technologies.) I have heard similar arguments in favor of extending the present solution of employing graduate teaching assistants to develop the Department’s distance education offerings.

While I agree that establishing a post-doctoral fellowship might be an effective means of creating a distance curriculum in the near term, I believe it is a weak long-term solution to the need for a distance program. First, it concentrates the knowledge and experience necessary to manage a new distance program in a single individual who will depart with that expertise at the end of the fellowship: leaving the department with a distance curriculum but no one to manage it. Second, it encourages the view that a distance program is separate from the rest of the curriculum, with separate faculty and separate practices. Third, it relies on the dubious assumption that an extraordinary, talented, energetic candidate might be able to overcome organizational inertia in ways that other, perhaps more enmeshed, faculty might not. Finally, based on my own experience, I submit that graduate teaching assistants would also require significant mentorship (and faculty oversight) to develop distance offerings that meet the department’s current standards, given the challenges inherent in adapting traditional classroom pedagogies for distance delivery. I argue instead that a sustainable distance curriculum for the English
Department’s service courses need to distribute expertise among the department’s faculty so that the program is not vulnerable to personnel attrition, and that any distance program be linked directly to the existing curriculum, with the same practices (and especially the same, or comparable, assessment practices). I suggest that a faculty committee or special interest group (similar to the present area groups) for distance education is more likely to facilitate those goals over the long term, and more likely to identify research opportunities (and other incentives) to motivate other faculty to explore distance and hybrid pedagogies.

Beyond that suggestion, I have three other recommendations that I believe will promote a sustainable distance curriculum.

**Establish distance policies and standards across the curriculum**

My online business communication course was attended by administrative problems, of which I will discuss two as examples to underscore the need for a high-level approach to distance education policy within the English Department. During the registration process for my pilot and experimental courses, potential distance students had to be vetted individually to ensure that they were eligible to register for an online section of English 302; that is, to ensure that they had some pressing exigency that prevented them from completing the course in a traditional classroom. Each semester the English Department offered the course, a member of the department’s administrative staff had to field student requests to take the course, follow up with each student individually, verify the student’s status (through the Registrar, the student’s department, the student’s advisor, or all three), register students, and maintain a reservation list for students who wished to take the course in future semesters. The manual labor at the department level was necessary because there is no centralized record at the University level of which students are distance students, and because when the process was left to staff at the College and other departments, the results were unacceptable (including incidences of over-enrolment and section seating
size change). The effort needed to enroll 24-26 students in a single offering of English 302 was considerable; expand that effort to cover multiple sections of multiple service courses, and the endeavor quickly becomes unsupportable.

End-of-semester course evaluations involved comparable problems. With no physical course meetings, there is no time and place to distribute paper evaluation forms; mailing forms to individual students is impractical, both in terms of time and cost, and because it eliminates anonymity from the review process. In the first three semesters, I worked with the staff at the college’s Center for Distance and Online Learning (CDOL) to create and implement an online version of the evaluation form (administered through SurveyMonkey). However, the output from that survey was not compatible with the electronic reports generated when the paper evaluations from all other sections were scanned; in order to include my distance course in the overall departmental report, a member of the department’s administrative staff had to key my course’s data by hand (including student comments). In the fourth semester, the department implemented an online evaluation form administered through department-owned resources, which eliminated the manual rework. However, this effort suffered from an issue that also undermined the previous attempts to obtain end-of-semester evaluations: lack of participation. Only about half of the distance students completed the online form, despite repeated requests and reminders to do so, undermining the value of the evaluation data. As with the registration problem, this issue would be magnified by additional sections of additional courses.

In both cases, existing departmental processes are not ideal responses to the task of structuring an online course. The solutions adopted for my course, while certainly effective in the short term, would likely prove unworkable over time or with the addition of more online sections to the department’s curriculum. Nor were these the only administrative issues, though they were the most time-consuming to resolve. If the English Department intends to offer a full distance curriculum covering the service courses, the best practice would be to review current course scheduling, registration, and administrative
procedures, and develop program-level policies that address the special requirements of a distance curriculum.

**Address the issue of instructor effort**

The data from my study suggests that, even with effort-reducing practices in place, the time commitment needed to offer distance versions of the department’s service courses would likely prove unsupportable over time. While I suspect that the extra time commitment needed to deliver a communication course in an online environment is essentially irreducible (an online communication course, delivered by an active, engaged, and motivated instructor, will always require more time from an instructor than a directly-comparable traditional classroom course) I have two primary recommendations to help address the issue in ways that should enable the department to sustainably offer multiple sections (or larger online sections) of the service courses.

The first is to address the most staggering source of additional instructor effort: the need to convert existing course materials, lessons, or activities into an online format (or generate that content from scratch). When I developed my online business communication course, I did so with the benefit of a course release during the semester before I delivered the course. That time was necessary; I would not have been able to learn the technology, design or convert a semester’s worth of material, and produce it in electronic format without that time off from my other duties. I submit that it would be impractical to provide the same incentive to the instructors of future online sections of department service courses, particularly if the department intends to develop a broad base of faculty with online teaching experience (as it should). Instead, I recommend that the department create and sponsor a repository of online material that new distance instructors could assemble into a working course without the need to create everything from the ground up.

For example, consider the subject of online lessons (the equivalents of the recorded lectures that I produced for my own course). The ideal play length of a recorded online lesson is about 10 minutes, to
ensure that online students are motivated to comply with the lesson requirements and can conveniently build the lesson assignment into their schedules, with adequate time to view/listen to the lesson, take notes, and review the material as needed. The effort required to produce all of the 10-minute lecture segments for full a communication course is considerable; the effort needed to produce a single 10-minute segment on a specific topic is not and might be distributed across the department’s faculty, all of whom have both experience and expertise preparing and presenting this material in traditional classroom settings. If each instructor who taught a traditional classroom section of a service course also produced two 10-minute lecture segments each semester, the department would quickly assemble a large body of prepared material suitable for arranging into online courses. The department’s faculty need not be solely responsible for the developing the effort and expertise needed to create this material. The department might, for example, offer students in the various media production courses the opportunity to act as production assistants to faculty as they generate this content, or arrange a course release for one or more graduate TAs to train and assist faculty. Faculty could also retain ownership of the intellectual property in these donated lectures, with the ability to remove their work from the department repository or only grant access to their material with express permission.

Another potentially valuable practice, and one that has been successfully used in other departments, is to distribute the workload by offering larger online course sections taught by multiple faculty members. One might offer a course with multiple graduate TAs, working with a lead faculty member for the course, each responsible for a different segment of the work (one working with students as a dedicated tutor, while another evaluates student work; or with each TA assigned to a subset of the course enrolment and providing primary contact service to all of the students in that subset). That type of distribution of labor would prevent a single instructor from being unduly burdened with the extra effort of online coursework, while providing graduate TAs a valuable experience under the direct mentorship of a faculty mentor.
Expand and coordinate research efforts

My final recommendation is that the department continue and expand the effort to research and implement strong distance learning solutions for online and hybrid communication courses. As a department within a Research 1 Institution, and as one with a proven track record of curricular research under the aegis of the ISUComm program, ISU’s Department of English is uniquely situated in the discipline to explore both the practical and philosophical aspects of online communication pedagogy. The department has some such projects already in process: Foundational Communication’s experiments with hybrid and online courses, for example, as well as upcoming projects to investigate the use of detailed electronic rubrics for student assessment (and instructor training) in Advanced Communication courses (Weiner, McGough, and Myers, 2010). These projects, and other future additions to the department’s research agenda, would benefit from some coordinating effort; a distance learning area group might encourage department researchers to combine their efforts (for more robust data-collection, collaboration, or the potential for consolidated grant applications).

For the Discipline: Recommendations for Future Research

At the 2009 annual conference of the Association for Business Communication, I have a conversation over breakfast with colleagues from two other universities: an Associate Professor of Composition from a two-year business college in New England, and an Assistant Professor of Communication at a four-year technical college on the Gulf Coast. Both have been dispatched to the conference to “find out how to set up” an online communication curriculum. Both have attended the many sessions on distance and online courses at the conference, including my own. Both are disappointed.

The problem is that all of the sessions they’ve attended have focused on pedagogical and technological solutions. That information has been helpful, but frustrating. My breakfast companions are veteran instructors with more than thirty years of composition experience between them. They know how to teach a composition course. They can figure out how to run the technology, and teach that course online.

Where they are at a loss, and what they have been looking for—and missing—in the sessions and in the pre-conference workshop on distance and online pedagogy, is some consensus on the larger issues: How does one assess an online communication course? How does one integrate remedial communication programs, such as a writing center, with online courses? How does an online communication course fit into an institution-wide
Communication Across the Curriculum program? What concerns do online courses raise during an accreditation process, and how should one anticipate and address those concerns?

I’ll conclude this chapter of recommendations, and my larger narrative, by returning to the beginning. In August, 2008, I undertook a project to teach my business communication course in a disembodied classroom. At the time, I found that the disciplinary literature concerning online communication pedagogy was focused on foundational communication, not professional communication; on written communication, not spoken or multimodal communication; on specific technological solutions, not broadly-applicable pedagogical approaches. I have spent the two years since then creating and delivering my idiosyncratic, multimodal business communication course, and speaking with other educators who were trying to do the same with their own courses. Now, two years on, I look through the literature and find that little has changed; I look through the results of my own study, and find that, beyond a minor confirmation of generally-accepted pedagogical principles, I have discovered little to change the literature. I have, however, come to understand the gaps in the literature more deeply: that it was not my course that was disembodied but my conception of it, and that that conception is reified by my discipline’s approach to online pedagogy and pedagogical research in general. In this final segment of my narrative, then, I’ll speak to those gaps and identify some potentially productive approaches for future research in the discipline.

The problem of technological transparency

Throughout this narrative, I have seized on Gouge’s (2009) discussion of hybrid courses as both touchstone and foil for my own observations. That focus was perhaps unwise, and certainly unfair. Gouge, like every other educator I’ve spoken with on the subject, has attempted to clarify a murky, discipline-wide issue using her observations of the programs and courses available to her, and in that sense, her article is a valuable contribution. However, in hindsight, I have come to see her argument less
as snapshot of what hybrid and online communication pedagogy will be, or should be, and more as a turn in a larger conversation about the problem of technological transparency in communication pedagogy. As Gouge, and Selfe and Anson (among many others) have observed, and as I have now experienced first-hand, it is far too easy to set aside the question of critical technological literacies, particularly when one is faced with what seem to be irresolvable technological challenges or while one is sunk nose-deep in the mires of daily pedagogical practice. It is easy, in the moment, to allow the technologies of communication to remain transparent, because to do otherwise is to layer complexities onto practices that are already irreducibly complex. In the course of this experiment, I have come to know the students in my disembodied classroom. I have come to understand their exigencies, and the communication problems that they struggle with as they attempt to apply the material in my professional communication course. I have come to understand my classroom as diffuse rather than disembodied. In the end, I now consider it more important than ever to take up a critical approach to technological literacy in my own pedagogy, practice, and in the discipline within which I work.

