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Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of "Community" in Online College Composition

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STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF "COMMUNITY"
IN ONLINE COLLEGE COMPOSITION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2011

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This study was a cross-case comparison analysis of paired case studies of instructors and students in five first-year online college composition courses at a community college. The purpose of the study was to learn about "community" in these courses and the effects of community on the students' writing. Specifically, the study documented and discussed the instructors' beliefs, perspectives, policies, and practices concerning community in their online writing classes; the study also documented and discussed students' beliefs, perspectives, and experiences concerning community in their online classes. Each of the five online courses was observed from start to finish, and the study also analyzed the students' participation in the course communities and the writing they produced for the courses. A series of in-depth interviews with each pair of participants, along with observations of the courses and analyses of written artifacts from the various courses were the primary sources of data.

The key findings of this study were: the prevalence of social constructivist theory and pedagogy in online writing courses; the necessity of policy and accountability in successfully building community; the theoretical versus practical value of community in the online writing course; the limited role of community when influencing students' writing; and the disparities between instructors' intentions and students' experiences of community.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Community” and the Online Writing Course

Writing instructors who teach college composition courses online confront some serious theoretical and practical differences compared to teaching traditional, face-to-face writing courses. In the completely Internet-based writing course, some aspects of teaching and learning are consistent with those of traditional courses, while others differ wildly, and making the instructional transition to the online writing experience requires teachers to reexamine some premises and practices in established composition theory. Perhaps no other facet of the contemporary, widely accepted social-constructivist approach to composition pedagogy changes more in the online environment than the notion of “community” and its importance and manifestation in the teaching and learning of writing. Just as the importance of social context in the traditional writing classroom once found its way to the forefront of our consideration in composition pedagogy, social context has now become a major concern for those of us who teach in the online writing classroom.

Student interactions and relationships are a common topic in the conversations among online writing instructors, and tales of successes and failures of community in the online classroom range from the anecdotal to the thoroughly researched. “Community”—for better or worse—has become a central character in our professional discussion of online composition as well as a focus of our training. Hewett & Ehmann (2004), in *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*, cited the social-constructivist view of writing as the primary theory cited in the literature of our discipline in our approach to online writing (p.

38), and their work is a theoretical and practical introduction into online writing instruction with the specific purpose of teaching instructors how to apply the tenets of that theory to the online composition course. Also, in addition to talking *about* our students, a growing number of researchers have suggested, too, that we begin talking *to* them to a greater degree, on issues ranging from plagiarism (Bradinova, 2006) to what makes a good writing teacher (Halsey, 2007), soliciting students to share their perspectives on their experiences in writing courses. Adding student voices to our conversation about community in online composition can complement our developing story, and the presentation of both instructor and student narratives can yield important, substantive insights to a growing body of research into the issue of online community, which is certain to continue to be important in composition into the foreseeable future.

The idea of community is fundamental in the social-constructivist approach to composition instruction, and the social-constructivist view has become for many of us an underlying premise in our writing theory and practice, as we use discussion to shape knowledge and collaborative activities to produce or revise our students' written work [c.f. Bruffee's (1997) "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" and (1986) "Social Construction, Language, and Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay"]. But what are we to do when the "social" aspect of our courses changes as radically as it does when we move our writing instruction into the online environment and lose the opportunity of face-to-face collaboration and conversation? We have a seeming paradox in the field of online writing instruction: on the one hand, we have a widely held belief that the technology making the online classroom possible also fosters virtual relationships and interactions that allow the collaboration and sense of community which are at the heart of social-constructivist pedagogy (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 3); on the other hand is the perhaps equally popular view that the online forum and the

technology itself create their own sort of distance between those using it, serving as a buffer to isolate individuals from each other, thus *preventing* the relationships necessary for knowledge- and relationship-building (Romi, 2000, p. 43).

Instructors who believe in the importance of community generally try to carry over that belief from traditional writing instruction to the online environment. Hewett and Ehmann (2004) stated, “The professional literature regarding OWI [online writing instruction] tends to engage the social-constructivist epistemology as its primary teaching philosophy” (p. 38), and, they went on to say, “Philosophically, OWI and its attendant instructional methods are a natural outgrowth of, and commitment to, the social-constructivist epistemology” (p. 41); the entire context of these authors’ “how-to” guide to online writing instruction focused on demonstrating the link between social-constructivist practices in traditional courses and the carry-over of those practices into the online classroom, and how writing instructors can best transfer that guiding epistemology to the online environment. One of the issues that faces us is how well our social-constructivist values and methods have made the leap from the traditional to the online classroom. The major focus of my own study was an examination of the notion of “community” in the completely online writing classroom.

Purpose of the Study

This was an exploratory study that examined instructors’ and students’ perceptions of community in online writing courses, as well as the manifestation of social-constructivist activities in those courses and the influences of those activities on students’ writing. Specifically, I solicited instructors’ beliefs about community and its role in their online writing classes, and I examined the policies and practices pertaining to collaborative learning in their

courses. Additionally, I investigated online writing students' perceptions of community and its role in their writing, and I looked at the activities they engaged in for their online writing courses that were manifestly collaborative, with a focus on how their interaction with others in the course affected their writing. It is my hope that this study offers a better understanding of how social-constructivist ideals are being realized in online writing courses, how student writing is impacted by community, and how teaching practices might be improved to better reflect social-constructivist pedagogical values and goals in online writing courses.

The study took place at a community college in Virginia. The college was one of the largest in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), with a thriving online education component and a well-established tradition of offering online composition courses, taught by both full-time and adjunct faculty. The institution in question was, I believe, typical of the more progressive VCCS schools in its commitment to online education, and it routinely offered numerous sections of high-quality online courses, in a variety of disciplines, to its students. My familiarity with the English faculty, student body, administration, online course delivery platform, and policies for online courses at the study site all allowed me both easy access to the courses I studied and an insider's insight into the teaching environment in which those course were taught.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, "community" most commonly refers to the social contexts of the virtual, individual classroom environments the study focused on—the particular online composition courses investigated at the institution. In his 1989 overview article, "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing," Joseph Harris said study of the idea of "community" in

composition studies was a “concern with the power of social forces in writing [that is] much needed in a field that has long focused narrowly on the composing processes of individual writers” (p. 12). As I discuss in the next chapter, social-constructivist composition pedagogy arose from this concern and concluded,

We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong. (Harris, 1989, p. 12)

In short, social-constructivist theory asserted the now-familiar idea that our students are greatly influenced in their writing and knowledge-building by a variety of “communities,” often the most immediate of which is the classroom community in which their college writing instruction takes place.

Within that environment, two other key ideas related to community are critically important: “conversation” and “collaborative learning.” In fact, Kenneth Bruffee (1997) posited that the classroom conversations and collaborative learning activities students engage in are the two most crucial elements that make up their participation in an academic writing community. He summarized the writing teacher’s goals regarding “community”:

our task must involve engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and reading process as possible, and that we should contrive to ensure that students’ conversation about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to read and write. The way they talk with each other determines the way they will think and the way they will write.

To organize students for these purposes is . . . to organize collaborative learning.

Collaborative learning provides a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued by college teachers. (p. 400)

Objections to some of Bruffee's premises can be (and have been) raised, but the above represent the basic idea of composition theory's notion of "community." Thus, in this study, I used the term "community" to mean the social context and activities of the online writing course. That context is made up of all "conversation" that takes place among participants in the community (this could also include people outside the course who nevertheless had some immediate impact on students' writing) and all explicit or tacit interaction among participants (collaboration) that had as its aim meeting some goal that was encouraged and/or required by the writing course. Practically, this meant I was usually looking at discussion board conversations, peer review of writing, and all public communication, participation, and interaction on the participants' parts.

Throughout this dissertation, references to courses as *online* or *distance* courses mean the courses were, for all practical purposes, conducted completely via the Internet. Generally, no face-to-face meetings with the instructor or other classmates were required. Some students may have chosen to communicate with an instructor, a tutor, or classmates via phone or in person, but such interactions were typically not mandatory. As a brief aside, at the institution where the study was conducted there was a College policy that all students enrolled in distance courses took part in two proctored course activities, for which they had to show up in person at one of the College's two campus testing facilities or make arrangements to participate in the proctored activities at some other approved location. Those proctored activities were for the administrative purpose of establishing the identities of students, to help ensure that the student who was getting credit for a particular course was in fact the student who was actually doing the work for the

course. However, the proctored activities did not (necessarily) entail the students meeting with their instructors or classmates; students could simply show an ID to the proctor, do the activity (be it a test, or whatever), and thus fulfill the requirement of having shown up in person for at least part of the course. Therefore, while two in-person activities were required of each online student, those activities might have had little or nothing to do with the community aspect of the course itself.

Designating the students in the study as “online” or “distance” students means only that the students were taking their current Composition courses via the Internet; students may have been concurrently taking other classes in traditional classrooms (either at the same institution or another), and they may have taken other college courses—even English courses—in traditional formats in the past.

Research Questions and Methodological Overview

The questions of the study, to be addressed through qualitative analysis of paired case studies, were:

1. What are instructors’ perceptions of and experiences with “community” in the online writing classroom?
2. What are students’ perceptions of and experiences with “community” in the online writing classroom?
3. Based on those perceptions and experiences, along with observations of the community aspects of the courses studied, what conclusions can be drawn about community in online writing courses?

In this study, I looked at five paired case studies, each consisting of an instructor of online composition and a single student from his or her class who had been identified as a successful student, “success” being defined in terms of the student’s performance in the course in both written work and class participation. Interviews with instructors focused on their philosophical beliefs and training regarding “community” in the writing classroom, their policies and practices regarding aspects of the course they saw as constructing community, and their assessment of the efficacy of the online environment in supporting their pedagogical goals related to community. My interviews with students focused on the students’ understanding of the role of community in their writing instruction, their perceptions of how community manifested itself in their experiences in the online courses, and their assessment of how that manifestation influenced their writing for the courses. I solicited the views of both groups of participants for suggestions about how the social aspects of the online writing course might be changed to improve both class community development and students’ writing.

Additionally, I observed and analyzed other relevant aspects of the courses that pertained to community in the online classroom: the degree of focus on collaborative activities in assignments and grading, the participatory activities of students with the instructors and each other both within the course and in any extra-curricular activities, and anything else that demonstrated a student’s formation of or participation in some element of community that influenced his or her writing. The study took place during a summer semester, as the classes were “live,” rather than looking at archived courses; the choice of studying live classes was an important one, as it allowed me to interview all participants at a time when their information and insights were fresher, more detailed, and more relevant to the participants themselves.

Rationale for the Study

In an era in which technological, cultural, economic, and administrative factors ensure online-based writing courses are a reality that is here to stay in higher education (Olsen, Carlson, Carnevale, & Foster, 2007, p. B-1), writing teachers need to know if some of our core assumptions about effective writing instruction can be maintained in online courses. Specifically, we need to see if real-world online classes reflect our theoretical assumptions about community and writing instruction, and we need to know what factors affect our students' experiences of community in online composition courses. Numerous recent dissertations in this area suggest potential problems with realizing some of those assumptions in this medium. Particularly significant to my own study, for example, Nicole Brown (2003), in "Constructing 'Community' Online: A Discussion of Metaphor, Meaning, and Rhetorical Action," found "community metaphors online may actually discourage . . . interconnectivity and interactivity within space" (p. 154) and suggested the almost ever-present concern with community in online education and writing is only "a starting point in analysis" (p. 156) in our exploration of the social experiences we and our students construct online. In his 2004 dissertation, "Forces in Space: A Bahktinian Exploration of Online Writing Groups," William Ritke Jones studied what "forces effect social cohesion of online writing groups," specifically from the perspective of the online writing instructor, who needs "to understand how these forces impede and/or foster the development of writing teams and their performance of writing tasks," and his major conclusion was that the added online element makes it more difficult for online writing students to adhere socially and to collaborate (p. iv). Clearly, in online composition, writing teachers must understand the degree to which the online environment supports our social-constructivist values,

what kinds of virtual writing communities are being created in our courses, what experiencing such courses is like for our students, and how those courses might be improved.

Several underlying assumptions drove this study. First, the social-constructivist view of writing is widespread and influential in composition studies today; it follows from that premise that writing instructors believe community to be important in the composition classroom, and that they engage in practices to encourage conversation and collaborative learning. Second, the online environment makes fostering collaboration and community-building if not additionally problematic then at the very least different from doing so in the traditional classroom. Third, both instructors' and students' views of community in the online writing classroom are important: by studying the understanding, perceptions, and practices of both groups of participants we can gain valuable information about the state of community in contemporary online writing courses; studying teachers' and students' experiences can also help us improve the quality of such courses.

Value of the Study

This particular study seemed to me to be important for a number of reasons:

1. The study was comparative, looking at both instructors' and students' perceptions of community in the online classroom. This was significant because students' voices are often underrepresented in our research (Halsey, 2007, p. 10).
2. The study deviated from most related studies in that it looked at the subject with a focus on the online perspective, "rather than continued research comparing outcomes between different delivery methods," i.e., comparing a traditional versus online approach (Ouzts, 2006, p. 287).

3. The study yielded a real-world snapshot of the state of online writing instruction from a social-constructivist perspective, what Blakelock and Smith (2006) called what is actually “going on in the trenches” in composition via distance education (p. 140).
4. The study yielded suggestions about how online writing instruction can be improved in the area of “community,” a need called for in Hewett and Ehmann’s (2004) treatment of instructor-training for online writing instruction (p. 156).

Those participants involved directly in the study benefited immediately by their inclusion in the study. Students got to voice their opinions about the courses and had an opportunity to reflect on their online writing experiences, possibly to shape the nature of future online courses. The participating instructors received immediate feedback on their students’ evaluation of the effectiveness of their course designs and teaching, with suggestions for improvement, particularly in the areas of collaboration and community; additionally, the instructors were able to articulate their own philosophies, concerns, and experiences with a knowledgeable peer, providing them with a valuable opportunity to share knowledge within their discipline.