In our class discussion sessions, my students described workplaces, lives, and communication practices that are so suffused with technologies that my online classroom—which seemed to me so novel, and so transgressive—is reduced to a commonplace, just another transparent locus of technology among so many others. In 1999, Selfe and Anson cautioned against pedagogical practices that allowed technological transparency to also erase social, economic, and individual distinctions: how much more necessary is critical technological literacy now, when our students’ (and fellow-citizens’) communication practices are distributed among so many technologies? My students now work, or anticipate working, in settings where the traditional print genres so central to “business writing” courses are being subsumed into electronic remediations, and in which spoken genres can be performed in person, via telepresence, or both simultaneously. We do our students a grave disservice when we allow these exigencies to occupy our classrooms and their daily practices, without pause for reflection, or questions. We, as a discipline of communicators and educators, do ourselves a disservice when we focus so intently on what technologies
we have available and how to use them that we render the social impact of those technologies transparent in our own pedagogies. While I agree that the current trend toward instrumental research in online communication pedagogy has a value (any practical solution to the problem of instructor effort in online communication courses can potentially free instructors to focus on pedagogical approaches that improve student outcomes) I argue that such research should be combined with research into the critical impact of these technologies: focusing not only how these technologies may be used in online communication classrooms, and what impact they have on student outcomes in our courses, but also on what impact they have on student and instructor perceptions, attitudes, and critical awareness of the role of communication technologies.

The problem of online “writing courses” and the “place” of composition research

A recent conversation with a colleague reminded me that the full title of my degree program is not Rhetoric, but Rhetoric and Professional Communication, and that there is a gulf between those two branches. In that conversation, I noted that much of the valuable scholarship in communication pedagogy that had informed my online course development had come from scholars in two-year institutions, community colleges, and the writing centers of four-year institutions. My colleague, a noted scholar in rhetoric, observed that that distribution was appropriate; scholars in larger (and, implicitly, more prestigious) institutions would do well to avoid “writing center” research whenever opportunities for other avenues of inquiry exist, while scholars in smaller programs (who have to make do with the opportunities at hand) naturally gravitate toward pedagogical scholarship. I found the distinction curious. As a scholar, I lean more toward the professional communication end of the spectrum, and I have often been taken to task by my colleagues for my preference for practical scholarship over (or at the expense of) rhetorical theorcraft; but the notion that research on “writing” or “writing center” pedagogies is somehow less scholarly than other topics, suffused as that notion is with needless elitism, seems as
counterintuitive to me as my insistence on practical applications must seem to my colleagues in rhetoric. Still, I believe that notion is at least in part responsible for the paucity of robust research within this discipline on online communication pedagogy, and on the social implications of technological literacies for student outcomes and perceptions. (The frameworks I outlined in Chapter Three, for example, might provide an avenue for such inquiries.)

During that conversation, I chose not to challenge my colleague’s beliefs about the place of research into composition, online or otherwise; nor do I intend to do so here. Instead, I’ll observe that the discipline of rhetoric is uniquely situated to investigate the social construction of knowledge, the impact of technology/ies on that construction, and the intersections of rhetorical theory and practice that inform the way(s) in which people learn, internalize, and express their relationships with technology. Communication classrooms provide a useful and potentially rich locus for that inquiry, one which I argue should not be dismissed so readily.

The need for unified, inclusive research at all levels

That said, the fact remains that much of the scholarship on online communication pedagogies, in this discipline, centers on foundational composition pedagogy: online first-year writing courses. Discussions of online business, technical, and professional communication pedagogy are rare; discussions of multi-modal pedagogies in online environments, particularly pedagogies that focus on spoken communication, are even rarer. As to the first gap, there are practical benefits to be realized from taking up a line of inquiry into online professional communication pedagogies, not least the potential to pair research in communication classrooms with communication research in professional settings: my students describe tantalizing parallels between the pedagogical adaptations required by my online classroom, and the communication practices of increasingly-distributed worksites. The subjects of team-building
communication, dynamic adaptation of traditional genres to meet the exigencies of online communication environments, and blended written/spoken genres in workplace settings seem especially ripe for inquiry.

On a more immediate, practical level, I see my own research as a starting point for potential inquiry into assessment practices for spoken communication in online communication course settings. The research I’ve conducted over the last two years has focused entirely on written communication due to a simple expedience: I lacked the time resources to collect and analyze data from my students’ spoken interactions, and their progress toward course goals relating to spoken communication. A business communication course like the experimental courses I’ve taught during this study could be a rich source of research data into spoken communication pedagogy in online communication settings (not to mention data regarding online speech, and dialectic analysis of blended spoken/written formats such as the audio/video/text chat sessions in my course). I see such research as a key component to understanding how online pedagogies impact student performance, given the central role that spoken communication plays in most of my students’ future career paths.

**The Disembodied Classroom**

I end this narrative where I started it: on a note of uncertainty. Not for the outcome of the course: based on the data I’ve collected, and especially based on the feedback from my students, I am as satisfied with the outcomes of my experimental courses as I can be. (I will always wonder about the long-term impact of these courses, and wonder if there was some intervention I missed that might have made the material more impactful for specific students; but never mind.) Nor am I uncertain about the fate of disembodied classrooms in the abstract. The past two years have demonstrated to me that enough people (students, instructors, administrators, others) are invested in the concept of online pedagogy in general and online communication courses specifically that the proliferation of these courses is inevitable. Whether that development is particularly desirable, or can be achieved without significant reinvestment,
rethinking, or retraining is a separate matter. I suspect that this shift, like others in communication pedagogy, may be profound, but in the end will be neither disastrous (as my more nervous colleagues have predicted) nor transformative at a disciplinary level.

Instead, I am uncertain regarding the fate of my disembodied classroom. My involvement with this particular online course will end with the data collection effort for the second experimental offering. The results I’ve presented in this discussion stem from the pilot and first experimental courses; I’ve continued to collect data through the Spring semester 2010. While I have yet to analyze that data, I suspect that they will corroborate my Fall 2009 data. The course I developed has proven to be unsustainable for me as an instructor… although I itch to try out some of the pedagogical techniques and process improvements that have emerged from this research process, I wouldn’t willingly teach this course again without some external motivation. Setting polite euphemisms aside, the workload for this experimental offering has been crushing, nearly to the point of ruin. Nor is the English Department likely to offer this course as more than an occasional, special-purpose section without external motivation. Though there are a number of motivating factors that might apply; not least among them, when I surveyed the students in my traditional classroom course, a majority indicated that they’d have been willing to pay a premium on top of their standard tuition to take the course online. Of course, most of them have a vision of the workload and time commitment of an online course that’s incongruent with the reality of the course I developed.

“Stacey” was one of the students in my Fall 2009 distance course who began with just such a vision. She was a traditional student who took her classes online that semester because she was away from campus at an internship, and she imagined that online classes would be a convenient way to keep her graduation date on track. Instead, she nearly jumped that track: she discovered that convenient was not synonymous with easy, and came close to failing all of her courses across the board. My experience with the course was similar. I imagined that delivering a communication course online would be convenient, and so it was, at least until I actually started teaching it. I imagined that I could turn my successful
traditional classroom course into a successful online course, and so I did, although simply remediating a classroom experience in an online environment has turned out to be a less useful goal than I’d thought. I imagined that I could achieve comparable student outcomes in my paired business communication courses, one in a traditional classroom and one online, and so I did, though at enormous cost in time and effort. By adopting workflow efficiencies, I imagined that I could deliver my online course with less time investment than other researchers had reported, and so I did: but only by enough to render the course bearable, if not truly sustainable. Most importantly, though, I imagined my course to be disembodied, an exercise in lines of text divorced from the hands that wrote them, in tinny voices and tiny, pixellated faces sandwiched into windows in a web browser—and so it was. But it was also an exercise in community-building, in discussions with interesting, motivated students who brought an amazingly diverse set of backgrounds and experiences into a surprisingly intimate classroom setting. It was, simply put, remarkable.

I wouldn’t want to teach this course again; not this way, and not with the narrow confines of my traditional classroom course (and my own preconceptions) constraining the possibilities of an online environment. I feel certain, however, that I will return to an online communication course, and, armed with some perspective and a realistic understanding of the personal investment required, I find myself looking forward to the challenge.
Works Cited


Ferdig, Richard, and Andrew Topper. “The Role of Interaction and Discourse in Distance Education: the STTAR Model of Teaching and Learning Online.” Proceedings of the Society for Information

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Appendix A: Major Assignment Sheets for the Experimental Sections

This Appendix contains the assignment prompts for the five Major Assignments in the experimental courses: four corresponding to the four course modules, and one group project that spans the course and ties all of the course material together:

- Job Application (Major Assignment for Module 1)
- Informative Report (Major Assignment for Module 2)
- Three Messages (Major Assignment for Module 3)
- Information Sheet (Major Assignment for Module 4)
Job Packet (Resume + Cover Letters + Memo)

15% of final class grade (total)

The first (and therefore the most important!) piece of workplace communication that many of you will create will be your resume and letter of application/transmittal: the documents that will get you a job. In this assignment, you’ll find an advertisement for a job, then demonstrate your grasp of the fundamentals of professional communication by creating a resume and cover letter that are tailored to the specific needs and expectations of your potential employer, as expressed in that ad. You’ll then compose a memo to explain your choices.

Project Scope

This project will include the following components, each of which will count toward your final grade on the assignment:

- A resume, specifically tailored to the requirements of the job ad.
- Two cover letters, both tailored to the requirements of the job ad: one full letter (a full page in length), and one short transmittal email (100-150 words).
- A reflection memo that describes the reasoning behind your choices in these documents.
- Reviewed, marked-up versions from any peer and audience reviews you choose to conduct for this assignment.

Step 1 - Find a job

Do some research, and find an ad for a job that you’ll “apply for” in this exercise. Online resources such as Monster.com or Dice.com may be helpful as you complete this step, but don’t limit yourself: there are lots of places to find job ads, and many professions list job ads in other venues. (Internships are rarely advertised on the big job boards like Monster or Dice, and an internship application would be great for this assignment.)

Select an ad for a job related to your field of study, or a job at which you would want to work. This isn’t fantasy time, however: choose a job for which you’re currently qualified (such as an internship), or choose a job for which you will be qualified when you graduate with from your current degree program.

Save a copy of your job ad: you’ll need to attach it to your memo in Step 5.

Step 2 – Write a resume for that job

Write a resume that details your past work and academic experience. Be sure to highlight aspects of your experience and education that speak directly to the requirements described in the ad. (Chapter 7 in the text includes useful information about the standard content of a resume. You will need to do some research about the company and the specific position in order to figure out just what you should include, or leave out.)
Some things to think about:

- What key facts will your potential employer look for? What do you absolutely have to include in order to avoid landing in the trash pile? What vocabulary and organizational structure will they expect to see in your resume?

- What is the most persuasive part of your background? What should you bring to your prospective employer’s attention?

- What is the least persuasive part of your background? What should you leave out of your resume, or downplay?

**Step 3 – Write two cover letters**

First, write a full-length cover letter, in formal business letter format, to go along with your resume, similarly tailored to the needs and expectations described in the ad. (Chapter 8 of the text includes useful information on the content and format of a formal business letter, cover letter, or letter of application.) Some things to think about:

- One purpose of a cover letter is to demonstrate some “personality.” (More than you can on a resume, in any case.) Use your cover letter to give your employer some idea of who you are as a person.

- The cover letter is a good place to explain gaps, lapses, or other “problem” areas on your resume. (As we’ll discuss later in the term, it’s good practice to buffer negative information between positive statements.)

- A cover letter’s main purpose is to generate interest in your resume: try to be upbeat, confident, and enthusiastic.

- A cover letter should be about one full page, including full business letter address and signature blocks. (Appendix A in the textbook has examples of formal business letter format.)

Then, write a very short cover letter, suitable to include as a transmittal email or online statement of purpose. This should be the “executive summary” version of your cover letter: you’ll need to hit all of the important points from your full cover letter (including any goodwill moves, and any buffers around negative news), but you’ll need to do it in a much shorter space – between 100-150 words.

**Note:** “Short” is not an excuse for vague or poorly-detailed writing. You’ll need to be just as detailed and persuasive in the short email as you are in the full-page cover letter. Part of the challenge is deciding which details to include, and which to leave out.
Step 4 – Reviews and revision

The best practice for professional communication is to get feedback on your work: it helps you catch any errors or omissions, and it gives you another perspective to help you improve your work. In order to get the “Reviews and Revision” credit for this assignment, you must:

- Get at least two reviews of a draft version of this assignment
  - At least one review from someone in this class
  - At least one review from people in your target audience: people who are in a position to make interview/hiring decisions for a job like this one (or for this job!), or people with special expertise relating to this type of business communication.

- Use those reviews to improve your work. Submit the reviewed drafts and the final revised draft when you turn in this assignment.

Step 5 – Write a reflection memo

Once you’ve completed your resume and cover letters, write a memo to me in formal business memo format, explaining your choices. (Appendix A in your textbook has some good examples of formal business memo format.)

In addition to a basic summary introduction, your memo should contain four section headings. Begin each section with an appropriate forecasting/transition sentence, then describe:

- **The Ad.** What are the requirements in the job ad? Based on the ad, who is the primary audience that you’ll need to address with your resume and cover letter (and how do you know)? What vocabulary do they use (that you can bring up in your own documents)? What expectations do they have? What barriers and resistances will you need to address as you respond to that ad?

- **The Resume.** Explain the choices you made as you composed your resume: how did you adapt this resume to the specific needs and barriers you found in the ad? What skills, experiences, and background features did you emphasize or de-emphasize? How? Be specific, citing evidence both from your resume and from the ad.

- **The Cover Letters.** Explain the choices you made as you composed your cover letter. How did you create interest in you as a potential employee? What skills, experiences, and background features did you emphasize or de-emphasize? How? Be specific, citing evidence both from your letter and from the ad.

Then explain how you adapted the long letter into the much shorter format of the 100-150 word email: what did you leave out or include? Why?
• **Assessment.** Discuss your assessment of this assignment. Address each of the following in this section:

  o **Reviews.** If you completed the Review and Revision portion of this assignment, briefly identify who your reviewers were, including their qualifications (if any), their major suggestions, and how useful their review was (why).

  o **Your assessment.** Explain whether you believe the materials you’ve created for this assignment would successfully achieve their specified purpose. As part of that assessment, discuss both:

    • **Successful** elements. What do you consider to be the most successful elements of your material? What would most likely contribute to its success?

    • **Unsuccessful** elements. What do you consider to be the least successful elements of your material? What would you change or improve if you had additional time?

Include a copy of the job ad (or a link to the ad) in your reflection memo.

Submit all four documents, plus any revisions you choose to complete, to the course site by midnight on 9/12.
## In a successful assignment...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong> (75%)</td>
<td>All aspects of the assignment are complete.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your resume is:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Clearly customized to meet the specific needs expressed in the ad.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Logically organized, using an organization scheme that addresses the needs expressed in the ad and highlighting your background to best effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your cover letters are clearly customized to meet the specific needs expressed in the ad.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Your “long” cover letter adds to and/or supports your resume, drawing attention to the most important parts of your resume.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Your “long” cover letter addresses any “problems” in your resume.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Your “long” cover letter is organized according to formal business letter format, and reflects the organization scheme discussed in Lesson 1-3 / in class.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Your “long” cover reflects strong attention to goodwill, especially reader benefits/you-attitude.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Your “short” cover letter reflects a careful and effective modification of your “long” cover letter’s organization and content.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Your analysis memo:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Is in formal business memo format, and begins with a summary introduction that forecasts content, organization, and purpose.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Identifies the audience, goals, and expectations that you have addressed in your application materials.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Explains the specific choices you made as you composed your resume and cover letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Includes a detailed and insightful assessment of your resume and cover letters.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Includes a copy of (or a link to) the job ad you are answering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every aspect of your work is supported by specific, relevant, and effective details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have used visual cues, such as headings, space, and highlighted text, to organize the information in your assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics and Grammar</strong> (20%)</td>
<td>Your work is free from spelling errors, grammar errors, and other major composition flaws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reviews and revision</strong> (5%)</td>
<td>You have conducted reviews of your materials and used those reviews to improve your work.</td>
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</table>
Informative Report

15% of final class grade (total)

In this assignment, you’ll research an issue of interest or importance to your chosen career field. As part of this research, you’ll interview a professional who has some special expertise with this topic. Then you’ll write up the results of your interview and present them in a detailed informative report.

This assignment will give you a chance to do some networking in your field of interest, practice obtaining and reporting first-hand information, and practice using the basic techniques of good professional communication.

Project Scope

This project will include the following components, each of which will count toward your final grade on the assignment:

- An informative report
- A follow-up “thank you” letter or email to your source
- A reflection memo that describes the reasoning behind your choices in these documents
- Reviewed, marked-up versions from any reviews you choose to conduct for this assignment

Step 1 – Select a topic and find a professional to interview

First, choose a current topic that interests you: the best topics are ones of current critical interest in your major, or in your chosen career path. I’ve also seen excellent projects completed around hobbies, extracurricular activities, sports, and organizations.

Once you’ve chosen a topic, select a professional to interview for this assignment. Your interviewee should work in a field that’s directly related to your topic or have some special expertise related to that topic:

- Your professors don’t count for this assignment. You can interview faculty members and use information from them in your report, but to receive full credit for this assignment, you need to talk to someone working outside the university. (If you’re having trouble coming up with someone to interview, try asking one of your professors for help: university instructors often work with people in business, industry, and government, and might be able to point you toward someone to talk to.)

- Similarly, your family members, friends, roommates, etc. also don’t count as primary sources for this assignment. You can interview them, but in order to receive full credit, you’ll need to interview at least one other professional source.
Step 2 – Do your research and conduct the interview

For this project, you’ll need to gather information from both primary and secondary sources.

For your primary sources, you’ll conduct at least one interview. Chapter 15 (517-518) in the text includes some guidelines for creating good, open-ended interview questions, but those are only starting points. You should tailor your list to your subject. One way to do that is to find out about their interests, specialties, or the tasks involved in their work (when you contact them to set up a time and location, for example), and then tailor your questions to fit that information.

You should conduct a face-to-face interview or a phone interview if at all possible: you may conduct your interview via email or other asynchronous methods, but such interviews will often provide you with less, and less useful, information than a conversation.

Some things to think about:

- Accommodate your interviewee, because they are doing you a favor. Schedule the interview at their convenience, and arrange to meet at their office or a place very convenient to him or her.

- Be prepared. Go through your questions so that you understand them: make sure that you can answer questions about your questions (such as: Why are you asking me about that?).

- Anticipate how you will record their answers. Will you take notes? Then have paper and pen ready. Will you write down their responses after the interview? If so, do it immediately following the interview so your memory is still fresh. Will you record the interview (using a recorder or other device)? If so, test the equipment beforehand and have it ready to go at the start of your interview—and be sure to ask permission to record your subject before you begin.

- Time is valuable to people. Make sure you use their time well. Try to keep your interview focused (30 minutes should be plenty of time to cover the narrow topic for this assignment).

- Be polite. Thank your interviewee after the interview: it’s a good way to close the interview.

You’ll also need to collect secondary sources: information that other people have collected and published in other venues (print, broadcast, or online). You’ll use secondary sources to:

- Explain the nature and background of your problem. Secondary sources can establish history. They’re also great for demonstrating rationale: reasons why this issue is important, or reasons why people need to become informed about this topic.

- Explain your recommendations, if any. You might use your report to make recommendations for best practices. A good recommendation is like a table that stands on three legs: a solid rationale (a reason why the problem needs to be solved), solid data
(reasons why this is a good solution), and proof of concept (some evidence, beyond your opinion or say-so, to convince people that this might work). Good secondary sources will help you strengthen all three legs.

Be sure to choose appropriately professional sources: that is, sources that are credible and reliable sources of information. (Wikipedia, for example, is not especially credible or reliable.)

**Step 3 – Write the report**

Synthesize the results of your interview and research in a report, 2-3 pages of single-spaced text (plus any additional pages for citations, etc.), and select a format, organizational structure, and written style that complement the material you have gathered. Be sure to organize information in your report in a logical order, and insert appropriate headings.

**Note:** As we’ll discuss later in the semester, a “report” is not necessarily a simple text document. If you determine through your formulation analysis that another format would be more appropriate to your topic, audience, and purpose, you’re free to use that instead – as long as you achieve the content goals outlined below, and the “substance” goal of 2-3 single-spaced pages. Some ideas:

- A PowerPoint presentation with 3-5 minutes of embedded voice-over narration
- A 2-4 minute informative video
- Two 3-fold brochures
- A website with 4-5 linked pages
- A large-scale graphic (such as a research poster presentation)
- A 2-3 page written report in formal business format

Bear in mind, however, a simple transcription of your interview in question and answer format is unlikely to be especially useful to an audience – and is therefore not likely to earn full points for this assignment.

Be sure to:

- Provide a summary introduction. Every piece of professional communication needs a summary introduction that establishes the content, purpose, and rationale.

- Identify your interview source(s) and provide enough background on them to establish their credibility and place their information in context.

- Include the “so-what” factor: some indication as to how your audience should use the information you provide. (The conclusion to your report might be a good place for that information; you could also handle it well in a sidebar or callout.)

- Include full citations for all of your sources. Cite your sources in a way that would be recognizable, meaningful, and useful to your audience. (If your audience would expect less formal and detailed citations in your report, that’s fine – make your report reflect
your audience’s expectations. Then attach detailed citations to your reflection memo so that I can evaluate the quality of your research process.)

**Step 4 – Write a follow-up letter/email**

Compose a follow-up letter or email to your interviewee to thank them for their time, and for the information you’ve received. (Chapter 10 in the text gives some pointers on this type of positive message.)