I believe the fields of both composition and online education will benefit by having the study’s findings presented in a dissertation which can be studied by administrators and faculty who are in positions to learn from and implement the study’s data and insights into online course policies and practices, particularly for online writing courses. The study uncovered information that will contribute to more informed theories of online writing instruction and to a better understanding of best practices in the teaching of online writing. Beyond online *writing* courses, the information about collaborative and community-building activities in the online environment should be applicable to all online courses in general. The study contributes to the growing and much-needed body of work surrounding online writing instruction and learning, as well as

answering the ever-increasing need to improve online education in general, and specifically in the area of improving the community aspect of online writing students' experiences.

Limitations of the Study

One potential limitation to the study was my own bias, based on the notion that drove me to select this topic for my dissertation: namely, that I did not necessarily believe community was as present in online composition courses to the degree that much of the literature and many underlying assumptions in the field thus far asserted them to be. I discuss my own experiences with the subject of community in the online writing course later in this chapter, and based on those experiences I had doubts that the online environment either automatically ensured collaboration, conversation, and community-building in such courses or that it easily fostered and nurtured those practices; I expected to find much more of the isolated learning experiences discussed in that literature in the field which focuses more on the negative aspects of online learning.

Counterbalancing this bias at least to some degree was the fact that I genuinely hoped to be pleasantly surprised by my findings, as I believe that a prevalent sense of community in the online writing classroom and the positive effects it can have on students' writing are good things. Additionally, even in my pre-study preparations (which I cover in Chapter Three), during which I observed other instructors' online courses, I saw indications that community activities among participants were in fact taking place to an unexpected degree in most courses I observed. Once I later began gathering data for the actual study, I immediately saw the benefits of cross-case analysis, which forced me to see the phenomenon of my study from multiple perspectives; in-depth interviews with five different instructors, with a variety of experiences in and approaches

to online writing, along with (especially) similar interviews with different students, went a long way toward, as one of my dissertation committee members put it, forcing me to see a subject I was fairly familiar with in new and different ways. Finally, I believe member-checking and peer review, during the study and as I wrote up results, kept any researcher-bias from too greatly influencing my conclusions.

The second limitation to the study was the in the form of the choices made regarding the institutional site, the particular courses chosen for study, and the sampling of individual instructors and students to be followed and interviewed. I will discuss the selection of courses and participants in detail in Chapter Three, but a few words on the choice of the study site are appropriate here.

I chose to conduct the study at a community college I was very familiar with, primarily for reasons of access and familiarity with the context in which the courses studied were taught. While this choice might be dismissed as based on convenience, the fact is I had permission to conduct my study from two other area community colleges (one of them located closer to my home than the school I chose) as well as from a school where I was formerly employed and to which I could have easily returned for the duration of the study. However, especially regarding the first two alternative choices, I genuinely felt my experience in and understanding of the site chosen—its demographics, departmental policies, administrative climate, etc.—would allow me to contextualize my study to a much richer degree. Additionally, a current relationship with the school in question assured me of easy access to the course themselves (that is, I already had Blackboard access with the school), and studying at a more familiar school meant meetings with the instructors of the courses and the students could be more easily effected.

A final objection to the study might be its limited scope: I studied only a single school and a handful of instructors and students at that school. While there are dangers in small sample-selection, when striving to present the experiences of the participants in a particular setting, “more”—far from equaling “better”—may in fact be a hindrance to the kind of detailed inquiry into and understanding of those experiences I aimed for here. In short, if one tells a hundred stories in a limited amount of time and space, rather than, say, a dozen, those hundred stories must necessarily be less detailed than the dozen could be. As I discuss in the Methods chapter, the case study has a long and honorable history in the paradigm of naturalistic research, and, for the goal of this study, which was to present a snapshot of the state of community in typical first-year online writing courses, the five paired cases of instructor/student/course were, I firmly believe, adequate for that task.

Context of “Community” in Online Composition Research

The premise of this dissertation hinged on the assumption that both instructors and students face unique challenges when forming communities in the online writing environment and that we need to better understand those challenges. In viewing the idea of community from the perspective of virtual writing courses, Fleckenstein (2005) noted,

The etymology of the word “community” confirms the association between the evolution of cohering groups of people and a shared physical site However, that co-presence—both in terms of bodies and geography—is stripped from participants in a cyberspace, and that loss affects the building and blossoming of community. (p.151)

In reporting on a virtual composition course Fleckenstein described as typical in the problems it encountered, she goes on to list the major drawbacks cited with the online environment: student

irresponsibility, inadequate personal relationships, trivialized writing, dislocation and facelessness (p. 150). Others reported a general lack of substantive communication in online courses (Hara & Kling, 2005, p. 559), high attrition rates (Ross, Morrison, Smith, & Cleveland as cited. in Wheeler, 2006, p. 175), and other problems, such as a perceived lack of human support (Hegarty, Bostock, & Collins, 2000, p. 209), also most often attributed to the loss of community caused by the lack of face-to-face interaction in the online classroom.

It is important here to note that of course no one is claiming a traditional classroom environment automatically leads to the successful formation and utilization of a community of peer thinkers and writers, but there is the supposition that community development in the face-to-face environment is an easier, more familiar task for most writing teachers, and that forming a virtual community in an online course presents exceptional challenges.

Fostering community in the online writing course can mean trying to facilitate discussions about topics for papers and sample essays that have been read for class, trying to get students engaged in peer review, trying to coordinate joint research, and trying to manage collaborative writing projects, all in an environment where no one physically meets, individual activities are usually done asynchronously, and problems with communication and understanding (both with the instructor and with classmates) are all likely to be key characteristics of the course. Added to this are the problems mentioned above: students simply “disappearing” temporarily or permanently, failure on the part of some students to complete work on time if at all, significant numbers of students feeling “lost” or at least very confused, some students having no sense of connection with or accountability to the instructor or classmates, and abbreviated or token communication among fragmented peer “groups.” Fleckenstein (2005) concluded the “experience of affiliation so essential for literacy teaching” too often fails to materialize in the

virtual composition course, and students and instructors believe learning suffers because of it (p. 150).

However, the notion that the online environment complicates and hinders community in the writing course is not held universally. In fact, as discussed in the literature review in the next chapter, the research and experiences of a significant number of educators suggest the online environment is actually especially beneficial in forming community. Participants in one recent study found,

Teaching writing online presents huge opportunities for interactivity and building writing communities. Peer writing groups, publication, and designing individual learning plans to address strengths and weaknesses are more effective and produce better results than traditional classroom practices. (Blakelock & Smith, 2006, pp. 156-157)

Blakelock and Smith's study actually found that *better* relationships with and among students were formed in online writing courses than in traditional courses (p. 157).

Some research indicated "the online course increases opportunities for interaction and participation" and that online students "communicate far more often and more substantively" than they could in traditional courses (Halfond, 2008, p. 53). Blair and Hoy (2006) contended that both teacher and student roles and relationships change for the better in online writing classes (p. 41) and that writing courses, in particular, "appear conducive to online delivery for the type of [positive and successful] interpersonal dialogue we have documented" (p. 45).

So, researchers into the community-in-online-writing issue are faced with the competing claims that the online environment both hinders and facilitates community. Nothing in the literature suggests either position is exclusively true or that the issue is in fact one of either/or. Experienced online writing instructors have most likely faced situations demonstrating both the

drawbacks and benefits of the virtual classroom in facilitating community development. The disparity between these views of community in online writing instruction is a key reason we need more research into the phenomenon. Community is a “highly contested” idea in the study of online writing, and

cyberspace is highly touted as a medium for facilitating the development of communities; although it is simultaneously interrogated for its failure to do exactly that. Because literacy evolves only within the give and take of a social group, we have to grapple with the conundrums presented by community if we wish to teach reading and writing in real or virtual classrooms. (Fleckenstein, 2005, p.173)

My study was developed from the belief that community in the online writing course is different from that of traditional courses, is more challenging to achieve, and is less understood. Calls for further research in the field are ubiquitous in articles, dissertations, and even books that address this issue. For example, Amy Jones Berry (2000), in “Cybercollaboration: Portrait of an Online Writing Course,” suggested investigation into questions such as what types of partnerships form online, what are the best teaching practices in online writing courses, and even “Should we be teaching online?” (p. 203). In her study of peer review in online writing courses, Christine Fitzpatrick (2006) concluded that much more needs to be known about peer interaction in such courses (p. 122), a need for understanding the importance of community echoed by Hewett and Ehmann (2004, p. 156). The goal of my dissertation was to study the nature of community in current online writing courses, that is, how instructors and students understand it and how it was actually being manifested in real online courses. This study was therefore both exploratory and descriptive. By analyzing the contexts of several courses and by presenting the views of the participants, this study aimed to present a detailed snapshot of the state of

community in the online writing courses of one institution, from the different perspectives of an outside observer, the instructors, and certain students.

The picture formed should prove useful for researchers, instructors, and, ultimately, for future students, because of lessons to be learned and applied to future courses. By interviewing teachers, analyzing their policies and practices, and reporting their own assessments of their successes and failures regarding community in their virtual classrooms, I present a picture of online writing teaching in its current state at one institution; this is an opportunity for composition teachers to learn from their peers what might and might not work in online writing instruction. The students' input likewise give readers unique and valuable insights into how students experience online courses, what they actually do when it comes to forming writing communities online, and how those communities affect the students' writing. Student perspectives on community in the online writing course are particularly rare, an underutilized resource when it comes to studying, understanding, and improving our courses.

Personal Background with the Subject

My own experience with the ambiguous nature of community in the online composition course began long before I focused on the topic for this dissertation. Twelve years ago, as I began my first full-time teaching job, I eagerly accepted the offer to become one of two instructors in the department to offer online writing courses at a community college in Wyoming. I had taught in networked computer courses before, and in my master's program I had read enough theory about computers and writing—guided by some prominent folks in the field—to be very enthusiastic about the relationship between the Internet and writing, excited enough to go to

the trouble of learning HTML and building my first online course from scratch, there being at the time no ready-made course delivery platform like WebCT or Blackboard.

The reality of teaching online soon curbed my enthusiasm. I had received virtually no actual training about teaching online, an all-too-common occurrence (the chief problem addressed by Hewett and Ehmann in their 2004 book, *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*), and I was unprepared for the problems I and my students encountered: everything from technical breakdowns to a general lack of understanding on the part of us all as to what exactly an online writing course was supposed to be like. It now seems hard to believe, but twelve years ago college students were ignorant of things like text-messaging (and sometimes even email), they had no experience with social networking interfaces like FaceBook, MySpace, or Twitter, and many of them didn't own computers of their own; in fact, the student body I was dealing with was fairly unsophisticated technologically; adding in my own inexperience, that first online course now seems a recipe for disaster.

Priding myself on high student retention, I was dismayed to experience a fifty percent attrition rate, although I later learned that was pretty standard in online courses (Ross, Morrison, Smith, & Cleveland as cited in Wheeler, 2006, p. 175). Most of those students who left simply disappeared without a word, and at the end of the course I sensed those who had finished felt as ambiguously about the whole experience as I did. However, there had been glimmers of hope: online, asynchronous discussions, for example, sometimes seemed to be of better quality than discussions in my traditional classes. Often online students had more to say (and more insightful things to say) about the sample essays we read and about each other's topics for papers. Some students communicated much more frequently and substantively with me, via email, than did

most of my face-to-face students. Simply put, I had begun to experience the sometimes very dichotomous nature of the online writing course community, as described earlier.

I continued teaching online, my courses getting better as I learned a lot through trial and error and as I began to communicate to a greater degree with colleagues who also taught online. Many of my students remained isolated and dropped out, while others thrived online and would tell me at the end of the semester that our class had been the best writing course they had ever taken. Still, I couldn't help feeling my online students and I were not realizing the full potential of our courses—particularly that we were not fully developing the participation and interaction that were possible in the online medium and that I believed were the hallmark of good composition teaching.

As far as my students' writing experiences, I was expecting or at least hoping for some of the benefits Rebecca Rickly (2004) mentioned in an article on computer-mediated writing and rhetoric. She found electronic writing across distance to be seen and generally accepted as a means for fostering cross-cultural communication (p. 37); building electronic discourse communities (p. 39); expanding students' learning opportunities and moving reader-writer relationships with literary texts to the forefront (p. 41); fostering students' voices, encouraging reflective rhetoric, and positively changing group dynamics (pp. 43-44); and disrupting "teacher-centered hegemony" (p. 46). Rickly concluded that by encouraging a variety of perspectives, then providing a non-threatening technological forum for these voices to be heard, the instructor was more likely to encourage thought, reflection, and learning. The result could be a rhetorically based communal conversation that did not have to conform to institutional boundaries but allowed both students and teachers to think across the curriculum via reflective dialogic interaction (p. 48). In short, I thought the online environment should be having some really

profound effects on my students' writing, but that wasn't the case, at least not on any consistent basis.

Wanting to improve in such areas, which I vaguely thought of as "connectedness," I began to do some research and to experiment within my own classes. I surveyed students about their perceptions and practices of communication within online courses; I engaged students in more online collaborative activities than I had previously used and solicited their feedback regarding the success or failure of those activities. What I learned was an unsurprisingly but depressingly mixed bag of conclusions: some students felt more connected with their online instructor and classmates than they did in traditional classes; other students felt totally disconnected from their fellows, but even within this group there were discrepancies: the lack of community was a major source of distress for some, while others were unaffected by it or even preferred to work in isolation. There seemed to be no magical formula for assuring the healthy formation of community in the online writing class or even for determining its importance, which I sometimes started to doubt. To this day examples of communication, participation, and interaction in my online courses continue to fluctuate from delightful successes to frustrating failures.