I don’t require that you send this letter or email to your interviewee, but it’s a good idea. You might use this opportunity to give your interviewee a copy of your report to get their input, and to show them how well you’ve used the information they gave you. If you choose not to send your follow-up letter or email to your interviewee, be sure to explain the reasons behind that decision in your reflection memo.

**Step 5 – Reviews and revision**

The best practice for professional communication is to get feedback on your work: it helps you catch any errors or omissions, and it gives you another perspective to help you improve your work. In order to get the “Reviews and Revision” credit for this assignment, you must:

- Get at least two reviews of a draft version of this assignment
  - At least one review from someone in this class.
  - At least one review from someone in your target audience: someone who stands to benefit from reading or using the information you’ve gathered.

It would also be a good idea to have your interview source review your report.

- Use those reviews to improve your work. Submit the reviewed drafts and the revised final draft when you turn in this assignment.

**Step 6 – Write a reflection memo**

Once you’ve completed your report, write a memo to me in formal business memo format, explaining your choices. In addition to a basic summary introduction, your memo should have four headings. Begin each section with an appropriate forecasting/transition sentence, then describe:

- **Audience and Purpose.** Identify the primary audience for your report, and provide a brief but detailed audience analysis of that audience. (The six questions from Chapter 2 and/or the four audience characteristics from Lesson 2-1 would be good starting points.)

Then identify your purpose: what concrete goal are you trying to achieve with this report? How will you know if your report is successful? What needs to happen to prove that met your goal?
• **The Report.** Explain the choices you made as you composed your report. How did you adapt this material to your audience and purpose? What did you choose to include, or exclude? What vocabulary choices did you make? What supporting details did you include, and why? What format did you choose, and why? How did you create goodwill and establish credibility with this audience?

As part of your discussion, identify another potential audience for your report and discuss how you would need to change your report for that second audience.

• **Assessment.** Discuss your assessment of this assignment. Address each of the following in this section:
  
  o **Reviews.** If you completed the Review and Revision portion of this assignment, briefly identify who your reviewers were, including their qualifications (if any), their major suggestions, and how useful their review was (why).

  o **Your assessment.** Explain whether you believe the materials you’ve created for this assignment would successfully achieve their specified purpose. As part of that assessment, discuss both:

    ▪ **Successful** elements. What do you consider to be the most successful elements of your material? What would most likely contribute to its success?

    ▪ **Unsuccessful** elements. What do you consider to be the least successful elements of your material? What would you change or improve if you had additional time?

Submit all three documents, plus any revisions you choose to complete, to the course site by midnight on 10/4.
In a successful assignment...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong> (75%)</td>
<td>All aspects of the assignment are complete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your informative report includes a clear, complete, concise, and well-organized:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Summary introduction that introduces the topic, organizes your document, and establishes its relevance to your target audience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Discussion of your interviewee and their work context that describes who they are, what they do, and why their insights might be of interest to your audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Selection of content that provides useful information for your target audience (and that reflects well on your interviewee).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You have chosen a medium and format that are appropriate to the topic, audience, and your goals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You have a clear “So-what” factor: you provide concrete ways that your audience can use this information.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Your follow-up letter or email is clear, complete, and well-written, and pays appropriate attention to the goodwill needs of the situation.</td>
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<td>Your analysis memo:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Is in formal business memo format.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Begins with a summary introduction that forecasts content, organization, and rationale/reader benefits.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Describes the audience for your report.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Establishes clear, concrete success criteria for your report.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Describes your organization and content choices for your report.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Includes a detailed and insightful assessment of your report.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every aspect of your work is supported by specific, relevant, and effective details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have used visual cues, such as headings, space, and highlighted text, to organize the information in your assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics and Grammar</strong> (20%)</td>
<td>Your work is free from spelling errors, grammar errors, and other major composition flaws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reviews and Revision</strong> (5%)</td>
<td>You have conducted reviews of your materials and used those reviews to improve your work.</td>
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</table>
Three Messages: Positive, Negative, and Persuasive

10% of final class grade (total)

In this assignment, you’ll demonstrate your understanding of the principles of good professional communication by writing three formal business letters: a positive letter, a negative letter, and a persuasive letter. Then you’ll write a memo to me to describe your choices in those letters, and explain why those choices will lead to successful communication.

Project Scope

This project will include the following components which will each count toward your final grade on the assignment:

- A positive letter (expressing satisfaction with a product, service, or outcome)
- A negative letter (expressing dissatisfaction with a product, service, or outcome, and proposing a solution)
- A persuasive letter (asking someone to do something that they were not otherwise planning to do)
- A memo analyzing the choices you made as you wrote your three letters
- Reviewed, marked-up versions from any reviews you choose to conduct for this assignment

Step 1 – Identify the situations you want to address with your letters

Begin by selecting three situations that you can reasonably address with a formal business letter. Your best choices will be situations that are part of your life, involving products, organizations, and services that you encounter on a daily basis—but not situations in which some other communication format would be more efficient or effective. (Communication with family members or current roommates, for example, would best be handled face-to-face.)

Note: Imaginary products, organizations, services, and situations are not acceptable for this assignment.

Once you’ve chosen topics for your three letters, take some time to identify what your goal for this communication will be, and who your target audiences are. What do you want to happen as a result of your communication? Who are you addressing? What are their characteristics as an audience? What barriers and resistances are you likely to face as you address them? What arguments / evidence will they consider persuasive? How will you create goodwill with each audience?

Step 2 – Write your letters

Compose your letters, based on the goals and audience factors you identified. Use formal business letter format, and be sure to use the organization structures we’ve discussed in the lessons for this module and read about in Chapters 10, 11, and 12.
Some tips:

- Address your letter to a specific person, if at all possible. Not only will this narrow down your audience (allowing you to be more specific in your choices), but it’s a good way to build goodwill: people are more likely to respond positively when a letter is addressed to them, as opposed to a generic “to whom it may concern.”

- Check your spelling and grammar carefully, and have someone else review it for you. Few things undermine your credibility more completely than poor mechanics.

- If you’d be more likely to communicate with this audience via email, then use that format instead (the text of your “letter” should be the same, but you’ll include a standard email header on your letter instead of the standard business letter address/date blocks).

**Step 3 – Reviews and revision**

The best practice for professional communication is to get feedback on your work: it helps you catch any errors or omissions, and it gives you another perspective to help you improve your work. In order to get the “Reviews and Revision” credit for this assignment, you must:

- Get *at least two reviews* of a draft version of your letters
  - At least *one* review from someone in this class
  - At least *one* review from someone who has the same appreciation for the subject that you do: someone who has experienced the positive or negative situation that you’re addressing, or someone who would like to see the same outcome that you’re recommending in your letters.

- Use those reviews to improve your work. Submit both the original draft and revised draft when you turn in this assignment.

**Step 4 – Write your analysis memo**

Once you’ve completed your letters, write a memo to me in formal business memo format explaining your choices in each letter. Include a basic memo introduction, and organize your discussion in a logical and consistent manner (using headings and white space to separate the information). Begin each section with an appropriate forecasting/transition sentence, and be sure to describe:

- The audience for the each letter (a detailed summary of your six questions/four characteristics).

- Your intended concrete goal for each letter (a detailed sentence describing your criteria for success—tell me how, *exactly*, you will *prove* that your communication is successful).

- A discussion of the steps / moves (as discussed in lessons 3-1, 3-2, and 3-3) you’ve used in each letter, supported by details from the letter.
Each type of message has a best-practices organizational scaffold associated with it: describe how you’ve used that scaffold to build your message. If you’ve adapted the scaffold based on a specific audience factor, explain how and why. If you’ve chosen to leave a specific step or move out, explain why.

Include a heading in your memo to discuss your assessment of your letters. Discuss:

- **Reviews.** If you completed the Review and Revision portion of this assignment, briefly identify who your reviewers were, including their qualifications (if any), their major suggestions, and how useful their review was (why).

- **Your assessment.** Explain whether you believe the materials you’ve created for this assignment would successfully achieve their specified purpose. As part of that assessment, discuss both:
  - **Successful** elements. What do you consider to be the most successful elements of your material? What would most likely contribute to its success?
  - **Unsuccessful** elements. What do you consider to be the least successful elements of your material? What would you change or improve if you had additional time?

Submit all four documents, plus any revisions you choose to complete, to the course site by midnight on 11/7.
In a successful assignment...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
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</table>
| Letters (45\% = 15\% of final grade for each letter) | Your three letters:  
  - Substantially meet the requirements of the assignment.  
  - Are in formal business letter or business email format.  
  - Clearly employ the organization structure that applies to each type of message, as discussed in the lessons / in class.  
  - Include a message that is adapted to the needs and expectations of your target audience.  
  - Display strong attention to goodwill using you-attitude, maintaining a positive focus, and buffering any negative information.  
  
  Every aspect of your work is supported by specific, relevant, and effective details.  
  
  You have used visual cues, such as headings, space, and highlighted text, to organize the information in your assignment. |
| Memo (30\%)                   | Your analysis memo:  
  - Is in formal business memo format.  
  - Begins with a summary introduction that forecasts content, organization, and rationale/reader benefits.  
  - Describes the audience for each letter.  
  - Establishes your concrete success criteria for each letter.  
  - Describes your organization and content choices for each letter.  
  - Includes a detailed and insightful assessment of your report.  
  
  Every aspect of your work is supported by specific, relevant, and effective details.  
  
  You have used visual cues, such as headings, space, and highlighted text, to organize the information in your assignment. |
| Mechanics and Grammar (20\%)  | Your work is free from spelling errors, grammar errors, and other major composition flaws.                                                                                                                                |
| Reviews and Revision (5\%)    | You have conducted reviews of your materials and used those reviews to improve your work.                                                                                                                             |
Information Sheet
10% of final class grade (total)

In professional settings, it’s not enough to merely present information: your information must be well-designed, well-presented, and useful to your target audience in the specific time, place, and circumstances in which they need to use it. In this assignment, you’ll research an issue of interest or importance to your chosen career field and present that topic in a short, one-page information sheet.

This assignment will help you practice obtaining and reporting first-hand information, using the basic techniques of good professional communication, and applying the principles of visual design and usability to your work.

Project Scope
This project will include the following components, each of which will count toward your final grade on the assignment:
- A one-page information sheet
- A reflection memo that describes the reasoning behind your choices in this document
- Reviewed, marked-up versions from any reviews you choose to conduct for this assignment

Step 1 – Select a topic and find a professional to interview
First, choose a current topic that interests you: the best topics are ones of current critical interest in your major, or in your chosen career path. I’ve also seen excellent projects completed around hobbies, extracurricular activities, sports, and organizations. Remember that the ultimate goal of this assignment is to produce a one-page information sheet that addresses this information for a specific audience, in a specific time and place. Look for topics that lend themselves well to that kind of summary or overview – or for topics that might be expressed well in the form of instructions or a brochure.

Note: To save yourself time and effort, consider using the information that you researched and prepared for your Informative Report assignment as the starting point for this assignment.

Step 2 – Do your research and design your information sheet
For this project, you’ll need to gather information from primary and secondary sources as appropriate, then create your one-page information sheet.

For your information sheet, distill the information you’ve gathered into a single page (one side) summary: include the most important points, and any best-practices recommendations you have gathered from your research. You might present a set of instructions (including materials and steps), a reference sheet, a set of crib-notes or a study-guide for a complex topic – the actual format of your information sheet is entirely at your discretion.
Choose an appropriate layout and appearance for your summary sheet. Use this sheet to showcase your knowledge of good visual design by including creative, attention-focusing, or memorable elements. Give credit to your major sources (depending on your format, your citations may be more or less formal… but they need to be present).

**Note:** The short, one-page format for this information sheet is not an excuse for vague or poorly-detailed writing. Part of the challenge is deciding *which details* to include, and which to leave out.

Begin by identifying the “so-what” factor – the idea, information, or process that your audience *absolutely must* “get” from this sheet – then structure your sheet around that information.

**Step 3 – Reviews and revision**

The best practice for professional communication is to get feedback on your work: it helps you catch any errors or omissions, and it gives you another perspective to help you improve your work. In order to get the “Reviews and Revision” credit for this assignment, you must:

- Get *at least two reviews* of a draft version of this assignment
  - At least *one* review from someone in this class.
  - At least *one* review from someone in your target audience: someone who stands to benefit from reading or using the information sheet you’ve prepared.

- Use those reviews to improve your work. Submit both the original draft and revised draft when you turn in this assignment.

**Step 4 – Write a reflection memo**

Once you’ve completed your information sheet, write a memo to me in formal business memo format to explain your choices. In addition to a basic summary introduction, your memo should have three main headings. Begin each section with an appropriate forecasting/transition sentence, then describe:

- **Audience and Purpose**: Identify the primary audience for your information sheet, and provide a brief but detailed audience analysis of that audience. (The six questions from Chapter 2 and/or the four audience characteristics from lesson 2-1 would be good starting points.)

  Then identify your purpose: what concrete goal are you trying to achieve with this information sheet? How will you know if your information sheet achieves that purpose? What needs to happen to prove you that met your goal?
• **The Information Sheet.** Outline the choices you made as you composed your document. How did you adapt this material to your audience and purpose? What did you choose to include, or exclude? What vocabulary choices did you make? What supporting details did you include, and why? How did you create goodwill and establish credibility with this audience?

Then detail the design choices you made in this document. What visual organization, page design elements, and visual elements did you include in your information sheet? What does each element add to the document?

• **Assessment.** Discuss your assessment of this assignment. Address each of the following in this section:

  o **Reviews.** If you completed the Review and Revision portion of this assignment, briefly identify who your reviewers were, including their qualifications (if any), their major suggestions, and how useful their review was (why).

  o **Your assessment.** Explain whether you believe the materials you’ve created for this assignment would successfully achieve their specified purpose. As part of that assessment, discuss both:

    ▪ **Successful** elements. What do you consider to be the most successful elements of your material? What would most likely contribute to its success?

    ▪ **Unsuccessful** elements. What do you consider to be the least successful elements of your material? What would you change or improve if you had additional time?

Submit both documents, plus any revisions you choose to complete, to the course site by midnight on 11/21.
### In a successful assignment...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content (75%)</td>
<td>All aspects of the assignment are complete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your information sheet:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Summarizes and presents the information you’ve gathered in a way that is useful and memorable to your target audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employs a professional appearance and layout that reflects the principles of good visual design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your analysis memo:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is in formal business memo format.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Begins with a summary introduction that forecasts content, organization, and rationale/reader benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Describes the audience for your sheet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Establishes clear, concrete success criteria for your sheet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Briefly describes your organization and content choices for your sheet, but…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Describes, in detail, your visual/design choices for your sheet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Includes a detailed and insightful assessment of your report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every aspect of your work is supported by specific, relevant, and effective details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have used visual cues, such as headings, space, and highlighted text, to organize the information in your assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Your work is free from spelling errors, grammar errors, and other major composition flaws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviews and Revision (5%)</td>
<td>You have conducted reviews of your materials and used those reviews to improve your work.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In this assignment, you’ll work as a team to identify a real problem, faced by real people on a regular basis. You’ll collect information about the problem, including information from and about the people most impacted by this problem, and compile your findings into a report that discusses the issue in depth while proposing data-driven recommendations to solve or mitigate that problem.

Teams play a crucial role in modern workplace settings. The prevalence of collaborative work brings to the forefront issues of: identifying leadership; dealing with conflict; delegating work in a group; and employing the different perspectives, experiences, and strengths that each individual contributes. This assignment will not only give you a chance to perform these tasks (as you have in many assignments over your academic career), but also allow you to reflect on the process of collaborative communication in terms of good professional communication practices.

Project Scope

This project will include the following components, each of which will count toward your final grade on the assignment:

- A proposal memo (due by 9/26)
- Two brief progress report memos (due 10/24 and 11/14)
- A formal presentation to the class, supported by presentation graphics and a handout (delivered as assigned during the week of 11/29)
- A conference with me during the week of 12/6 (Dead Week)
- A policy report (final version due on 12/12)
- Reviewed, marked-up versions from any reviews you choose to conduct for this assignment (due with the final version of your report)
- An individual assessment of your experience working with this team on this project (submit by the course final exam date)

Step 1 – Identify a problem and submit a proposal to address it

As a group, identify a problem that you’ve encountered or observed. It can be a school issue (I’ve had several interesting assignments completed regarding the campus bookstore, or campus parking), something specific to life in your community (one of the best projects I’ve seen addressed CyRide coverage of outlying areas of Ames), or something else (the availability of halal foods at local supermarkets; implementing neighborhood-level recycling programs).

The best candidates for this project will be real problems that you have personally experienced, and that you are interested in seeing addressed. A good problem for this assignment will be one that impacts people you know well: one requirement for this assignment is that you support your own research with data you collect from other stakeholders (people on all sides of the problem). You’ll be conducting interviews, surveys, focus groups, or some combination of the three.

Proposal Memo

10% of final assignment grade (due by 9/26)
Before you begin, you’ll create a formal proposal memo to define your topic, audience, methods, and your team’s composition and procedures. Address your proposal to me (your gatekeeper audience), use headings as appropriate, and make sure that the final document includes the following topics (at a minimum):

- **Introduction** stating the purpose of your proposal. (Make this a basic summary introduction: content, organization, and document rationale.)

- **Purpose and rationale** of your project. Briefly:
  - Describe the problem, providing specific details
  - Provide a rationale: why are you addressing this issue? What are the benefits of finding / implementing a solution (or what are the costs of not doing so)? Again, be specific: details are persuasive.

- **Stakeholders**: who is involved in this problem? Who does it impact? Who must be part of the solution? (Hint: if you only see two sides, you’re not looking hard enough.) Describe the primary audience or stakeholder for your topic in detail. The audience analysis questions from Chapter 2 or the four characteristics from Lesson 2-1/class would be a good start. Briefly identify the other major stakeholders and their relationship to the problem / solution.

- **Methods**: explain how you’ll collect information, and from where. This assignment requires you to gather and collate information directly from primary sources (in the form of interviews, surveys, focus groups, or all three); explain which you’ll be doing, how (give specific details!), and why your methods should be effective.

  You’ll also need to supplement your primary data with information from secondary sources: provide a short list of specific sources (publications, broadcast venues, websites) that you plan to use, and identify why each source is likely to be useful.

  As part of your methods section, also explain why you are the right people to research this issue and make recommendations. What special relationship to this topic do you have? What skills/knowledge/experiences does your team bring to this subject?

- **Group procedures**, a discussion of your working plan. Skim ahead to Chapter 14 for ideas, but at a minimum, include:
  - What are the tasks your group needs to accomplish? Be specific and set preliminary dates, *then present those dates in the form of a Gantt chart in your proposal.*
  - Do you need a team leader? If so, who will be your team leader? Why is the person qualified? What is expected of her/him?
  - What will be the roles of the other members of the group?
  - When and how will group discussions take place? How will you moderate group discussions? Can/will you make decisions if all group members do not contribute? How will you inform members of group decisions?
• How will you resolve disagreements?
• Create a policy to deal with people who don’t attend the class discussion during your presentation day, don’t contribute to group meetings or discussions, miss deadlines, or don’t do their assigned work at all or in a timely manner. You must have specific policies: you may not simply say that your choice is not to have a policy or to deal with the problems as they arise.

Some ideas:
• How does your group define absence? Are all absences equal? Are some absences acceptable?
• How do you define non-contribution: late work? Poor quality work? Someone who only contributes after you’ve nagged them to do so?
• What about people who are disruptive, dismissive, rude, insulting, or otherwise poor team players?

There are many options to deal with group issues (Loss of points? Grade reductions? Failure? Firing? Group intervention?), but what that policy is remains up to your group. I will enforce whatever policy your group decides to adopt.

Do not include a call to action in your proposal.

Step 2 – Collect and collate data, and formulate recommendations
You'll need to collect two kinds of data for this assignment. The first kind is from primary sources: that’s information you collect straight from the experts. In this case, that means speaking with (or collecting data directly from) your stakeholders—the other people involved in this problem. Chapter 15 (511-519) in the text includes some guidelines for creating:

• **Surveys**—good for collecting data from large numbers of people to give you a ‘wide angle’ view of the problem. The more people whose opinions / experiences you can include, the more credible your report will be.
• **Interviews**—with individuals who have expertise to add to your understanding of this problem.
• **Focus groups**—a group interview. Focus groups are good both for collecting information on a problem, and for brainstorming or getting feedback on potential solutions.

All three forms of primary sources will be useful for this assignment. You only need to collect data from one type of primary source to receive full credit for this assignment, though having a combination of primary sources will improve the credibility of your observations and recommendations.
You’ll also need to locate secondary sources: information that other people have collected and published in other venues. You’ll use secondary sources to:

- **Explain the nature and background** of your problem. Secondary sources (like newspapers) can establish history. They’re also great for demonstrating rationale: the benefits that will come from solving the problem or the consequences of not doing so.

- **Explain your method.** Are you approaching a problem that other people have already tackled in another time and place? Can you use their methods? Is it useful to compare yours to theirs? How are you planning to interpret the information you collect? Secondary sources will help you explain that, too. (Hint: the best methods reflect practices that have been successful in the past, or that differ from practices that were unsuccessful in the past. Look for evidence that someone, somewhere, attempted to solve a similar problem.)

- **Explain your recommendations.** A good recommendation is like a table that stands on three legs: a solid rationale (a reason why the problem needs to be solved), solid data (reasons why this is a good solution), and proof of concept (some evidence, beyond your opinion or say-so, to convince people that this might work). Good secondary sources will help you strengthen all three legs.

**Step 3 – Work on your project, and provide progress reports**

Work on your chosen project throughout the semester, following the schedule set out in your proposal memo as closely as possible. You’ll keep me informed of your progress with two periodic progress reports.