The same can be said of students' writing in those classes. Some students willingly and successfully participate in all the areas Rebecca Moore Howard (2001) listed as the hallmark of collaborative writing pedagogy: collaborative learning, contributing to one another's individually authored texts, collaborative writing, and writer/text collaboration (pp. 58-62), and the papers they wrote reflected a sophistication I felt I could attribute in part to the relationships and feedback they experienced with and from others in the class. On the other hand there were those minimally participating students who took little or no part in class activities, discussion boards,

and group work, who ignored feedback from me and their classmates, who were virtually absent from the course (eventually becoming actually absent and withdrawing or simply disappearing from the course), and whose writing suffered accordingly: papers showing little effort or ability and in many cases incorporating none of the revisions which active participation in the community aspects of the course would have produced.

The more I learned from colleagues who taught online, the more I found that story of the elusiveness of community in the online writing classroom repeated, reflected not just in anecdotal narratives but in formal research as well. After twelve years, my online composition courses remained frequently my most challenging and sometimes my most rewarding classes. In my doctoral coursework I began to investigate community in the online composition course more thoroughly, and in choosing it as my dissertation topic I was taking the opportunity to learn more about what I have come to believe is the most perplexing professional puzzle I face on a daily basis. What follows is a study I would be interested in reading myself, and it is my hope that what I learned helps me and my students and that other teachers facing the same challenges in teaching writing online find the inquiries made and information gathered both theoretically interesting and practically helpful.

Chapter Contents

The chapters that follow cover, respectively, a review of the literature relevant to this study, a detailed outline of the methods employed in data gathering and analysis, a presentation of the results of that data-gathering, and a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the study. After the References section, the reader will find an appendix showing the interview questions for both student and instructor participants.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to review the relevant literature that will allow for an informed discussion of the role of “community” in online college composition courses, along with a treatment of the perspectives of instructors and students as they might bear on that topic. The chapter is organized into four main sections:

1. An overview of thought within the discipline of composition studies regarding community in online composition. This review consists of three sub-sections:
 - a. Social-constructivism in composition theory
 - b. The theory of community in generic (i.e., not necessarily focused on writing) online learning
 - c. The specific manifestation of social-constructivism in the community aspect of online composition courses
2. A discussion of instructors’ perspectives and practices, and students’ perspectives and experiences, regarding community in online composition courses
3. A synopsis of what the literature of the field suggests should be done regarding promoting community in online composition courses; this section covers those pedagogical goals our teaching should ideally strive for in this area
4. A brief summation of the literature discussed in this chapter, as that body of literature relates directly to this study

Overview

As mentioned in the first chapter, in their guide to the teaching of writing online, *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*, Hewett and Ehmann (2004) traced the widespread practice of embracing social-constructivist theory from traditional or face-to-face writing courses to the adaptation of that theory to online writing courses. They stated, “Many contemporary writing instructors extrapolate their [social-constructivist] practice from Vygotsky’s ideas and encourage social encounters in the forms of collaborative writing, peer workshops, and peer-response groups” (pp. 34-35), and then went on to point out, “Philosophically, OWI [online writing instruction] and its attendant instructional methods are a natural outgrowth of, and commitment, to, the social-constructivist epistemology” (p. 41).

Just how widespread this underlying philosophy is in online writing instruction is apparent in a review of recent dissertations that focus on online composition courses, a sample of which follows, along with a discussion of how my own study is designed to further this research. On the advice of one of my dissertation committee members, I turned to other dissertations to learn what recent work had been done in this area of study. Specifically, I searched the electronic database Proquest for dissertations done in Comp/Rhet and Education that focused on one or more of the elements of my study: online writing, online community, and the effects of the online forum on student learning.

The earliest of this selection of studies is “Cybercollaboration: Portrait of an Online Writing Group,” completed in 2000. Amy Jones Berry found the student-participants in an online writing group to have both negative and positive experiences uniquely related to the characteristics of group interactions (“community”) in the online environment, particularly in the

areas of synchronous “real-time collaborative critique,” “verbal bonding,” and group-size (pp. iii-iv). These findings support the rather mixed reports regarding online community and collaboration that are the hallmark of the bulk of the remaining review of literature. Berry also found that the degree of perceived input from both the instructor and peers had a direct and positive impact on students’ perceptions of the quality of their own writing (pp. 194-95), but she also stated it was difficult to tell what effects the online environment, specifically, had on the student writers (p. 198). The need to better understand these ambiguous experiences in and hard-to-trace influences of the online environment on writing students highlights the need for further research like mine to study students’ experiences in such courses, along with their perceptions of how their writing is affected by their interactions with others in the online writing classroom. My research sought to answer some of the questions Berry ended her study with: What learners, if any, most benefit from the online environment? And, what are the best practices of online writing teachers, and how can we best share those practices (p. 203)?

In her 2003 study, “Constructing ‘Community’ Online: A Discussion of Metaphor, Meaning, and Rhetorical Action,” Nicole Brown looked specifically at how technology fostered and hindered the construction of a sense of community in an online discussion group. Surprisingly, she found “community metaphors online [that is, using the metaphor of *community* at all to explain online interactions among participants] may actually discourage . . . interconnectivity and interactivity within space,” noting, “While community is certainly valuable in particular learning and social contexts . . . more idiomatic representation might be useful for thinking about online communication technologies and our relationships with them” (p. 154). Brown suggested the almost ever-present concern with community found in the literature about online education and writing is only “a starting point in analysis” (p. 156) in our exploration of

the experiences we and our students construct online. This is particularly interesting given the current sometimes-heated debate over the efficacy of the online environment in facilitating community, which sometimes seems to take as a given premise that such facilitation—regardless of one’s beliefs about how well or poorly it can be done online—is a positive and necessary thing. My own study did proceed from social-constructivist values as a given positive premise, but it was open to the possibility of finding that instructors and students may not find community valuable or may, using community as Brown’s suggested starting point, have better or at least different conceptual constructs for what goes on among participants in online writing courses.

As a quick aside, in a later (2006) article based in part on the dissertation just described, Brown also noted that,

Now, with millions of people corresponding online, traditional conceptions of how people meet, speak, and interact are being rethought. Included in this rethinking is the teaching of writing, as discussions of online writing classrooms and online writing groups are frequent among scholars in the field. (p. 2)

Statements like this in recent publications demonstrate the timeliness of the information I discovered for my own dissertation. While the idea of community in online writing is new enough for us to still be forming our ideas about it, it has also been established long enough for us to reexamine it, through studies like mine. Additionally, the paired case study approach I used seemed particularly well-suited to one task Brown proposed:

students and teachers should combine their experiences online with questions related to these . . . how does the “real life” interactions within or between social groups compare with online discourse; how do online classroom contexts construct and/or deconstruct

understandings of the classroom . . . and how might online communication technologies establish social learning contexts otherwise? (2006, p. 14)

The paired case study approach I took proved to do exactly that: combine the experiences of students and instructors to shed light on the interactions, class “construction,” and social learning context of the virtual writing classroom.

In his 2004 dissertation, “Forces in Space: A Bahktinian Exploration of Online Writing Groups,” William Ritke Jones studied what “forces effect social cohesion of online writing groups,” specifically from the perspective of the online writing instructor, who needs “to understand how these forces impede and/or foster the development of writing teams and their performance of writing tasks” (p. iv). Jones’ major conclusion was that the added online element made it more difficult for online writing students to adhere socially and to collaborate (p. iv), and one of the questions for further research he was left with was, “How do communities form and perform online” (p. 196)? In addition to addressing some of Jones’ concerns and questions, my research sought first to learn from both instructors and students if any communities are in fact forming in online writing course in the first place—that is, meaningful communication, participation, and interaction that could be considered communities in more than just name. Beyond that basic question, I hoped to learn how some of the obstacles to social adherence and collaboration that Jones found might be overcome; this is one reason I specifically planned to target successful (both academically and “communally”) students as participants in my study. In speaking to both successful students and instructors, drawing on the experiences and insights of both groups, I hoped to answer to some degree Jones’ question of how communities form and perform in online writing classrooms.

In 2006, Christine Fitzpatrick finished “Peer Review in an Online Technical Writing Course,” a study in which she set out to learn more about the “effective practices for structuring and conducting electronic peer review” (p. vi), something that was a crucial aspect of my own study, since peer review is one of the benchmarks often used to measure the level of community and collaboration in writing courses (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, pp. 34-35). Fitzpatrick looked at some of the strategies for implementing peer review specifically in an online writing class, the logistics of operating peer review online, and students’ attitudes toward peer review as a result of their participation in the online experience (p. vi). Among the results and recommendations Fitzpatrick cited, two of the major influences she mentioned as being crucial to the success of peer review online were the technologies used and “the expectations, attitudes, and participation of students” (p. 124). Fitzpatrick’s work is a recent example of the growing body of literature specifically devoted to the study of students’ experiences with and possible contributions to the improvement of online writing. My study focused on this key issue of student attitudes as well as how students take part in an online community. Additionally, Fitzpatrick stated that electronic peer interaction was “complex and is bounded by the design and expectations of faculty and course developers” (p. 124), another element of the online writing course that was studied and developed in my own research. The paired cases study approach I took allowed a view of online community that was informed by an exploration of the forces Fitzpatrick lists and which sought to answer her call for “further examination” of and “improved guidance” for peer interaction in online writing instruction (p. 124). By exploring the perspectives and practices of the instructors, as those things related to community online, I sought to better establish exactly how instructors’ course designs and expectations influenced student interaction; through interviewing students about their perspectives and experiences regarding community online, I wanted to learn

more about how their expectations, attitudes, and participation affected their performance and their writing in the virtual composition classroom.

The final dissertation included in this introductory review is another 2006 dissertation, Terra Williams' "Student Discussion of Assigned Reading in Online First Year Writing Courses." As with Fitzpatrick's treatment of peer review, Williams focused on a particular manifestation of collaboration and community in the online writing course: the use of discussion boards, although the primary purpose of Williams' study was "to identify characteristics of students' writing about assigned reading" (p. vii). It might be argued that Williams' study really used online discussion more as a data gathering tool than as the focus of the study itself, but still, the study dealt with another primary tool by which we typically measure students' participation, interaction, and engagement in online courses: the discussion board, which David Freedman stated could be more socially interactive in the online courses than face-to-face classroom exchanges (1999). Williams used students' responses to emailed questionnaires along with samples of the students' own postings to discussion boards to observe and describe how online discussions develop (p. vii). The author concluded from her study that, among other things, while there were some similarities between face-to-face student discussions and online discussions (for example, in each, a core body of students tended to contribute the most), there were also some important differences: for instance, in online discussions, the role of the teacher tended to be less centralized, allowing students "to learn from themselves rather than become sponges trying to soak up my [the teacher's] wisdom" (p. 149). My own study sought to develop this understanding of instructors' and students' expectations, perspectives, and actual experiences in the socially interactive aspects of the online writing class, and discussion boards proved to be a key component and locus for those aspects. Many of the questions I asked both

instructors and students focused on perceptions of the differences between community in the traditional and online writing environment. In particular, two issues Williams suggested should be explored further are addressed by my research: qualitative study of teacher and student communication (p. 151) and the relationship between time spent by students in community activities like discussion board postings and students' grades (p. 152). Since I specifically included as participants *successful* students, one topic I asked instructors about was what behaviors and characteristics they felt students must have to be successful in the online writing classroom, "successful" being defined as those students who excel both in the participatory aspects of the courses and in their academic writing. Related to that, I solicited students' views of the role of communication practices, participation, collaboration, and any other interactions with the instructor and peers in the students' success in the courses. In this area, I hoped to answer Williams' call for further research "for the purposes of sharing accurate and realistic information" (p. 152) about what it takes to be a successful online writing student.

As these dissertation studies show, ideas about social-constructivism and the online learning environment are sometimes an interesting paradox. On the one hand, there is the widely held belief that the technology which makes the online classroom possible serves to make possible the relationships and interactions that allow the collaboration and sense of community that are at the heart of this pedagogy, when those relationships would otherwise have been impossible due to the "distance" element of "distance education" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 3); on the other hand is the perhaps equally popular view that the online environment itself creates distance among those using it, serving as a buffer to isolate individuals from each other, thus *preventing* the relationships necessary for knowledge- and relationship-building (Romi, 2000, p. 43). Examining the disparate perspectives on community in the online writing course is best

framed through an understanding of the following key elements and the intersection at which they meet: community as it relates to writing, the online learning environment itself, and the specific manifestation of online community in composition courses.

Community in Writing: the Social-Constructivist Paradigm

To get a sense of both how widespread social-constructivist pedagogy is in the teaching of writing and what exactly we mean when we discuss collaboration and community in online writing, it is necessary to look at the theoretical underpinnings of social-constructivism as it relates to writing.

Long before this theory or pedagogy was applied to online writing, it was applied to face-to-face writing instruction, and my own understanding of that tradition started with an introduction to two theorists seminal to the field of contemporary composition studies: Lev Vygotsky and Kenneth Bruffee. Vygotsky developed the idea of collaboratively “constructed” knowledge using psychological principles, and Bruffee brought the philosophy specifically to the discipline of composition, from whence myriad others have applied the social-constructivist view to writing instruction, and eventually to online writing instruction.

In *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky (1986) introduced and developed the theory that language is acquired and develops through social relationships. Progressing from inner speech through talking to writing, language (or at least outwardly directed language) requires a social situation in which to manifest itself, and social situations demand and shape language use. Children learn language through imitation of and through cooperation with others. Many educators have seized on this theory, and, in particular, as noted earlier, many writing instructors base their practices in Vygotsky’s ideas and encourage social interaction in the forms of

collaborative writing, peer workshops, and peer-response groups (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, pp. 34-35), and these practices have made their way from the face-to-face classroom to the online writing class (41).

In the previously mentioned “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” Kenneth Bruffee (1997) was chiefly responsible for bringing Vygotsky’s principles to bear in writing instruction, leading to the widespread extrapolation just mentioned. Bruffee’s basic premise was that “writing is internalized conversation re-externalized” (p. 24). And if writing is a conversation, it needs a social context in which to take place, an audience, etc. Rebecca Moore Howard (2001) summarized three of Bruffee’s principles “that have now become canonical in composition studies”:

- Thought is internalized conversation, and thought and conversation tend to work in largely the same way
- If thought is internalized public or social talk, then writing is such talk made public and social again
- Learning is working collaboratively to establish and maintain communal knowledge (p. 54)

The practical manifestations of social-constructivist pedagogy show up in the writing classroom most often in the forms of discussion (whole-class and small-group), group projects and actual collaborative writing, and peer-review of writing.

In developing the notion of the private/public dialogism of social-constructivism, Bruffee was building, as well, on Mikhail Bakhtin’s premise that individual discourse “is relativized by its dialogic contact with another social discourse” (Morris, 1997, p.73). Bakhtin stated:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. . . . it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions (p. 293-294)

From the work of these scholars, the social-constructivist view has become for many writing teachers a fundamental element in writing theory and teaching, as we use discussion to shape knowledge, and collaborative activities like peer review to produce or revise our students' written work. Again, in "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing," Joseph Harris (1989) summed up this underlying approach to writing thus:

We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong. (p. 12)

Community in the Traditional Writing Classroom

In order to understand how this pedagogy manifests itself in the online writing class, it is necessary to first look at the manifestations of social-constructivism, of community, in the traditional writing classroom. Community in the traditional classroom is fostered upon a couple of key social-constructivist principles. First, as Andrea Lunsford (1991) stated:

The [epistemological] shift involves a move from viewing knowledge and reality as things exterior to or outside of us, as immediately accessible, individually knowable, measurable, and sharable—to viewing knowledge and reality as mediated by or

constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualized, as, in short, the product of *collaboration*. (p. 4)

Specifically, then, as Anne Ruggles Gere (1987) noted, “Knowledge conceived as socially constructed or generated validates the ‘learning’ part of collaborative learning because it assumes that the interactions of collaboration can lead to new knowledge or learning” (p. 72). While my study did not seek to compare community in traditional writing courses with community in online courses, a working knowledge of relevant research in the former is necessary to understand how manifestations of community online are unique or at least different, and the studies that are summarized immediately below are helpful in doing so.

In a study the focus of which intersects with my own in the areas of both collaboration and technology in the writing classroom, Simons (1990) found the community formed in writing students’ working groups was dependent upon or heavily influenced by several factors. Relationships among the students, particularly in the area of leadership, were important in the students’ community activities in the writing course, as well as in their actual writing (pp. 61-62). Students’ (perceived or actual) decisiveness, knowledge of the writing task, and familiarity with technology all can allow some students to emerge as leaders, with a disproportionate influence on the direction and nature of the course, while causing others to fall into more passive roles as followers (pp. 61-61). In my study, students’ perceptions of their peers (and instructors) were particularly interesting to note, since those perceptions, in all cases, were based solely on faceless online interaction, and knowing that issues of relationships had been frequently noted in traditional social-constructivist writing classes allowed me to look for those elements of relationships that were especially significant to the online environment. Simons also found that, when working together, students’ perceptions of assignments (p. 61) and their abilities with

technology (p. 62) also affected their performance in the course; this was important to my study because understanding assignments proved difficult for some of the students in the online classes studied (based, I believe, on the lack of verbal clarification that often goes on in traditional classes, as instructors expand on their written assignment guidelines), and students had to turn to each other for help in understanding assignments, course layout, and sometimes certain technologies involved. Since Simons did not observe the individual writing of particular students, nor did she observe such students writing without computers, she was unable to determine to what degree either the community aspect of the writing groups involved influenced students' writing (pp. 64-65), an area of inquiry that was addressed through instructor and student interviews in my own study, as was Simons' call for further research to identify and describe the variables of collaboration (or, as I have broadened the notion, community) in computer-based social-constructivist writing courses.

Claire Coleman Lamonica (1996) presented two case studies of college student writing groups, in which she observed the interactions and collaboration of the respective groups and the effects of that collaboration on the writing the students produced; in particular, the research focused on the creativity and conflict produced by the group dynamic. Her major conclusions had to do with the necessity of conflict within collaborative writing and the danger of premature consensus among such groups with regard to the success of their writing (pp. 207-208); however, the implications she saw for teaching in the areas of community and interaction were more relevant to my own study. Since many instructors interviewed for the study voiced concern about the difficulties of handling conflicts and misunderstandings within the online writing class, it was important to note both that Lamonica found intra-group conflicts within face-to-face writing classes and that she determined those conflicts actually played a positive role in students'

writing (pp. 210-211); she noted “the need for an increased attention to the benefits of dissensus in the classroom” (p. 211). Another pedagogical implication of her study was that “we must educate our students concerning the nature of collaboration and offer them myriad opportunities to collaborate” (p. 212). This is significant, because in analyzing problems with community in the online classroom, it can be tempting to attribute such problems automatically to the online environment, when in fact those problems might be the result of a lack of preparation on the students’ part or even a lack of opportunity to interact in meaningful ways. Several of the areas ripe for further inquiry that Lamonica mentioned were relevant to my own study: the importance of group dynamics and personality types in student interaction, students’ level of preparedness regarding collaboration, and the effects of student interaction on the success students experience with their writing (pp. 209-210).

Another group case study was Gary Randolph’s (1997) dissertation, “‘Fused Horizons’: Collaboration and Co-Authored Texts: A Case Study of a Freshman Writing Group.” Randolph sought to observe the effects of collaboration on students’ writing processes and how those processes informed a student’s understanding of writing (p. 166). Unlike my own study which focused more generally on “community,” Randolph focused specifically on actual co-authored texts and found them to be essential tools in getting students to have “a common, shared problem,” in inviting and reinforcing a collaborative atmosphere, as well as in getting students to understand their responsibilities to each other (pp. 176-168). Additionally, he concluded that the collaborative process

seems to help the students focus their attention more directly on the processes involved in

writing and/or composition. It encourages them to openly share their information and knowledge about writing, about composition, about the topic, about research, or about those concepts that are raised or challenged by the collaborative process. (p. 168)

While the instructors I studied did not have students actually co-author texts, all did attempt to establish community environments in their online classrooms to a very significant degree, and I was particularly interested to see if that community atmosphere had the effects on students' awareness of their own writing processes—and their sharing of that awareness—that Randolph found in the face-to-face writing course community. Randolph recommended further study of student interaction and its effects on writing in, among others, the areas of study length (his own was five weeks long), varied types of writing tasks, and “the potent social factors, that influence the effectiveness of . . . student groups” (pp. 182-183), all factors my own interviews with students and instructors directly or indirectly addressed.

Bahar Diken (2003), in a study that, similar to my own, focused “on the ways students participated . . . in collaborative classroom events and how the ways they understood and interacted within such activities constructed the life of the classroom” (p. 230), found in the face-to-face writing classroom “a distinct pattern of interaction shaping the ways events unfolded in the classroom” (p. 230). Diken found that the face-to-face social-constructivist writing classroom had serious repercussions on and was largely affected by issues of students' identities and roles within the class (p. 235), their sense of enjoyment or fun in the interactivity of the class (p. 246), and their use of the community aspect of the course to achieve their own academic goals (p. 250). Diken asked one of the central questions of social-constructivist pedagogy: “How can we encourage students to work with us to produce a productive collaborative life in the classroom?” (p. 263). She responded,

One answer to this question suggests that collaboration is much more than a classroom technique to get students to work together on a common task. Rather, it refers to jointly creating a space where students and teachers can experience being among others and interacting in its true sense. (p. 263)

This notion is centrally important in the exploration of community in the online writing class, in which the creation of such a (virtual) space faces particular challenges, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Diken concluded that it was the students she studied, not the teacher, who had difficulty stepping outside traditional, passive roles and taking a more active part in the community of the class (p. 270), and one particular problem she stated with the traditional writing classroom seemed to be ripe for investigation into whether or not the online classroom, as, say, an “alternative” space, can change that problem:

Classrooms with their sole inhabitants—teachers and students—are often divorced from the realities of the larger contexts. If we look at what happens in the classroom in terms of our assumptions and expectations alone, we may not be able to see how institutional forces can shape relationships between teachers and students in classrooms. We then need to examine what happens in the classroom not to identify and prescribe effective collaboration techniques but to first understand why particular patterns of interaction dominate classrooms. (p. 271)

I believe the online writing class is conceptualized by many students (and instructors) as being somehow “outside” the larger institution, and as will be seen later in this chapter the online environment can allow for the development of non-traditional relationships among participants; these two factors may contrive to create a writing class in which social-constructivist ideals can more freely manifest themselves.

Helen Dale's (1997) book, *Co-Authoring in the Classroom: Creating an Environment for Effective Collaboration* revealed a number of insights into the traditional social-constructivist writing classroom that can be used to inform our views of community in the online writing classroom. Interestingly, many of the instructors I interviewed naturally used much of the social-constructivist language encountered in studies of traditional writing classes. For example, Dale stated that in the social-constructivist writing course, "The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning rather than a transmitter of knowledge" (p. 17), and *facilitator* was a label several of the instructors in my study used to describe their role in the online writing course. Dale's study also found several important realities about collaboration and interaction among college-aged student writers. She found that, in general, younger students "tend to learn the most about writing from each other because their writing processes are not yet clearly formed," and older students are more likely to stick with their own well-established processes (p. 40); this could be particularly relevant when trying to foster community in the online writing course, because online courses have in the past tended to have higher percentages of non-traditional students, although I believe this is starting to change. Dale also found that assigning students roles in groups was counter-productive (p. 19), and that, left on their own, students in groups would find their own relative strengths and would assign themselves roles accordingly (p. 40); she found that if group leaders were not assigned, leadership roles would also develop naturally among students (p. 42), which was an area of inquiry I explored with my student participants when I asked them about student roles and students' perceptions of each other in the online classroom. Finally, Dale identified several factors that influenced the success of student interaction in the writing classroom: students' level of engagement in discussion with each other (p. 45), "cognitive conflict" or substantive give-and-take among students (p. 46), social and power issues particularly in regards

to students respecting one another (p. 47), and lastly *time* in which students can “engage in the process and communicate with each other and the teacher” (p. 50). These elements were exciting for me to note as each was something that could be directly assessed in my own study of students who were successful in both their writing and the community aspects of the online courses, either through my interviews with those students or through my observation of their course activities. Dale’s earlier (1994) research also drew my attention to a number of things I was alert for in my own research. For example, she found in the community of the traditional writing course, “The most effective collaborative writing discourse occurred among students writing in a positive social environment who were engaged with each other, the writing process, and the topic” (p. 342), and without exception, each instructor I observed talked at length about his or her attempts to create just such a positive atmosphere in his or her online writing courses.

These few studies offer a brief introduction into the actual results, often ambiguous, of research into social-constructivism in the writing classroom. According to Rebecca Moore Howard (2001), then, the practical manifestations of the social-constructivist writing classroom, at least in theory, include abundances of whole-class discussion or conversation (p. 58), small-group work (p. 59), both individual and group peer response (p. 60), and, sometimes, actual collaborative writing (multiple authors working on the same single text) (p. 62). This theory and these practices are important to note, because they form the framework for understanding perceptions of community in the online writing course.

However, as they are examined in the next section, it will be seen that the communication, interaction, and participation of social-constructivist pedagogy in the traditional writing classroom must undergo transformations that can become somewhat more problematic

when those activities are attempted in the online classroom. I first look at online classes in general and then specifically at online writing classes.

Community in the Generic (non-Writing) Online Class

Even more than in the literature specifically devoted to online writing instruction, the research about community in the generic (that is, not-necessarily-writing-related) online educational environment is split between two prevailing views, one advocating the efficacy of the online environment in facilitating community and one focusing on the difficulties that environment raises in fostering communication and collaboration.

Benefits to Community in the Generic Online Class

On the positive side of the debate, in *Lessons from the Cyber Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching* Palloff and Pratt (2001) summarized and discussed many of the more commonly cited advantages to online learning. First, they cited the changing nature of education, students, and technology as coming together to afford more access to education for many students, particularly non-traditional students (p. 3), allowing at least the possibility of new learning communities that otherwise would not exist. This is an interesting take on the access issue, which has been recognized as problematic, usually in terms of haves versus have-nots, or even wants versus want-nots (c.f. Moran, 1999, in “Access: The A-Word in Technology Studies”); however, it cannot be denied that access to courses online has in fact allowed some students to participate in higher education when they could not have done so by any other means.

In fact, as seen in the studies discussed next, many researchers have found great strengths in the online learning environment, often comparing it favorably to face-to-face teaching and

learning. Overall, Palloff and Pratt took a charitable view toward the effectiveness of online learning (pp. 17-18.). The supposed ease (and quality) of electronic communication and collaboration with and among students—a sort of technology-facilitated connectedness—is also a specifically cited benefit of the online classroom. For example, in his observation of online discussions in one course he studied, David Freedman noted, “I am struck by how interactive, emotionally charged, and generally insightful the discussions are” (1999). Participation in online discussions is easily tracked, so when such participation is required, students who might fade into the background in a face-to-face course often end up participating more fully. In addition to the characteristics of online discussion Freedman noted, I have found my online students’ comments are typically longer and their thoughts are better-developed in asynchronous online discussion forums than are those of my face-to-face students in in-class discussions. Quoting one online instructor, Freedman said the emphasis on participation was the biggest difference between online and what he called “on-ground” courses: “If you don’t participate,” the instructor states, “you almost don’t exist” (1999). This demonstrates the importance of the technology of the online class in almost demanding students be part of the course community in order to succeed, a practice that was demonstrated in the policies (if not the practices) of all five instructors who participated in my research.

In an overview of online learning communities, Caverly and MacDonald (2002) cited numerous advantages of interactive technologies (especially discussion boards) in the online learning environment, including:

- Encouragement of group orientation, mutual support, and positive interpersonal relationships among students
- Fostering community building, community acceptance, and camaraderie

- Providing group cohesiveness, “which moves students from being educational outsiders to insiders as they become part of the academic community” (p. 36)

Keeping in mind some of the benefits just discussed, clearly, at its best, online learning can offer some powerful and practical advantages when it comes to facilitating community. However, the community aspect of online educational experience is not without its pitfalls.