**Progress Report Memo (x2)**

10% of final assignment grade each (#1 due by 10/24, #2 due by 11/14)

Prepare a brief (one full single-spaced page) memo describing your work to date on this assignment. In addition to describing your activities, progress, challenges, and future plans (especially if your “actual” schedule has diverged from the schedule in your proposal), be sure to:

- Begin with a summary introduction that forecasts content, organization, and rationale/reader benefits.
- Demonstrate not only the details of the work you’ve accomplished, but the value of that work (to your project, to your audience(s)).
- Employ strong attention to positive emphasis (especially if you are reporting negative information – such as problems, or a lack of progress).
- Provide an updated timeline.
- Support your assessment with specific, relevant, and effective details.
Step 4 – Prepare the report and presentation
You have two major deliverables for this project: a report and a presentation. Although the presentation is due before the report, they cover the same material and can use some of the same resources (especially visuals). The best professional communication practice would be to work on both the spoken and written components of this project together.

Formal Report with Recommendations
30% of final assignment grade (due 12/12)

Prepare a report that describes the problem you’ve identified, the data you’ve collected, and the solutions you’re proposing. This report should be an unbiased overview of the problem, based on information you’ve collected through your sources. It should not be grievance-driven: the intention is to identify an issue and propose one or more specific solutions, not identify a culprit and place blame. Your report should conclude with reasonable, data-driven recommendations based on your research.

Chapter 16 of the text provides information on analyzing data and presenting it in a report, and the example beginning on page 559 is a good one for reference purposes (a good example, but don’t copy it too closely: it’s a different kind of report).

You will compose a report in problem-solution format (see pages 546-547). Your report (about 7-9 pages long, not counting appendices) must include the following sections:

- A cover page with title, audience (Hint: I am a gatekeeper audience, but I am probably not the audience for this document…), and authorship information.
- A table of contents (including a list of figures).
- An executive summary (which is different from an introduction: see 574-575 in the text): a summary or descriptive abstract would work well for this project.
- An introduction, providing a detailed discussion of rationale, content, and organization.
- A discussion of the problem, including details that support its existence, and a rationale for solving the problem.
- A discussion of the data you’ve collected, including your method, a representative subset of your data, and your interpretation of that data. Visual displays of information, such as charts, graphs, and tables, may be especially effective in organizing and presenting the information in this section.
- A conclusions and recommendations section describing potential solutions, including a discussion of costs/benefits and an implementation path for each. You may choose to recommend one of those solutions as a preferred solution, or recommend factors for your audience to use as they decide which solution to adopt.
A complete list of references.

One or more appendices containing your data collection instruments (interview questions, surveys, etc.) and your full data set, as well as any other ancillary materials that need to be present for completeness, but do not need to be present in the main text.

Do not prepare a memo of transmittal.

Your report must also include at least three visuals that add to the informative or persuasive message of your text: clip art or ‘decorative’ visuals will not earn full credit for this assignment.

All members of your team will receive the same grade for the report, before any changes established by your group’s policies and procedures.

**Formal Presentation with Presentation Graphics and Handouts**

20% of final assignment grade (due as assigned, the week of 11/29)

As with your report, your presentation should be driven by facts rather than opinions. Well-written and performed presentations allow the audience to make-up their own minds regarding a topic. A good way to begin your presentation is with a question which identifies your problem for the audience to answer for themselves, or with an anecdote that illustrates the nature of the problem. In the conclusion, you should give your final recommendation(s) to resolve the issue. (Refer to Chapter 17 in the text for information on structuring and delivering formal presentations.)

Your presentation should last approximately 15 minutes. There will be a 5 minute question and answer session after each presentation for which you will need to provide logical and coherent answers.

Present your material in an objective manner without editorializing or inserting fictional information, and:

- Ask a question or introduce a scenario
- Identify your problem and topic in detail
- Identify multiple perspectives of your topic
- Include data from your primary / secondary sources and results
- Explain your recommendations

For your group to receive full credit for this assignment, all of your group members must have an equal role in your presentation, and all must have a speaking role. In addition to a PowerPoint presentation and a one-page handout summarizing your key findings and recommendations, you must include at least 5 visuals that showcase and clarify your selected topic. (The visuals that you’ve created for your report may be a good start! You may use clip art, but it won’t count toward your 5.)

All members of your team who participate in this presentation will receive the same grade for the presentation.
Step 6 – Conference with me

In addition to the content components of this project, each team must hold a conference with me at least once during the week of 12/6 (dead week) to discuss the content of your report. The majority of your team must attend that conference, and you must have a functionally complete draft of your report ready for review.

This conference is part of your grade for the report. I will assign a conference grade to you based on the quality of the materials you have prepared for your conference, the questions you have prepared, and your professionalism as displayed at the conference.

Naturally, you may also schedule additional conferences with me in addition to that final review.

Step 7 – Reviews and revision

The best practice for professional communication is to get feedback on your work: it helps you catch any errors or omissions, and it gives you another perspective to help you improve your work. In order to get the “Reviews and Revision” credit for this assignment, you must:

- Get at least two reviews of a draft version of this assignment
  - At least one review from someone in this class who is not in your group.
  - At least one review from someone in your decision-maker audience: someone who has the power to adopt or disregard the recommendation(s) you are proposing. This person may not be in your group.

- Use those reviews to improve your work. Submit both the original drafts and revised draft when you turn in this assignment.

(That’s at least two reviews total—you don’t each have to obtain two reviews. Although, as always, the more reviews you get, the better…)

Step 8 – Assess your group’s efforts and products

Individual Assessment Memo
20% of final assignment grade (submit individually, by the Final Exam due date/time)

Individually, you will write an evaluative memo (with no attachments) in which you reflect on the whole group process and evaluate each of your group members, including yourself, by assigning a grade for effort and work put forth throughout the process. You need to provide supporting reasons and details for the grade assigned to each group member.
Your memo should begin with an appropriate summary introduction, then include the following:

- A brief account of your group’s work process.
  - Was this a positive experience overall? Why or why not? If not, what could *you* have done to improve it? If so, what was *your* role in the group’s success?
  - What were some of the challenges you faced within your group? What kind of conflicts developed? How were those conflicts resolved?
  - How does this group experience compare to other group projects that you’ve completed in other classes? Based on this group project, what can you do to improve your next group experience?
- What, if anything, did you learn about your topic from this assignment?
  - Do you feel you gained an understanding of the problem and the people and system(s) involved with it?
  - What suggestions do you have to further explore and understand this problem?
- List of members in your group, and detailed discussions of:
  - Their contributions
  - Your evaluation of their contributions, including the criteria/rationales that support your evaluation.
  - Any group policies that I need to apply to my evaluation of their work.
  - Your performance recommendation(s) for each group member: what do they need to work on to be a better co-worker in future projects?

This memo should adhere to the conventions we’ve discussed in class (in terms of format, framing, summary intro, etc.). Address this memo to me. I will be the only person who reads this memo, so feel free to be candid.
In a successful assignment...

Proposal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Content and organization (80%) | Your proposal memo:  
- Is in formal business memo format.  
- Begins with a summary introduction that forecasts content, organization, and rationale/reader benefits.  
- Includes a statement of purpose and rationale that explains what you’re proposing to do, and why.  
- Discusses the various people and groups of people who are involved in this problem.  
- Identifies your sources and research process.  
- Describes your group procedures, outlining your group’s composition, procedures, plans, milestones, and success criteria for this project.  
- Provides a workflow timeline in the form of a Gantt chart.  

Every aspect of your work is supported by specific, relevant, and effective details.  

You have used visual cues, such as headings, space, and highlighted text, to organize the information in your assignment.  

| Mechanics and Grammar (20%) | Your work is free from spelling errors, grammar errors, and other major composition flaws.  

## Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content and organization</td>
<td>All aspects of the assignment are complete, and you have organized your work according to the structure specified in the assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(60%)</td>
<td>Every aspect of your work is supported by specific, relevant, and effective details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In your report, your:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Executive summary encapsulates the major ideas and recommendations of your report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Introduction forecasts the content, rationale, and organization of your document.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Problem and rationale discussion describes the existing problem and makes a strong case for a solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Data discussion describes your methods, the data you’ve collected, and the interpretations you’ve drawn from that data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conclusion and recommendations clearly and persuasively documents your recommended solutions, and clearly maps back to your data (all of your solutions should be data-driven).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Appendices (if any) supplement the material in the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have used visual cues, such as headings, space, and highlighted text, to organize the information in your assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have created and placed visuals that:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Substantially augment the content and message of your text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employ sound principles of layout and design to present information in a usable and professional manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your group is professional and prepared at your conference with me during dead week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics and Grammar</td>
<td>Your work is free from spelling errors, grammar errors, and other major composition flaws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>Reviews and Revision (5%) You have conducted reviews of your materials and used those reviews to improve your work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Presentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>All aspects of the assignment are complete.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Content and Context.** You have:
- Structured a discussion that highlights the main points of this topic.
- Included a strong, engaging introduction and a solid conclusion/summary.
- Supported your recommendations with clear, concise, and appropriate details.
- Produced original and creative examples, activities, and ancillary materials to support your presentation.

**Audience.** You have:
- Adapted this material to the needs, experiences, and expectations of your audience.
- Encouraged (or dealt with) audience participation.

**Delivery.**
- You are prepared and well-rehearsed.
- You use strong verbal (voice, tone) and non-verbal (stance, gestures, eye contact, visuals) cues in your presentation.

**Professionalism.** You are:
- Ready to go at the established time and place.
- Prepared and able to handle questions and/or problems.
- On time: your presentation fits well within the established timeframe of 15 minutes (+/- 2 minute or so), exclusive of time for questions.
Appendix B: Research Protocols

This Appendix contains the research protocols approved by Iowa State University’s Institutional Review Board under IRB ID: 08-498: one for the pre-instruction memo, one for the post-instruction memo, and one for the longitudinal interviews.
Pre-Instruction Memo Prompt

This Introduction Memo is your first assignment in this class. In this memo, you’ll establish your basic credentials as a communicator by describing your communication style, while giving me (as your instructor) an idea of your writing ability and your background as a student.

As you write, be concise but complete in your ideas, and organize your thoughts well. As your audience, I will want to be able to scan through your memo quickly, but I will want a thorough discussion of you, your interests, and your communication ability.

The memo

Open a new MS Word document and write a single-spaced, one- to two-page memo (at least one full page) to introduce yourself, as well as explain your interest in your major / future career. Address these points:

- **Introduce yourself**—Who are you? What is your background? You might focus on: how you see yourself as a writer (or speaker, or designer, or artist, or as a communicator in general). Or: how do you see yourself as a professional? Or: how do those two aspects of your experience connect? How have they connected? How would you like for them to connect?

- **Interest in your major**—Why are you here? Why are you doing what you’re doing? For example: is there a specific experience (or a number of experiences) that drew you to your major? What was this experience? Why did it have such an effect on you? Explain how this experience shaped your interests.

- **Future career**—What attracts you to your future career, and why? In your major you study general principles in your field, which may include a lot of material that won’t be as focused on your interests / career goals. What specific types of tasks do you wish to perform in your career? Why?