Problems with Community in the Generic Online Classroom

Juxtaposed against the sometimes very optimistic view of the online environment facilitating community is the widespread acknowledgement in online education research that, conversely, the online environment can be a great barrier to those very goals. The editors of *The Online Teaching Guide* noted that the social emphasis of their book is “especially poignant” and refer to a Carnegie Mellon study that found online students can “become lonely and socially withdrawn” (White & Weight, 1999, p. vi). In the first chapter of that work, authors White and Weight spoke of the *deindividuation* that can occur in the online environment because students are anonymous and the electronic classroom is impersonal (p. 5). This criticism is a recurring theme in the negative research about community in the online classroom, citing the social costs of moving education from the traditional, face-to-face classroom. Shlomo Romi (2000), in a discussion of the use of online delivery in non-formal education frameworks, noted, “One of the main goals common to all these programmes is to develop the social abilities, communication skills and interpersonal co-operation among the participants.” Romi went on to point out, “The wide use of distance learning reduces the meaningful interpersonal meeting which creates the open arena for developing these new social skills” (p. 43). This directly contradicts the reports cited in the previous section about the higher quality discussions and interactions among students

in online courses. As Romi pointed out, “Many social value[s] can only exist with actual contact with additional participants of the activity. Education of true values must be taught through personal examples and experience” (p. 43), which he believed could not, or at least generally was not, provided through distance learning.

Hegarty, Bostock, and Collins (2000) also cited problems with the social element of distance learning as being foremost among students’ complaints about online classes. For example, the students they studied emphasized the importance of human support, and they “placed great value on immediate responses to email, on rapid feedback on draft assignments, and on staff availability and accessibility, and regretted occasions when these were not forthcoming” (p. 209). This desire for support and contact is a reflection of the general complaint about the isolated nature of online education. Significantly, problems on the student side of the equation are not limited to the students typically found in our online composition classes: first or second year college writers. McCartan, in a 2000 study of a postgraduate online course, found echoes of the typical complaints even among postgraduate students. The study found that almost half of students surveyed (46%) saw some disadvantages in distance education. Though this excerpt is lengthy, it is worth looking at carefully. McCartan stated:

The teaching issues concerned their distance from university resources, the library and from teaching staff: “being remote and away from department”; “the lack of advice from others and getting hold of books etc”. The disadvantages centred on lack of face-to-face discussion as expressed in “lack of interaction in areas such as group tutorials” and “if you go wrong—it is too late to tell you once you hand work in.”

Other students (36%) referred specifically to the lack of social contact: ‘reduced personal links with other students’ and isolation: “(I am) not in academic environment.

Isolation. Added stress!"; "Prefer more personal contact in educational environment";
'Lack of classroom to bounce ideas"; "E-mail contact does not really replace the
interpersonal communication." (p. 187)

It is significant that even these older students who had previously had great success in their academic work were considerably put off by the problems the online environment raised for them in the more social or community aspects of learning.

A host of criticisms about online learning can be found, but the above comments offer a good overview of those problems generally cited when specifically discussing the community aspect of online education.

Clearly the social element of online education has resulted in a dichotomous view within the literature, and my own research aimed to clarify or at least better inform the ambiguous perceptions we have regarding the efficacy of the online environment in creating community in the writing classroom. As will be seen, that ambiguous view is also to be found when specifically researching *writing* instruction online.

Community Specifically in the Online Writing Class

Again, in their treatise on the training of online writing instructors, Hewett and Ehmann (2004) stated, "The professional literature regarding OWI tends to engage the social-constructivist epistemology as its primary teaching philosophy" (p. 38). Because the social-constructivist paradigm tends to dominate many instructors' approach to teaching writing online, it is important to know how that epistemology manifests itself, at least theoretically, in online writing instruction. These authors went on to elaborate:

Understanding the connections between social constructivism and the use of networked microcomputers . . . is especially pertinent to developing instructor training for OWI.

This importance arises because interaction through text is a core concept underlying both the computer platforms that assist textual talk and software that teaches or addresses writing skills. . . . Usually, CMC employs some sort of file-sharing capacity, as well as a communication method such as electronic mail (e-mail), conference software, or instant messaging (live chat). Teachers and students (as well as businesses) use such electronic communication tools to share, critique, and comment on writing, as well as to generate and discuss ideas in a text-based group or one-to-one setting. (pp. 37-38)

In the typical online classes I observed for this study, the underlying social-constructivist pedagogy strove to at least some degree—and in some cases to a great degree—build a sense of community through electronic conversation and collaboration. Student participation was stressed as necessary for success in the courses, and that participation was measured by a student’s involvement in discussion boards; additional “relationship-building” in some cases was required through collaborative projects, such as real-time virtual meetings, small group work, or electronic peer review. My study sought in part to explore to what degree the classes studied manifested that epistemology which Hewett and Ehmann found so prevalent in the literature (p. 38). What immediately follows is a discussion of the perceived benefits to and problems with the online environment as it applies to writing courses.

Benefits to Community in the Online Writing Class

A number of social benefits in online writing courses have been reported in the literature of the field. The survey of dissertation research into online writing earlier in this chapter touched

on a number of characteristics of social-constructivist focus in the online college writing classroom: concerns with group size and group interaction, collaborative critique, and “verbal bonding” (Berry, 2000, pp. iii-iv); a focus on sense of community and even the metaphor of community itself (Brown, 2003, p. 154); study of the dynamics of social cohesion online and how those dynamics influence students’ writing (Jones, 2004, p. iv); and research into effective practices in electronic peer review (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. iv) as well as the use of discussion boards (Williams, 2006, p. vii). Early research into computer mediated communication reveals the underlying social-constructivist values that have led to such research into online writing. In Hawisher and Selfe’s (1991) CCC article, “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class,” the authors argued that the “enthusiastic discourse” that first accompanied the idea of computers-and-writing “influences our perceptions and use of technology” (p. 57). Quoting Batson (1988), they pointed out the widespread belief that the “creation of a written social context, an online discourse community” makes for “an unusual opportunity to shift away from the traditional writing classroom because they create entirely new pedagogical dynamics” (p. 57).

One source, Kinkead (as cited in Hawisher and Selfe, 1991), stated that she actually got to know her students *better* through networked correspondence than in her traditional classroom (p. 57). In the same article, Hawisher and Selfe quoted Shriner and Rice: “The computer, far from making the class more impersonal, fostered a strikingly close community” (p. 57). Other sources asserted that computer mediated writing can do away with status, power, and prestige; can foster collaboration and problem solving; and can result in the democratization of ideas over personalities (pp. 57-58). These statements reveal both the expectations many writing instructors

might bring to the online environment, along with assumptions many bring about what ought to be happening in their online composition courses.

As noted in Chapter One, much more recently, Rebecca Rickly, in a 2004 article, surveyed the rhetorical landscape of computer mediated communication. She found electronic writing across distance to be seen and generally accepted as a means for fostering cross-cultural communication (p. 37); building electronic discourse communities (p. 39); expanding students' learning opportunities and moving reader-writer relationships with literary texts to the forefront (p. 41); fostering students' voices, encouraging reflective rhetoric, and positively changing group dynamics (pp. 43-44); and disrupting "teacher-centered hegemony" (p. 46). Rickly concluded that by encouraging a variety of perspectives, then providing a non-threatening technological forum for these voices to be heard, the online writing instructor was more likely to encourage thought, reflection, and learning than his or her counterpart in traditional writing course. The result could be greater collaboration and a rhetorically based communal conversation online (p. 48).

In drawing explicit connections between the social-constructivist view of community and the online environment, one pair of researchers studying the transition from teaching composition in a traditional classroom to an online classroom wrote, "Sharing, in peer critiquing, teacher critiquing, authoring, and editing, means the creation of a community of writers/readers/editors/critics. The building of community generally means the creation of stronger, better realized writing" (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, p. 2). After a discussion of the tools typically found in most online courses, the researchers concluded, "With all of the tools available, it is possible to create an on-line writing community in which the teaching/learning community develops and interacts much as that community would function on-site" (p. 24). Looking at the

communities the participating online writing instructors were attempting to create, my own study explored whether the potential to develop online communities that are as interactive as those in face-to-face was being realized, and, whereas studies like that just discussed explored that issue from the instructors' perspective, my own research builds on that view by also including students' experiences and opinions.

Problems with Community in the Online Writing Class

Whether or not the positive community potential of the online writing class is reached or not is another matter. Understanding the basis of community in the online writing course—its philosophical genesis and its successes and ideal goals—is important, but, as was seen in the review of community in the generic online learning environment, realizing those ideals is sometimes difficult, and sometimes the realities encountered seem almost the opposite of what theory suggests should happen in the online writing classroom.

In “Teaching Composition Online: The Quest for Classroom Community,” Letizia Guglielmo (2005/2006) noted, “One of the most significant considerations in online education is that students miss out on important human contact that normally takes place in traditional classrooms” (p. 104). She cited the widespread feeling among experienced online writing instructors that “feeling connected” helps students learn more, yet in her own teaching she saw the difficulties in creating that sense of connection: “What I had not expected when designing the course was the lack of participation in collaborative activities even among those students that had proven themselves ‘A writers’ or ‘good students’” (p. 105). This is partly due to the fact that in online writing courses students do not build what Guglielmo called the “spontaneous community” that occurs in traditional classes, where, simply due to students’ actual physical

presence there is “the prior existence of community” (p. 105); however, that sense of community must, if possible, be deliberately and somewhat artificially created in the online course.

In addition to feelings of isolation and lack of student interaction or participation, technology issues can also thwart the formation of community, as students become frustrated either by problems with hardware or software, or simply through their own lack of familiarity or skill with the online environment (Coffield, Essid, Lasarenko, Record, Selfe, & Stilley, 2000, p. 294). What interaction does take place between students can easily go awry in the online writing classroom, in the forms of students misunderstanding or even striking out at each other verbally (Cogdill, 2000, p. 81).

The direct effects of these various problems with online community on students’ writing are difficult to determine, although it is probably safe to assume that some of the same problems seen in the writing of students in face-to-face classes, when those students are uninspired by and disengaged from the class, show up in the writing of online students when those students lack a sense of community connection with the course (as was borne out by my own study): flat, uninspired, “surface” writing that aims just to reach minimal requirements; writing that shows little sense of audience, that clearly has not benefited from the feedback and different perspectives other invested readers could have provided; and ideas that are not shaped and refined by engagement with other views and voices. In exploring instructors’ and students’ views about how the online community affects students’ writing, my study directly addressed this area of difficulty in characterizing online writing courses.

Summary of Community in the Online Writing Class

This survey of the landscape of community in online writing courses has exposed the social-constructivist roots of much of contemporary composition pedagogy, explored the potential facilitation and hindrance of community in the online education environment, and shown how community—issues of communication, participation, interaction, and connection—specifically manifest themselves, both positively and negatively, in online writing courses.

Situated within this body of lore and research, my own study sought to add details to the discipline's developing picture of community in online writing by giving voice to the primary participants in the phenomenon of online composition: instructors and students. The ambiguous and sometimes contradictory findings in the research of this still-emerging field show a need for research like mine, which speaks directly to the driving factors of the online writing and learning experience: those who design and deliver online composition instruction and those who must experience that instruction and negotiate the virtual academic writing milieu instructors and students come together to create. In addition to the descriptive element of my study, what also emerged were ideas about how online writing instruction and learning might be improved, a mission that all the research discussed so far had either explicitly or implicitly as one of its goals.

Instructors' and Students' Perspectives On and Experiences With Community in Online Composition

Regarding instructors' perspectives on community in online writing courses, as has been seen throughout this chapter the social-constructivist epistemology is widespread (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, p. 41), often the primary underlying philosophy driving instructors' approaches to teaching writing online. This means many such instructors believe that the social influences

on students' writing are of paramount importance, and therefore online courses must be designed and taught in such a way that communication and interaction among students are important features in the courses. Guglielmo (2005/2006) stated,

Creating intentional and significant interactions among students through collaborative activities and group work becomes essential to connect students to the course and “to provide students with a real-world opportunity to examine and participate in a professional discourse community.” (quoting Knowlton, p. 104)

Doing this means that interactive activities like sharing writing, discussion, and group work result in student writing that is “stronger, better realized” (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, p. 2), and there is a common assumption that, “Based on reflection, critical thinking, and the recursive nature of writing, techniques available in Web-based classes can more tightly link teaching and learning” (p. 3).

In short, many online writing instructors believe both in the importance of community to students' writing and the ability—or at least potential—of the online environment, with its various interactive tools, to facilitate that sense of community, yielding positive effects on students' writing. This perspective is often held in spite of the acknowledged difficulties the online classroom sometimes raises in achieving the goals of social-constructivist writing pedagogy.

Even assuming a social-constructivist bent on the part of instructors, many instructors who move from face-to-face writing courses to online writing courses receive little or no training when moving their classes online (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, pp. xii-xiii), which was exactly the case with the instructors who participated in my study. In fact, it is common for teachers to take existing traditional courses and simply do their best to replicate those courses online; in *Writing*

Across Distances & Disciplines, Neff and Whithaus (2008) suggested more instructors making the switch from traditional to online writing instruction need to re-examine their teaching habits and determine what needs to be modified for their online courses (p. 59), noting especially, “Collaborative pedagogy serves as a[n] . . . example of the need for planning and compromise in distributed learning” (p. 62). Guglielmo (2005/2006) concurred, noting that in the attempt to “mirror the kind of community that develops in traditional classes” the online class is less successful and that we must “rethink our methods for building community in online or virtual classroom[s]” (p. 105).

If faculty are untrained or do not approach their transition from the traditional to the online writing classroom in a critical and reflective manner, the technology of the new environment, rather than the instructor’s pedagogical philosophy and goals, can dictate the shape of the course (Neff & Whithaus, 2008, p. 70) and the students’ writing experiences within that course. Harrington, Rickly, & Day (2000) noted “investments in technology are worthless without accompanying investments in teachers. New technology will go to waste unless teachers are trained to use it in educationally sound ways and are given opportunities to develop their theories as technologies develop” (p. 5). No matter what theoretical perspectives instructors bring to online writing courses, if instructors do not have the knowledge to create classes that reflect their pedagogies, or if the online environment does not offer the tools to support the pedagogy, problems are going to occur, and a primary aim of my study was to determine to what degree the online environment and its available technologies support social-constructivist goals.

In summary, previous research has shown online writing instructors who approach their courses from the social-constructivist perspective have found mixed results when it comes to successfully achieving their pedagogical goals. The instructors who agreed to participate in my

research were glad to have the chance to share their ideas about the benefits and drawbacks of the online environment regarding writing instruction, and giving voice to such teachers who are in the trenches, so to speak, of online writing was an important contribution of my study.

If writing teachers have mixed reactions to the online environment, it is no surprise, then, that students in online writing courses have also had both positive and negative experiences regarding the community aspects of their courses.

To begin, it is necessary to note that the online environment alone does not necessarily change students' perspectives on or experiences with community in writing. In a 2001 CCCC paper, Napierkowski (2001) compared writing students in a face-to-face course to those in an online course taught by the same instructor and found, "A collaborative learning survey that measured students' post-treatment attitudes revealed no significant differences between groups in regard to sense of belonging to a discourse community" (p. 1). Neff and Whithaus (2008) similarly stated, "The impact of distance delivery systems on student writing is unclear" and many studies of student learning [in multiple disciplines] that compared outcomes in traditional courses to those in online courses suggested no significant differences, "yet we do not know how or why that is the case" (p. 53). This suggests the need for further research into students' perspectives on and experiences with online writing. One important thing to note about my own study is that, while social-constructivist values are at least in part assumed on the part of the instructors, whether or not students experience or even value community in the online writing classroom was a fundamental question to ask of them and one that I addressed.

As the review of recent dissertations in this area at the beginning of the chapter suggests, writing students clearly do have both positive and negative experiences with the interactive aspects of online courses (Berry, 2000, pp. iii-iv); for some, the emphasis on the community

metaphor may actually hinder a sense of connection (Brown, 2003, p. 154), and the online environment can hinder social cohesion and collaboration (Jones, 2004, p. iv), while for others that same environment resulted in more self-directed and student-centered learning and writing (Williams, 2006, p.149).

Some indicators of negative student perceptions and experiences with online writing courses include high rates of student attrition (Ross, Morrison, Smith, & Cleveland, as cited in Wheeler, 2006, p. 175); a voiced sense of isolation (Young, Johnson, & Hess, 2006, pp. 1-3); frustration with various aspects of the courses, such as waiting for responses from others and “practices of normalization, a flattening of perspectives and approach” in discussions and interactions (Anderson, 2006, p. 117); trivialized writing and no sense of affiliation among classmates (Fleckenstein, 2005, p. 150); and feeling there is a general lack of substantive communication (Hara & Kling, 2005, p. 559) in these courses; additionally, students—when consulted—have stated there is room for improvement in the technology used in online writing classes, the actual quality of instruction in such classes, and in the use of specifically community-oriented tools like electronic peer review (Duncan, 2005, pp. 80-81) (this suggests further research is needed into how instructors are successfully employing community-building practices in online writing courses). Experienced online writing instructors will be familiar with the above complaints, as well as with other problems from the students’ side of the interface.

At the same time, though, many times students in online writing courses have in fact experienced the benefits expected by those teachers who have tried to use the virtual classroom to facilitate social-constructivist pedagogical values. Early on in this field of study, Hawisher and Selfe (1991) reviewed the literature of network-facilitated writing instruction and found students reporting significant benefits over traditional writing courses: for example, more course-

time spent actually writing and more peer-teaching and sharing of work among students (p. 59). Online writing students have also reported a sense of belonging to a discourse community that is at least as strong as that felt by students in traditional classes, as well as having a sense of audience that is actually more well-developed than that of their face-to-face class counterparts (Napierkowski, 2001, p. 1). Students have also reported better interpersonal relationships, with both other students and instructors, in online writing courses (Blair & Hoy, 2006, p. 40), and some more reserved students believed the online environment allowed them better opportunities to participate in discussion (p. 41). Additionally, writing students have stated that being in an online class had a positive effect on their satisfaction with the course, their satisfaction with the quality of their writing instruction, and on the ease of participation in the course (Finlay, Desmet, & Evans, 2004, pp. 163-164).

Anecdotally, I and many of my colleagues have had numerous students tell us their online writing courses were the best writing experiences they had ever had, due to the quality of instruction, the mode of delivery, and/or the experiences they had interacting with classmates and the instructor. Similarly, in a study that focused in part on the effects of asynchronous discussion in online classes on learning community and student writing skills, Vonderwell, Liang, and Alderman (2007) found students valued such interactions through the discussion board “as an essential component of their online learning” (p. 309).

Another area of student perspective and experience that was ripe for inquiry in my study was that of the communities and technologies students might be accessing on their own which influenced their experiences in the online writing class. For example, as many students now come to such classes with extensive online social networking backgrounds, those with experiences with, say, blogs, bring a different perspective to the virtual classroom (Smith, 2008,

p. 35). Cheryl Smith (2008) proposed that some students' familiarity with blogging makes them more "likely to have had their minds and writing styles impacted by their exposure to technology" (p. 36), noting particularly the influence of community on their writing in that as they "rethink and revise their initial ideas, working off one another's comments, they develop more authority as critics with valued opinions and voice" (p. 35). This is precisely the kind of electronic community influence on student writing my research sought to explore and document, and part of what I asked students about had to do with community practices related to their writing which were outside of the writing course itself.

On a last note regarding research into student and instructor perspectives, one other source was influential in my own study. Although, Richard Halsey's 2007 dissertation, "Through Students' and Teachers' Eyes: What Writing Teachers Need to Know" did not deal with online writing instruction at all, one element of his research bears directly on my own. As I discuss in the following chapter on methodology, I borrowed Halsey's idea of pairing instructors and students in case studies of particular writing courses. A basic tenet of my study was that the views of instructors and students were equally important in learning about my topic, and by creating pairs of instructors and students I sought to get two different perspectives on a common phenomenon: the course that each instructor and student shared together. This was important because it showed the intended experience of community in online writing (from the point of view of the instructor and his or her training, beliefs, policies, and practices) juxtaposed with the actual experience itself, as manifested through the student's encounter with and perspective on the actual realities of community in the course. As Halsey stated, there is value in "understanding the differences between teachers' intentions and students' experiences" (p. 177).

In conclusion, the literature of the field has shown clearly that both instructors and students have had a variety of perspectives, understandings, and experiences regarding community in online writing courses. Because of these widely varying experiences, further study is important in making sense of the exact beliefs and goals instructors bring to the community aspects of their online writing classes, and, perhaps even more importantly, in investigating students' understanding of and experiences with those aspects, all with an eye toward learning how community online is influencing students' writing in real-world college classes.

Ideal (Online) Writing Courses:

Social-Constructivist Goals

Through much thinking about theory, and through research, a fairly clear picture emerged of what the ideal social-constructivist writing course, whether traditional or online, should look like, the goals it should attempt to achieve in the area of community, and how this focus should help students improve their writing, and this understanding became the lens through which I viewed the courses I studied, the framework within which I understood them.

First and foremost, online writing courses based in social-constructivist pedagogy should provide—even require—extensive interaction among course participants. The written social context of the course should be used to foster an online discourse community, and the interactive technology of this discourse community should be used to shift focus away from the problematic teacher-centered character of some traditional face-to-face classes (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991, p. 57). Consistent and substantive student participation should be the hallmark of any social-constructivist writing course.

In online courses, communication tools like email, discussion boards, and live chat should be used extensively to facilitate conversation among participants, actually increasing the feeling of human interaction over that of a traditional course (Kemp, 1998, p. 145). File-sharing and course tools should be used to facilitate collaborative activities like peer review and group work (Krause, 2000, p. 116). In general, the online environment should be used to help students share ideas and their writing more with each other and with the instructor, and the results of this greater interaction and sharing of work should result in stronger student writing (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, pp. 2-3).

Instructors in online writing courses should be “live” and “real” presences or personalities within the courses, and they should communicate with students via the text-based course tools frequently and in detail, on what Barker and Kemp (1990) called “a more transactional level equal to that of any other person” (p. 16). Teachers’ policies and practices should be student-centered and student-writing-centered and should require students’ participation and interaction through both communication and collaborative activities; policies and practices should also be designed to make such participation and interaction socially and academically meaningful and reasonably easy to achieve from a technological perspective (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 36).

In both traditional and online courses, all of these community concerns should, ideally, result in better student writing, writing that is more sophisticated and polished, more substantive, critical, and audience-aware. Instructors, students, and courses accomplishing these goals can be said to be successful from a social-constructivist point of view. While my own examination of the courses I studied was designed to be primarily descriptive, and only secondarily evaluative, such an examination was important because it serves to inform everyone involved in online

writing—administrators, instructors, and students—how we can best create online writing experiences that help students to have success in their academic writing. My study was especially valuable because it brought the disparate views of both instructor and student to bear on the class they had in common, hopefully yielding a more accurate view of how “success” can be obtained in online writing courses.

Summary: Research as It Relates to the Value of This Study

Researchers agree that online writing courses are a phenomenon that is here to stay in higher education (cf. Rickly, 2004; Blakelock & Smith, 2006; Olsen, Carlson, Carnevale, & Foster, 2007), and it will thus be an ongoing concern in the discipline of composition. This review of literature relating to community in online writing courses has shown that social-constructivist pedagogy is a widespread influence in the teaching of college writing online (Napierkowski, 2001, p. 4; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, p. 41; Ouzts, 2006, p. 286), and that this pedagogy has had both successes and failures in its application in the online medium. Furthermore, calls for further research in this area are numerous (e.g. Berry, 2000, p. 203; Jones, 2004, pp. 195-96; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, pp. 157-58; Fitzpatrick, 2006, pp. 122-23; Williams, 2006, p. vii), and there is a need for a better understanding of both instructors’ and students’ perspectives regarding community in their online writing classes (Brown, 2003, p. 156), especially the latter, because in much of our research into online writing “the dialogue does not substantially incorporate the voices and perspectives of the students” (Kirtley, 2005, pp. 209-210). Fundamental questions remain to be explored: How do communities form and perform online (Jones, 2004, p. 196)? What is the relationship between interaction online and students’ performance in their writing (Williams, 2004, p. 152)? What types of learners, if any, are best

served online? Who are the committed online instructors and what are their best practices? Even, should we be teaching online (Berry, 2000, p. 203)? While we may feel we have a relatively clear understanding of what we should be trying to accomplish in this area, there is less understanding of the actual state of affairs in college writing courses online.

No other study I am familiar with has investigated community and its influences on student-writing through case studies of instructor/student pairs in multiple online writing courses, seeking to learn from the teachers their underlying beliefs, their training, and their practices regarding community in their online courses; seeking to learn from students their understanding of community and their experiences with it in their online writing classes; and studying how the actual manifestations of community in the classes studied influenced the students' writing. My study sought to fill an important gap in the literature and make a valuable contribution to the emerging picture of what will continue to be a significant topic in our discipline: how to best teach writing in the online environment. The chapter that follows discusses in detail the means by which I went about exploring this issue.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Study Design Overview

This study was a cross-case comparison of five case studies, each made up of a pair of participants: an instructor and a student from the same online composition course. Miles and Huberman (2002) described the cross-case comparison as a means of “looking at the data in many divergent ways” by looking at multiple case studies (focusing on the same phenomenon) so that the researcher gathers inter-group data as well as within-group data (p. 18). They describe the value of the cross-case comparison as a good tool to counteract the problem of coming to conclusions based on limited data when within-case (only) data is used (p.18) and state the researcher using cross-case methods will “improve the likelihood of accurate and reliable theory, that is, a theory with a close fit with the data” (p. 19). I studied one course each from five instructors who taught the bulk of the online writing courses offered at the study site during a typical eight-week summer session. Each course was a three-credit section of English 111 or English 112, the first- and second-semester Composition courses offered by the College. I chose the cross-case comparison as the best vehicle to present a picture of the current state of community in online writing courses at a typical community college. Looking at several courses—and a majority of the online writing instructors, at that particular time, at the institution studied—ensured a bigger overview and thus a more reliable picture of online community in writing than studying just one course in minute detail. Using extensive personal interviews (rather than, for example, surveys) and a case study approach allowed me to get a more detailed and in-depth understanding of participants’ beliefs and experiences than would have been

gathered through methods targeting a larger number of participants but allowing for less interaction with each individual participant.

While conducting the research, I employed interactive data analysis, which I discuss in more detail later, alert for the emerging themes in the data that were relevant to understanding online community and writing, themes that were pertinent to improving instruction and that were both interesting to readers and unique enough to be worthy of exploration and discussion.

Research Questions

As stated in Chapter One, this exploratory, qualitative study sought to answer these research questions, which were loosely formed prior to the study, while I did background reading for the study, and which were refined during the pre-study:

1. What are instructors' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
2. What are students' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
3. Based on those perceptions and experiences, along with observations of the community aspects of the courses studied, what conclusions can be drawn about community in online writing courses?

The specific means of gathering data for each issue are covered in the table below.

Table 1: *Research Aims and Means*

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Means of Gathering Information</u>
Instructors' perceptions of community and experiences with community	Interviews and observation of policies and online instruction
Students' perceptions of community and experiences with community	Interviews and observation of online classes and students participation and work
Conclusions about community in online writing courses	Analyses of each paired case study: comparison of paired participants' comments; analyses of each course and its policies and practices; analysis of students' writing

Study Site

As discussed in Chapter One, the institution I chose for the study was located in Virginia and was typical of the more progressive Virginia Community College System schools in its commitment to online education: it was invested in offering numerous sections of high-quality online courses, in a variety of disciplines, to its students. At the time of the study, I had been employed full-time at the institution for three years, and my familiarity with the English faculty, student body, administration, online course delivery platform, and policies for online courses at this school all allowed me both easy access to the courses I studied and an insider's insight into the teaching environment in which those courses existed.