  For example: In any field you study a broad range of concepts. However, a mechanical engineering major may enjoy acoustics because of an interest in high-end audio equipment; a computer science major may wish to develop Internet software that provides diverse / international educational experiences for children, tying together an interest in teaching with programming knowledge. You’re not just going to be “an accountant” or “a manager,” or even “an employee”—describe your specific career interest.

- **Experiences with online courses**—Tell me about experiences you’ve had with online content in other classes. What classes were they? What did you do in those classes? What kinds of communication did you engage in? How did those classes compare to traditional classrooms? How did those classes prepare you for your future career?

- **Impact of English 302**—How do you think that this class will figure in your career preparations? What types of things do you know about yourself, your writing, or your ability to communicate with others that you would like to further develop in this class?
**Hint:** Don’t just say, “This class will teach me how to write different proposals and memos for my future career.” I can guess that one. Instead, focus on whether your work performance can be enhanced through writing, and if it can, how? How can this class help you better articulate your ideas to co-workers / employers / potential clients?

**Things to consider**

- **Content:** You are writing this memo about you: therefore, using “I” is appropriate in this memo. When talking about your interests, you can say things like, “My most influential childhood experiences, such as with high school fund raising activities, helped shape my current interests and develop skills in marketing.”

- **Format:** Write in memo format. The examples in Appendix A in your textbook can give you some basic formatting ideas, as can the memo templates available in MS Word. (In future assignments, you won’t be allowed to use standard Word templates, but it’s OK for this assignment.)

- **Organization:** Remember that I’ll be using this memo to learn about you, so think about useful ways to organize the information you include. One obvious framework would be the one I’ve given you in the assignment: Introduce Yourself / Interest in Your Major / Future Career / Online Courses / Impact of English 302. However, depending on what you have to say, that may not be the best way to present your information.

However you decide to organize your text, use page layout techniques such as headings, bulleted lists, and bold text to organize your work visually on the page.
Post-Instruction Memo Prompt

In this memo, you’ll reflect on your basic credentials as a communicator by describing your communication style as you see it now – at the end of the semester – while giving me (as your instructor) an idea of your current communication and your assessment of this course.

As you write, be concise but complete in your ideas, and organize your thoughts well. As your audience, I will want to be able to scan through your memo quickly, but I will want a thorough discussion of you, your interests, and your communication ability.

The memo

Open a new MS Word document and write a single-spaced, one- to two-page memo (at least one full page) to describe yourself and your experiences in this class, and explain what you see as the place of communication in your major / future career. Address these points:

- **Introduce yourself**—What is your current assessment of your communication knowledge, skill, or ability? What is your background as a communicator, and how have you developed that background over the course of the semester? You might focus on: how you currently see yourself as a writer (or speaker, or designer, or artist, or as a communicator in general). Or: how do you see your ability to communicate as a professional?

- **Future career**—Explain how you believe the material we’ve discussed this semester fits into your future career. How will you be able to use the course material in the future? How has the course material prepared you for the future?

- **Experiences with online courses**—Tell me about experiences you’ve had with online content in this class. How did you use the online content? How did it impact your course experience? How did your experience with the online content in this class compare to other classes you’ve taken?

Things to consider

- **Content**: You are writing this memo about you: therefore, using “I” is appropriate in this memo. When talking about your interests, you can say things like, “My most influential childhood experiences, such as with high school fund raising activities, helped shape my current interests and develop skills in marketing.”

- **Format**: Write in memo format. The examples in Appendix A in your textbook can give you some basic formatting ideas, as can the memo templates available in MS Word. (Rather than using an MS Word template, however, use your knowledge of layout and design, and your best judgment, to format your memo.)

- **Organization**: Choose a logical, consistent way to organize your memo. One obvious framework would be the one I’ve given you in the assignment: Introduce Yourself / Future Career / Online Courses. However, depending on what you have to say, that may not be the best way to present your information.
However you decide to organize your text, use page layout techniques such as headings, bulleted lists, and bold text to organize your work visually on the page.
Follow-Up Interview Prompts

Longitudinal interviews with students will be conducted in the calendar year following course completion. A formal interview framework and final list of interview questions will be developed from and used to expand on themes that emerge from initial analyses of other data collection instruments; however, some sample interview questions may include:

1. Describe an experience you had using the course website. How did the website impact the way(s) in which you approached and completed assignments?

2. Describe an experience you had using the course lessons on the website / ancillary materials on the website. How did those materials impact your approach to the course?

3. Describe an experience you remember from one of the course meetings / voicechats. How did course meetings impact your approach to the course?

4. Describe an interaction you had with another student. How did your interactions with other students impact your approach to the course?

5. Describe an interaction you had with the course instructor. How did your interactions with the instructor impact your approach to the course?

6. Describe a situation in which you have used the course material since completing the course. How did the course material impact your approach to that situation?

7. Please provide feedback regarding the course material, assignments, and practices. What aspects of this course were most valuable (what aspects would you want to see continued in future course offerings, and why)? What aspects of this course were least valuable (what aspects would you want to see discontinued or modified in future course offerings, and why)?
Appendix C: Rating Protocol and Rubric

This Appendix contains the information that I distributed to the independent raters for this project. It includes the basic protocol, the rubric and “cheat sheets” for applying the rubric, and special instructions for each of the data sets.

Rating Protocol

1. **Read** through the rubric, and the assignment prompts.

2. **Interview** – You and I will discuss the rating rubric, and I’ll answer any questions you might have about the rubric and the assignment prompts.

3. **Calibrate** – We’ll calibrate your ability to apply the rubric. You’ll rate three sample memos. After each one, we’ll discuss your rating process: what was your rationale for assigning each rating to each category? We’ll work together to fine-tune your rating process, to make sure that you can apply the rubric uniformly.

4. **First set** – You’ll rate the first set of memos. Read each memo, then record your rating in the Excel file I’ve provided. If a memo (or a feature of a memo) stands out to you as especially impressive (either positively or negatively), add a line or two explaining why.

   You’ll also write a brief (1-2 paragraph) assessment of your overall impressions of the first set: in your judgment, what were the major issues or areas for improvement that you saw in the set? What were the major strengths that you saw in the set?

5. **Second set** – You’ll rate the second set of memos, taking note of the minor differences in the prompt (the differences relate to required content of the memo; context, audience, and purpose remain the same).

   You’ll also write a brief (1-2 paragraph) assessment of your overall impressions of the second set: in your judgment, what were the major issues or areas for improvement that you saw in the set? What were the major strengths that you saw in the set?

6. **Return** the Excel file with your ratings, comments, and your overall impressions.
# Pre/Post Assessment Rating Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Exemplary = 5</th>
<th>Mature = 4</th>
<th>Competent = 3</th>
<th>Developing = 2</th>
<th>Beginning = 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Creative response beyond the intrinsic scope of the assignment; no revision (or cosmetic revisions) needed.</td>
<td>Full response; minor revisions would improve the work, but are not required</td>
<td>Competent response; requires minor, specific revisions</td>
<td>Basic response; requires extensive revisions</td>
<td>Incomplete or naïve response; requires complete revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As mature, and: content reflects a creative approach to building audience engagement, interest, and response</td>
<td>As competent, and: content displays a high order of critical thinking or engagement with the topic</td>
<td>Content that shows a clear purpose and supports a main idea; supporting details are generally well-chosen and persuasive</td>
<td>Required content is present, but poorly-developed; supporting details are unsubstantiated, and lack in clarity or completeness</td>
<td>Content is substantially missing or off-topic; supporting details are absent or inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization / Visual Structure</strong></td>
<td>As mature, and: organization reflects an understanding of goals beyond this task; visual presentation demonstrates creativity that extends beyond the scope of this task</td>
<td>As competent, and: ideas are clearly arranged and linked; visual presentation is clear and attractive, and extends beyond a basic template</td>
<td>Organizational structure is clear, logical, consistent, and well-suited to the material and context; visual layout uses basic templates</td>
<td>Organizational structure suits the material and context but is poorly or inconsistently implemented</td>
<td>Organizational structure and overall appearance does not suit the topic, the context, or the assignment requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Register/Style</strong></td>
<td>As mature, and: tone, vocabulary, and register reflect a strategic approach to the material that extends beyond the scope of this task</td>
<td>As competent, and: tone, vocabulary, and register present a ‘personal style’ that stands out from the work of others</td>
<td>Composition is engaging, interesting, and focused; tone is professional and clearly adapted to the needs and expectations of the audience(s) of this task</td>
<td>Composition is inconsistently engaging and clear; tone is inconsistently professional</td>
<td>Composition is dull and/or verbose or terse; tone is unprofessional, or contains elements that are inappropriate to the context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>As mature, and: syntax and transitions reflect a creative unity of purpose that links this task to others</td>
<td>As competent, and: syntax is coherent, with varied sentence structure and length</td>
<td>Few significant mechanical errors; transitional elements are present</td>
<td>Infrequent mechanical errors, and/or consistent errors (one or two errors consistently repeated); errors are distracting but do not impede comprehension</td>
<td>Mechanical errors are numerous and represent a significant distraction from content; mechanical errors obscure, confuse, or invert the main idea of the text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Applying the Rating Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When you assess…</th>
<th>You’re looking at…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>The information this author is providing in the document:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Is it complete (does it address all of the main points in the prompt)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Is it informative (does it give you a clear picture of this person’s background)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization / Visual Structure</strong></td>
<td>The way(s) in which this author chose to organize that information, including:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Topic order (Is it logical? Is it effective?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Headings/text highlights (Are they present? Are they useful?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Register / Style</strong></td>
<td>The way(s) in which this author expresses information:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Is it businesslike?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Does the author communicate a professional, articulate image?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Does the author sound interesting to know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>Spelling, grammar, and basic composition competence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Are there errors? Do those errors distract from or undermine the message?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Does this message strike you as well-written?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A rating of...</td>
<td>Means...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>This is <em>seriously</em> sub-par work. This quality of work undermines your confidence in the author. As a supervisor or co-worker, you would not entrust communication tasks to this author, and might start to wonder why this person was hired in the first place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>This is sub-par work. As a supervisor or co-worker, you’d want this author to make substantial revisions before you’d consider it acceptable, and you might be inspired to take this person aside for a ‘management moment’ about the quality of their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>This is ‘ok’ work, on par with what you’d expect from an inexperienced or entry-level employee. As a supervisor or co-worker, you might see this work as ‘needing improvement,’ but you’d also expect that this author could ‘come up to speed’ quickly with minimal mentoring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>This is acceptable work. As a supervisor or co-worker, you’d expect this quality of work from a co-worker or employee, and you’d accept it with few changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>This is <em>great</em> work. You enjoy reading it, or it impresses you in some significant way. As a supervisor or co-worker, you’d expect this work from an especially experienced or talented person.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rating Notes for the First Data Set

As you read and evaluate the memos in the first data set, please consider the following points:

- The students are responding to a specific prompt, which requests them to compose a memo containing information about their personal background. The prompt for the first data set is included in the rating packet.

- The numbers in the upper right are sequential (and match the numbers in your rating.xls file). There are numbers missing in the sequence. That’s intentional: the gaps belong to students who voluntarily withdrew from the study.

- I have assigned generic pseudonyms to these students (and to anyone else they referred to by name), and have replaced their names with those pseudonyms. All female students are Sarah Student in the memos below, and all male students are Sam Student.

- I have preserved the students’ original formatting choices. The fonts, spacing, and other layout choices appear here as they did in the original documents.

- Some students submitted documents with their actual signatures appended to the text. I have removed those signatures, to preserve the students’ anonymity, but I have replaced them with their name in script font. Where you see a name in that font, read it as a handwritten signature.

- The first two sample memos in Appendix A of the class textbook begin with the phrase As per your request, and As you’ve requested.
Rating Notes for the Second Data Set

As you read and evaluate the memos in the second data set, please consider the following points:

- The students are responding to a specific prompt, which requests them to compose a memo containing information about their personal background and their experiences during the course. The prompt for the second data set is included in the rating packet.

- The numbers in the upper right are sequential (and match the numbers in your rating.xls file). There are numbers missing in the sequence. That’s intentional: the gaps belong to students who voluntarily withdrew from the study.

- I have assigned generic pseudonyms to these students (and to anyone else they referred to by name), and have replaced their names with those pseudonyms. All female students are Sarah Student in the memos below, and all male students are Sam Student.

- I have preserved the students’ original formatting choices. The fonts, spacing, and other layout choices appear here as they did in the original documents.

- The first two sample memos in Appendix A of the class textbook begin with the phrase As per your request, and As you’ve requested.
Appendix D: Detailed Data Tables

This Appendix contains a more comprehensive, detailed view of the data summarized in Table 5 of the text.

Analysis: Content in Pre-Course Memos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>2.4348</td>
<td>0.755015</td>
<td>0.15743</td>
<td>2.1083</td>
<td>2.7613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
<td>2.5556</td>
<td>0.808569</td>
<td>0.16505</td>
<td>2.2141</td>
<td>2.8970</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**t Test (Trad. vs Online)**

- Difference: 0.12077 t Ratio 0.529493
- Std Err Dif: 0.22809 DF 44.9719
- Upper CL Dif: 0.58018 Prob > |t| 0.5991
- Lower CL Dif: -0.33863 Prob > t 0.2995
- Confidence: 0.95 Prob < t 0.7005

Analysis: Content in Post-Course Memos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>3.4167</td>
<td>0.570985</td>
<td>0.12768</td>
<td>3.1494</td>
<td>3.6839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
<td>3.5362</td>
<td>0.446526</td>
<td>0.09311</td>
<td>3.3431</td>
<td>3.7293</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**t Test (Trad. vs Online)**

- Difference: 0.11957 t Ratio 0.75665
- Std Err Dif: 0.15802 DF 35.83033
- Upper CL Dif: 0.44010 Prob > |t| 0.4542
- Lower CL Dif: -0.20097 Prob > t 0.2271
- Confidence: 0.95 Prob < t 0.7729

Analysis: Organization in Pre-Course Memos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>3.0290</td>
<td>0.724137</td>
<td>0.15099</td>
<td>2.7158</td>
<td>3.3421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
<td>3.1250</td>
<td>0.686745</td>
<td>0.14018</td>
<td>2.8350</td>
<td>3.4150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**t Test (Trad. vs Online)**

- Difference: 0.09601 t Ratio 0.466015
- Std Err Dif: 0.20603 DF 44.58561
- Upper CL Dif: 0.51109 Prob > |t| 0.6435
- Lower CL Dif: -0.31906 Prob > t 0.3217
- Confidence: 0.95 Prob < t 0.6783
### Analysis: Organization in Post-Course Memos

#### Means and Std Deviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>3.70000</td>
<td>0.506103</td>
<td>0.11317</td>
<td>3.4631</td>
<td>3.9369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
<td>3.85364</td>
<td>0.510826</td>
<td>0.10891</td>
<td>3.6371</td>
<td>4.0901</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### t Test (Trad. vs Online)

- **Difference**: 0.16364, **t Ratio**: 1.041867
- **Std Err Dif**: 0.15706, **DF**: 39.68943
- **Upper CL Dif**: 0.48115, **Prob > |t|**: 0.3038
- **Lower CL Dif**: -0.15387, **Prob > t**: 0.1519
- **Confidence**: 0.95, **Prob < t**: 0.8481

### Analysis: Register in Pre-Course Memos

#### Means and Std Deviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>2.63768</td>
<td>0.666008</td>
<td>0.13887</td>
<td>2.3497</td>
<td>2.9257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
<td>2.75000</td>
<td>0.717282</td>
<td>0.14641</td>
<td>2.4471</td>
<td>3.0529</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### t Test (Trad. vs Online)

- **Difference**: 0.11232, **t Ratio**: 0.556589
- **Std Err Dif**: 0.20180, **DF**: 44.95784
- **Upper CL Dif**: 0.51877, **Prob > |t|**: 0.5806
- **Lower CL Dif**: -0.29413, **Prob > t**: 0.2903
- **Confidence**: 0.95, **Prob < t**: 0.7097

### Analysis: Register in Post-Course Memos

#### Means and Std Deviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>3.45000</td>
<td>0.633149</td>
<td>0.14158</td>
<td>3.1537</td>
<td>3.7463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
<td>3.76812</td>
<td>0.394850</td>
<td>0.08233</td>
<td>3.5974</td>
<td>3.9389</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### t Test (Trad. vs Online)

- **Difference**: 0.31812, **t Ratio**: 1.94239
- **Std Err Dif**: 0.16378, **DF**: 30.96552
- **Upper CL Dif**: 0.65215, **Prob > |t|**: 0.0612
- **Lower CL Dif**: -0.01592, **Prob > t**: 0.0306*
- **Confidence**: 0.95, **Prob < t**: 0.9694
Analysis: Grammar / Mechanics in Pre-Course Memos

Means and Std Deviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>2.37681</td>
<td>0.712829</td>
<td>0.14864</td>
<td>2.0686</td>
<td>2.6851</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trad.</td>
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<td>0.686745</td>
<td>0.14018</td>
<td>2.2517</td>
<td>2.8317</td>
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</table>

t Test (Trad. vs Online)

| Difference | 0.16486 | t Ratio | 0.806881 |
| Std Err Dif| 0.20431 | DF      | 44.70859 |
| Upper CL Dif| 0.57643 | Prob > | 0.4240   |
| Lower CL Dif| -0.24672| Prob > t| 0.2120   |
| Confidence | 0.95    | Prob < t| 0.7880   |

Analysis: Grammar / Mechanics in Post-Course Memos

Means and Std Deviations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Std Err Mean</th>
<th>Lower 95%</th>
<th>Upper 95%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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t Test (Trad. vs Online)

| Difference | -0.20435| t Ratio | -1.71423 |
| Std Err Dif| 0.11921 | DF      | 40.07665 |
| Upper CL Dif| 0.03656 | Prob > | 0.0942   |
| Lower CL Dif| -0.44526| Prob > t| 0.9529   |
| Confidence | 0.95    | Prob < t| 0.0471*  |

Traditional Classroom: Content Δ

| Content Avg Post | 3.53968 | t-Ratio | 4.776918 |
| Content Avg Pre  | 2.52381 | DF      | 20       |
| Mean Difference  | 1.01587 | Prob > | 0.0001*  |
| Std Error        | 0.21266 | Prob > t| <.0001*  |
| Upper 95%        | 1.45948 | Prob < t| 0.9999   |
| Lower 95%        | 0.57227 |
| N                | 21      |
| Correlation      | -0.1817 |

Traditional Classroom: Organization Δ

| Organization Avg Post | 3.85 | t-Ratio | 3.69653 |
| Organization Avg Pre  | 3.13333 | DF | 19 |
| Mean Difference       | 0.71667 | Prob > | 0.0015* |
| Std Error             | 0.19388 | Prob > t| 0.0008* |
| Upper 95%             | 1.12245 | Prob < t| 0.9992 |
| Lower 95%             | 0.31088 |
| N                     | 20     |
| Correlation           | -0.0073 |
### Traditional Classroom: Register Δ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Register Avg Post</td>
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<td>5.643364</td>
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<tr>
<td>Register Avg Pre</td>
<td>2.7777</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Difference</td>
<td>0.98413</td>
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<td>&lt;0.001*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Std Error</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper 95%</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>Correlation</td>
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### Traditional Classroom: Grammar / Mechanics Δ

<table>
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<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Grammar Avg Post</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Difference</td>
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### Online Course: Content Δ

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<tr>
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<td>Lower 95%</td>
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### Online Course: Organization Δ

<table>
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<th>Metric</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization Avg Post</td>
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<td>Lower 95%</td>
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</table>
### Online Course: Register Δ

| Metric               | Post | Pre  | Mean Difference | Std Error | Prob > |t| |
|----------------------|------|------|-----------------|-----------|--------|---|
| Register Avg Post    | 3.46296 | 2.64815 | 0.81481       | 0.1406    | <.0001*  |   |
| Register Avg Pre     | 3.46296 | 2.64815 | 0.81481       | 0.1406    | <.0001*  |   |
| Mean Difference      | 0.81481 | 0.81481 | 0.81481       | 0.1406    | <.0001*  |   |
| Std Error            | 0.1406  | 0.1406  | 0.1406        | 0.1406    | <.0001*  |   |
| Upper 95%            | 1.11146 | 1.11146 | 1.11146       | 1.11146   | 1.0000   |   |
| Lower 95%            | 0.51817 | 0.51817 | 0.51817       | 0.51817   | 1.0000   |   |
| N                    | 18    | 18   | 18             | 18        | 1.0000   |   |
| Correlation          | 0.63745 | 0.63745 | 0.63745      | 0.63745   | 1.0000   |   |

### Online Course: Grammar / Mechanics Δ

| Metric               | Post | Pre  | Mean Difference | Std Error | Prob > |t| |
|----------------------|------|------|-----------------|-----------|--------|---|
| Grammar Avg Post     | 3.88889 | 2.38889 | 1.5             | 0.13541   | <.0001*  |   |
| Grammar Avg Pre      | 2.38889 | 2.38889 | 1.5             | 0.13541   | <.0001*  |   |
| Mean Difference      | 1.5   | 1.5  | 1.5             | 0.13541   | <.0001*  |   |
| Std Error            | 0.13541 | 0.13541 | 0.13541     | 0.13541   | <.0001*  |   |
| Upper 95%            | 1.7857 | 1.7857 | 1.7857        | 1.7857    | 1.0000   |   |
| Lower 95%            | 1.2143 | 1.2143 | 1.2143        | 1.2143    | 1.0000   |   |
| N                    | 18    | 18   | 18             | 18        | 1.0000   |   |
| Correlation          | 0.65368 | 0.65368 | 0.65368     | 0.65368   | 1.0000   |   |