Pre-study Preparation

In order to prepare for my study, during the summer prior to that during which the study took place I contacted five instructors and asked for permission to access one of their online courses, and all agreed (to avoid later confusion: this group of five was not the same group of

five who eventually took part in the study). I decided to look over the online materials and components for these courses before doing the study so that I might familiarize myself with some of the instructors' policies and practices regarding community in the online classroom, so that I could decide whether or not to include certain instructors, and so that I could shape the focus and content of my study based on the characteristics of the classes available for the study as well as on what data was available in those classes.

From my pre-study investigation of the five classes, I determined that all five of those instructors studied were concerned with community in their online courses, and all included some emphasis on participation, interaction, and communication in their courses, in both their policies and practices. For example, all five instructors in the pre-study included students' participation as part of the course grading policies (as well as emphasizing to students in their syllabi the importance of active participation in the courses), and all instructors required student-interaction at least on discussion boards and sometimes in actual collaborative projects. Additionally, I saw that it was possible to track students' involvement in the community aspects of the courses through their participation practices and their academic work in those aspects of the course that required them to interact with their peers. The main things I learned from the initial look at the pre-study classes included:

- Instructors appeared concerned with community in the online writing classroom
- Classes required communication, interaction, and participation from students
- In each class significant numbers of students were engaged in activities that were manifestly concerned with "community"

When I did the actual study, the following summer, only two of the original five instructors were available to participate; this was due to the fact that two instructors studied previously had left

the school, and one could not participate in the actual study because of health issues during the time of the study. However, initial conversations with the three new instructors assured me that their courses, too, maintained a similar focus on community when compared to those courses I had looked at in the pre-study, and I did not feel the change in instructors significantly changed the nature of the study or the data gathered.

The choice to study five classes came about through conversations with my advisor. We felt five courses and ten participants would yield enough data to be significant but manageable, would give an accurate portrayal of the state of online writing instruction at the study site, and would ensure the feasible continuation of the project in the face of some participants being unable or unwilling to complete the study. In the end, this choice proved a good one: I had only one participant (a student) drop out, and I had approximately twenty-four hours of interview materials, a vast amount of discussion board material, a limited but significant amount of student writing, and all course materials (syllabi, assignment sheets, etc.) from each of the five courses.

Participants

I selected the five instructors for the study based on the fact that they taught a large portion of the online writing courses offered at the school studied, and they taught the vast majority of those classes during the summer session in which the study took place. Since my goal was to develop a picture of the state of community in online writing courses at this institution, it made sense that I would look at those instructors most directly and dramatically influencing that phenomenon at the school. Additionally, I knew through pre-study investigation or conversations that all instructors were willing to participate in the study and that all taught courses in which the subject of the study (“community”) was in fact obviously present to one

degree or another in the teachers' stated goals for the courses. It was somewhat difficult to categorize the selection of instructor-participants according to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen's (1993) sampling categories (p. 83). While I did select the majority of willing instructors available during the time of the study, this was not, strictly speaking, convenience sampling, since my initial contacts with the instructors determined they all, to some degree, practiced social constructivist pedagogy, which would be criterion sampling. A brief introduction to the five instructors, listed alphabetically, is appropriate here.

"Kardish" was a full-time member of the English Department at the study site, someone I would categorize as a senior member, and the only instructor participant whom I knew well before the study. He was also one of the two participating instructors whose online course I had had the opportunity to observe prior to the study, and, based on what I had seen, he was the instructor I was most interested in including. Kardish had a terminal degree, with extensive training in the teaching of writing, and had been in the department for seventeen years, teaching developmental writing, composition, technical writing, and literature. Prior to joining the College he had taught writing as a graduate student or adjunct for seven years at three other universities. He had begun teaching writing online five or six years before the study, and he had previously taught or currently was teaching online sections of technical writing, the first semester of composition, and a literature course. He currently taught his English 111 composition course exclusively online (that is, he had no face to face sections of that course). Kardish was one of two real veteran teachers of online writing, and the experience and analysis he brought to the discussion of community in online writing proved to be invaluable.

"Liz" was a part-time adjunct instructor, relatively new to teaching, to the College, and to online instruction. She had just finished her Master's degree in Composition and Rhetoric the

year prior to the study but had been teaching for two years. Within that short amount of time, however, she had taught nearly the entire range of writing courses at the institution studied, excluding technical writing. She had taught both first and second semester composition; she had taught the second semester of developmental writing; and she was preparing to teach for the first time the first semester section of developmental writing. The majority of her teaching experience had been in the traditional classroom, but she had taught two writing courses online during the semester prior to the study. Those two sections, as well as the course she was currently teaching, were all English 112 courses, the second semester of composition. With that first experience with online writing instruction still very fresh, Liz was making adjustments to her online teaching in the summer session during which the study took place, her second foray into the online classroom. It was particularly interesting to meet with her at that time, because she was actively considering the role of community in her online courses and experimenting with ideas and practices that determined that role.

“Michael” was another part-time adjunct instructor who, like Liz, was in his second year of teaching. He had completed his Master’s in Literature, and the year before the study he had taught Composition—primarily Comp 1—at a college in another state; during that time he received additional instruction and mentoring in teaching writing. After moving to the area where the study was conducted, Michael began teaching for the College and another local community college, teaching Comp 1 and 2 at each institution, and also teaching the first semester of developmental writing at the study site. The course of Michael’s that I observed was his first online course, so, as with Liz, I was meeting him at a time when he was making decisions about how to teach online, and many of those decisions were about the community of his online course. Although he had not taught online previously, Michael was perhaps the most

technologically knowledgeable instructor I observed. His traditional courses were already what he described as “sort of self-induced hybrids—they’re not official hybrid courses, but I tend to integrate a lot of online stuff into my composition class.” Michael’s extensive use of online technology in his teaching and personal life had great influence on his attempts to create community in his online writing course.

“Paul,” although an adjunct instructor at the study site, was a full-time instructor at another local college and was, like Kardish, someone I categorized as a veteran writing instructor. He had received his MA in Literature eleven years previously and had since gotten a PhD in Business. He had been teaching writing courses at the study site and another area community college (not the institution where he taught full-time) since 1998. He taught Comp 1, Comp 2, various Lit courses, and Technical Writing; in fact he had been the primary tech writing instructor at the study site for seven years. He began teaching writing online in 2003, and he was the first instructor to offer tech writing online at the College. His recent and current online teaching schedule at the study site included tech writing and Comp 2, and he also included Comp 1 in his online repertoire at the other area community college. In addition to being a seasoned online instructor, Paul brought extensive experience as an online student to his online teaching, having completed his doctorate either largely or exclusively through online coursework.

“Stan,” the final instructor, was a part-time adjunct who had only recently begun teaching at the College but who brought considerable and varied teaching experience to the study. Stan was in the unique situation of having taught writing for years and having taught other subjects online for years but only now bringing the two experiences together. Stan had a Master’s degree with a graduate background primarily in literature. The Comp 2 course he was teaching during the summer session while I was doing my study was his first online writing course. He had

begun teaching, at the high school level, ten years before and had taught high school from 1999 through 2002. After that, Stan began teaching logistics for the U. S. Army, the full-time position he held when we met at the beginning of the study. His teaching of logistics with the military was all done online, so he had considerable experience with online instruction. He had recently begun teaching English again at the study site, teaching both Comp 1 and Comp 2. As mentioned, his English 112 course that summer was his first writing course online, although he was already scheduled to teach future online sections of comp in the next upcoming semester. Like Michael, Stan was very interested in technology and new media and brought extensive knowledge of and experience with technology—both professionally and personally—to the teaching of his first online writing course.

To find student participants, during my second interviews with the instructors I solicited from each the names of several students whom the respective instructor had identified as at that point (about the mid-point of the semester) having been successful in his or her course. These students had demonstrated success both in participation in the community of the course and in their written work and so were chosen through intensity sampling (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 83). I contacted these students via email, and from each group of several students I found one from each course who was willing to be interviewed and to allow me access to his or her work that had been or would be completed for the course; the instructors did not know which students chose to participate. A brief introduction to each student follows, the order corresponding the instructors with whom the students shared their respective classes.

“Ashton” was a self-described stay-at-home mom who had graduated from high school eleven years previously. As such, she definitely considered herself a non-traditional student. She was also a part-time student and a Nursing major. With the exception of a Psychology course,

she had done all of her coursework so far online, and those courses included a study skills course, a Math course, a Health course, a Sociology course, and the English 111 course she was currently taking. She had had no other college writing course than the first semester composition course during which she and I met.

“Bonnie” was a thirty-one year old part time, non-traditional student majoring in Business and Marketing and currently working as a legal secretary. She had completed course work in face-to-face classes in Psychology, Speech, Math, and the first semester of English Composition, which she completed at an institution other than the study site. During the time of the study, Bonnie was taking English 112 and a History class online, her first experience with online courses.

“Alexander” was another non-traditional student, having graduated from high school in 2000; at the time of the study he was not working. He was an Information Systems major nearing sophomore standing, with twenty-six credit hours prior to taking the current English 111 course. His previous coursework had included courses in Accounting, Biology, Pre-Calculus, Spanish, and US History. The first semester composition course he was taking was his only online course experience. Some time before his enrollment at the institution studied he had been in a composition course for six weeks at a large local university but had dropped out.

“Kathleen” was a full time student, the only traditionally aged student in the group, and she was working as a summer camp counselor. Her completed course work so far included traditional sections of Biology, History, Math, and a study skills course; her previous college writing instruction was also in face-to-face classes and consisted of English 3 (a developmental writing course), English 6 (developmental reading), and English 111. She had previous online

experience in classes in Art and Health, and she had taken a computer class taught as a hybrid course (half online and half face-to-face). She was taking English 112 online.

“Natalia” represented something of an anomaly in the study: she already had a Master’s degree in Public Health from an institution in another state. But, for reasons I was never able to determine, she was taking (whether voluntarily or under compulsion) many general education courses over as she worked on her Nursing degree. She was a part time, non-traditional student who was employed in the healthcare field. As can be imagined, given her previous degree, she had taken a whole range of classes before and had even successfully written a Master’s thesis in the field of Public Health. In discussing the degree she was currently working on, however, Natalia listed only these recent courses: Microbiology (in a face to face class) and English 111 and Anatomy & Physiology (both online). She was currently taking English 112 online. Very interestingly, Natalia had actually taken English 111 online with me two years prior to the time of the study. We had never met in person, and I frankly did not remember her name as a previous student when her English 112 instructor gave me his list of successful students whom I might consider for the study. Natalia remembered me, however, and when the fact that we had shared a class together came out during our interview I was both stunned and, admittedly, embarrassed at not remembering her.

The five teacher-student case studies were paired as follows:

Table 2: *The Paired Cases*

	Teacher	Student	Course
Pair One	“Kardish”	“Ashton”	English 111 (College Composition 1)
Pair Two	“Liz”	“Bonnie” (*this student did only the first interview and did not complete the study)	English 112 (College Composition 2)
Pair Three	“Michael”	“Alexander”	English 111 (College Composition 1)
Pair Four	“Paul”	“Kathleen”	English 112 (College Composition 2)
Pair Five	“Stan”	“Natalia”	English 112 (College Composition 2)

It is necessary to say a word here about the purposive sampling of successful students for participation in the study. A good respondent or informant is “one who understands the culture but is also able to reflect on it and explain to the researcher what is going on” (Merriam, as cited in Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 91), and participants are best “determined on the basis of what the researcher desires to know and from whose perspective that information is desired” (p. 91). In my view, successful students were more apt to actually finish the courses, thereby being more able to reflect upon and discuss the entire course-long experience. I believed students who had more successfully (and thus more fully) participated in the community aspects of the class were likely to have more to communicate about those aspects, conceptually, as well as more examples to draw on practically. Also, my experience had taught me that students who experienced success in their writing were generally able to reflect on that writing in more sophisticated and insightful ways than less successful writers, were better able to think critically about what has influenced their writing in both process and product, and such students also tended to be more capable of identifying strengths and weaknesses in writing instruction and

course policies and practices. Finally, since one of this study's purposes was to improve community in the online writing course, I thought it would be more helpful to look at those student attitudes and student-behaviors that led to successful community participation and writing, rather than at examples of limited experience or failure in both areas. Although this in fact did turn out to be the case, deliberately picking students who were successful writers also turned out to be somewhat problematic when it came to measuring the influence of the course community on a student's writing, an unforeseen consequence that affected the study in a major way, as will be discussed in detail in the following two chapters.

Protecting and Compensating Participants

All participants from both groups "officially" participated anonymously and were represented by pseudonyms of their own choosing; some instructors knew one or more of the others who were participating. The instructors and students received small gift certificates (\$50 each) after their interviews, although several instructors declined that compensation.

The Paired Case Study Approach

I believed in-depth personal interviews and the case study approach were the best method for understanding instructors' and students' beliefs, practices, and experiences with community in online writing instruction at a typical community college. Specifically, by pairing instructors and students from five courses at a representative school I believed I captured a more detailed and accurate representation of the subject. In their discussion of the case study in the methodology of naturalistic inquiry, Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) state the following:

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have recognized the case study as the vehicle of choice for reporting the results of the naturalistic study. According to Borg and Gall (1983) the case study report involves an investigator who makes a detailed examination of a single subject, group, or phenomenon

[T]he principal task of the researcher is to communicate a setting with its complex interrelationships and multiple realities to the intended audience in a way that enables and requires that audiences interact cognitively and emotionally with the setting. (p. 163)

In the Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, and Lee (2007) study of an online, graduate-level MBA course, I found a good model for using the case study method in online learning research. The authors articulated the perspective I sought to bring to my own study and methodology:

The case study approach is often considered appropriate for exploratory research that examines the perceptions of participants in an online program. Such an approach can also be beneficial in providing better understanding of a complex system like the one studied here. (p. 13)

Each of the five paired cases combined with the others to present the larger picture of community in online writing instruction at the study site. By using the data gathered through the examination of each of the five courses' policies and practices, along with the data gathered from course documents, student writing, and each of the five pairs of instructor/student interviews, I was able to represent the beliefs, practices, and experiences regarding community of the primary stakeholders in online composition at a typical community college and to build on my own and the reader's tacit knowledge of the subject by providing a vicarious experience of community in these courses through both instructors' and students' eyes. In addition to being descriptive, this approach also provided a platform for evaluating some aspects of community in online

composition courses and suggested how the community aspect of students' experiences in such courses might be improved. Among the purposes Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) list for case studies, the purposes relevant to this particular study included recording history, describing the object of study, facilitating change, and revising issues for future consideration; and the levels of data analysis include factual, interpretive, and evaluative analyses (p. 164).

Data Gathering: Overview

Richard Halsey (2007), in "Through Students' and Teachers' Eyes: What Writing Teachers Need to Know," successfully used instructor/student pair case studies and conversational interviews to study and present best teaching practices in composition. I used similar methodology and presentation to investigate online community in composition. In my own study, the pairing of participants aimed to show each course from diverse perspectives and specifically to allow the reader to see intent (from the instructor's point of view) and manifestation (from the student's experience) regarding the formation and effect of "community" in the virtual writing classroom. The naturalistic interview method which I used with each pair can be described as "a conversation with a purpose," that purpose being to "help the researcher to understand and put into a larger context the *interpersonal, social, and cultural aspects of the environment*" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 85, emphasis added), a tool that seemed to me the best choice to study "community" (which consists of those very elements—interpersonal, social, and cultural aspects of the courses) in online writing instruction and learning.

Instructor Interviews

Interviews formed the bulk of the data I gathered, and I interviewed each of the five participating instructors three times and each participating student twice, for an estimated total of twenty-five hours of interview materials. Interviews were recorded, coded, transcribed and analyzed by me, and I looked for important emergent themes in that interview data, finally settling on the five key conclusions presented in the final chapter. Specific interview questions can be found in Appendix.

The first interviews with the instructors took place just prior to or at the beginning of the courses. The purpose of the initial interview was to determine each instructor's experiences, beliefs, and practices regarding community in the online writing classroom. At that stage I was trying to learn each instructor's ideas about community in writing, how those ideas had formed, what he or she did to facilitate and measure community, and what he or she believed about the nature of community specifically in the online writing classroom and how issues of community influenced students' writing. I also asked the instructors to pay particular attention, over the course of the summer session, to the ideas we discussed in this interview, so that we could reflect back on that discussion when we met again later. In this interview, I also asked instructors to make note of any issues related to community that came up during the first part of the session, as well as to watch for students who they felt were doing particularly well in the course, in both the writing for the course and in the areas of communication, interaction, and participation.

The second round of instructor interviews took place at the midpoint of the semester. At that time, we revisited issues of community and its influence on students' writing, with the participating instructors having a heightened awareness of these phenomena, due to our earlier conversations. I asked instructors if there were any aspects of community or related issues that

they believed I should be looking at but that had not yet been discussed. We discussed what made a “successful” student in online writing, what criteria each instructor was using to determine whether or not a given student was successful, and I also asked each instructor to suggest three to five students who he or she felt had so far been a successful student as far as the students’ writing and participation were concerned.

The final interviews with instructors took place at the end of the courses or just after the courses had wrapped up. At that time, we revisited some of the questions discussed in the first interview, and I asked the instructors to reflect on and discuss the specific community of the individual class just studied. I also gave the instructors a chance to contextualize their course and what went on in it and to add any information they felt was relevant in order for the study to most accurately represent their participation in the project. Finally, I asked instructors what, if anything, they thought might be changed regarding community in their online writing courses to better facilitate their teaching goals and values, as well as what advice they might have for other instructors of online writing courses.

Student Interviews

Unlike the first interviews with the instructors, the first interviews with students took place not at the beginning of the semester but more toward the middle of the courses. This delay was for the purpose of identifying and selecting from a group of students who A) seemed likely to finish their courses, and B) who had been pointed out by their respective instructors as thus far having been successful students, both in the academic requirements of the course (particularly writing) and the “community” aspects of communication, interaction, and participation. The purposes of this first interview with the students were to familiarize them with the concept of

community in the online classroom and in the teaching and learning of writing, to get their initial views about community and that aspect of the courses so far, and to ask them to pay particular attention to community and how they thought it affected their writing in the remainder of the course. Specific questions for students can be found in Appendix.

The second interview with students took place at the end of the course or just after the summer session. This interview covered the students' experiences with community in the online writing class throughout the semester, their reflections on and insights into those experiences, their thoughts on how their writing was influenced through community, their suggestions regarding how the community aspect of such courses might be improved, and anything else they wanted to cover.

Written Artifacts

In addition to interviews, I collected and analyzed logs of discussion boards from all classes, relevant course documents (syllabi, assignment sheets, etc.), and the written work turned in by participating students. Using the "Collect" feature of Blackboard's Discussion Board tool, I was able to capture the entire discussion for every forum for every class and transfer those discussions into Microsoft Word files, which allowed me to analyze the discussion at leisure later; this practice also allowed me to search discussions for participants' names (to ensure I did not miss any of their posts) and to search for key terms, which also helped with coding. Course policies and assignments were simply captured and recorded from the course websites, and student writing was either captured from the course or (in some cases) emailed directly to me by the participating students. All of these documents yielded information about numerous key aspects of community in the courses studied, such as:

- Students' levels of participation in the public aspects of the courses
- Students' communication practices with the instructor and classmates
- Students' writing
- A picture of students' public experiences in the online environment, both generically and specifically involving writing
- Instructors' public engagement in the communities of the courses, both directly and indirectly
- Areas of obvious connection between writing and the online environment, with an emphasis on communication and collaboration
- Pertinent areas of instruction and learning specific to the online writing environment

Data Analysis

Although I assumed emergent design in the study, my initial plan for data analysis was as follows. The interviews with the instructors themselves helped shape my impression of the “community” aspects of each course: instructors' stated beliefs, policies, and practices regarding communication and collaboration within the course. I next began analyzing relevant course documents that I believed informed and corroborated my interviews with the instructors. Once the courses began, I observed the manifestations of community in each course, looking specifically at communication, interaction, and participation, most generally through observation of discussion boards. Once successful students were identified and selected, I began my interviews with them. Additionally, I looked at the written work of participating students, specifically trying to determine how or if it had been influenced by the other community aspects

of the course I could identify. Finally, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed interview materials and written artifacts relevant to community in the online writing course.

Data Reduction

With all of these sources of data I employed what Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) call emergent category designation or the sorting of units of data into categories of ideas (p. 118). Generically I looked for emergent themes regarding community (communication, participation, and interaction) in the online writing course, and specifically I looked for materials that directly addressed the three research questions I was trying to answer (listed at the beginning of this chapter). Although I of course had some preconceived notions about community in this setting, employing emergent category design “allows categories of thought characteristic of a particular setting to emerge intuitively as the researcher’s own background and latent theory interact with these data” (p. 118), and I attempted to allow the interaction with the data itself and my own interpretation to form the construct of the picture of community in these courses. I first sought to put data into categories that were predetermined to answer my research questions, but I also, as best I could, formed categories that were descriptive, rather than prescribed by me, and in this area member-checking proved useful in ensuring I was representing data in a way that was true to participants’ intentions.

I followed the Miles and Huberman (1984) guidelines for coding data: assigning tags or labels to large units of data in order to assign meaning to certain categories of information for the purposes of retrieval and organizing (p. 56). Having all of my data in electronic form was especially helpful, since it allowed me to search for participants’ names, as well as key words or phrases.

As an example of descriptive, emergent themes in composition research, in his dissertation on students' and teachers' perspectives on best practices in the teaching of writing, Halsey (2007) identified numerous markers (emergent themes) as agreed-upon (by students and instructors) as crucial characteristics for successful composition teachers (p. iv). This example was relevant to my own study, because my study similarly yielded results that might have been reasonably predicted, some that came as surprises, and other themes that did not easily fit into major categories or which were necessarily left out due to lack of a significant presence in the data. The cross-case comparison of courses and participants was especially important in this aspect of data collection and reduction, because with too limited a body of data emergent themes could not be relied upon as being necessarily representative of the larger state of community in online writing at the study site.

The major, relevant themes my analysis led me to present are those five issues discussed in my Conclusion:

- The prevalence of social constructivist theory and pedagogy in online writing courses
- The necessity of policy and accountability in successfully building community
- Theoretical versus practical value of community in the online writing course
- The limited role of community when influencing students' writing
- The disparities between instructors' intentions and students' experiences of community

Frankly, I had found that the study of five online courses and ten participants produced such a volume of data that more themes emerged than could be meaningfully or reasonably pursued. Numerous other themes suggested themselves, which I chose not to develop in the presentation, for various reasons: lack of widespread support in the data, obvious or uninteresting aspects of

the study, tangents that stretched the focus of the study too thin, and issues that could not meaningfully be addressed either by the study or by the typical online writing instructor. Two examples follow:

“Student motivation” (touched on as part of the themes discussed in the following chapters) was one coded theme that could arguably have been discussed as its own separate issue, but I felt that the issue of student motivation was not uniquely a matter of either “online writing” or “community” but is in fact a prevalent issue in virtually all of learning and instruction. Similarly, one theme that emerged as having a rather significant impact on students’ participation in the community of their online writing courses was what I coded as “personal issues” (see especially the case study of Bonnie in the following chapter): those life issues which often influenced students’ performances in their courses; however, this seemed to me to be something that also was not only not unique to the focus of this study, but also fell into the category of things the average online writing instructor cannot meaningfully address or control.

Credibility of the Study

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) refer to six characteristics of naturalistic inquiry that can lead to a study that is credible, one that demonstrates “the compatibility of the constructed realities that exist in the minds of the inquiry’s respondents with those that are attributed to them”: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, referential adequacy materials, peer debriefing, and member checks (pp. 30-31). The research design presented here met these criteria in the following ways (all page numbers in this section refer to Erlandson et al).

By observing all five courses from start to finish, I met the criteria of prolonged engagement and persistent observation. Indeed, since the entire “life” of each context—the summer-long course—was encompassed by the study, no further engagement or observation was feasible. The key factors for me to be aware of here, when it came to presenting participants’ constructs accurately, were my own biases and the need to pursue my interpretations in “a process of constant and tentative analysis” (p. 31).

Those concerns were addressed through the other criteria for credibility. I triangulated data by collecting information from multiple and various sources. The data sources allowed me to triangulate information gathered on community in the online writing classroom from multiple sources of data (interviews, course documents such as syllabi and assignment sheets, discussion board logs, participants’ in-class communications, and students’ writing) and from several different perspectives, notably the participants’ views, as supported or contradicted by others’ reports, as well as my own analyses, which was also checked by my dissertation advisor. Interview data, for example, was checked against the statements of other participants, as well as my own observation of “behavior and various records and documents” (p. 31). The written documents and artifacts (course syllabi, students’ writing, discussion board postings, assignment sheets, etc.) made up the referential adequacy materials of the study (p. 30).

As part of an ongoing process of member checking with participants, I sent every interview transcript back to the relevant interview participant, for his or her review and approval. No participant asked for any changes to the transcripts. Once I had written up my results chapter, I sent the relevant case study to each of the participants who were still available (two instructors and several students were no longer at the College and could not be reached), also for

review and approval. Again, no one asked for any changes or indicated he or she had noted any inaccuracies.

Finally, ongoing peer debriefing with my dissertation advisor and some teaching colleagues served to allow me to “step out of the context being studied to review perceptions, insights, and analyses with professionals” who could provide understanding and feedback that might “refine and . . . redirect the inquiry process” (p. 31). Two crucial meetings with my dissertation committee, after the pre-study but before the actual study began, also helped to make me aware of how my research process could better yield the information I was looking for and could be monitored for accuracy in my representation of my findings.

Summary

To re-cap my study methods, I conducted a cross-case comparison analysis of paired case studies of instructors and students in five first-year online college composition courses at a community college in Virginia. A series of in-depth interviews with each participant, along with analyses of written artifacts from the various courses were my primary sources of data. The purpose of the study was to learn about “community” in these courses and the effects of community on the students’ writing. Specifically, I documented and discussed the instructors’ beliefs, perspectives, policies, and practices concerning community in their online writing classes; I also documented and discussed students’ beliefs, perspectives, and experiences concerning community in their online classes. Additionally, I observed each of the five online courses from start to finish, and I also analyzed participating students’ participation in the course communities and the writing they produced for the courses. Throughout the entire research process, my focus was particularly directed at how community influenced students’ writing. The

ultimate goal of the study was to gather some insight into how we might, through fostering interaction, communication, and participation, improve our students' writing experience in the online composition course. The results of that research are presented in the chapter that immediately follows. I employed interactive data analysis, searching for relevant, interesting, emergent themes regarding community in online writing, and those themes are discussed separately in the final Conclusion chapter.

Following these guidelines; balancing an approach that included disciplined research with being alert for necessary changes in design, execution, and interpretation; and persistent insistence on looking further than the “surface” meanings of easily-gathered data and into the deeper insights possible through good qualitative methodology, I believe, resulted in a study that both satisfied the rigor to which a doctoral dissertation should be held and resulted in a project that was both personally rewarding and professionally meaningful.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

This chapter presents and discusses the results of participant interviews, course observations, and analysis of student writing, as such data apply to each of the three research questions:

1. What are instructors' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
2. What are students' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
3. Based on those perceptions and experiences, along with observations of the community aspects of the courses studied, what conclusions can be drawn about community in online writing courses?

From the beginning of my study I sought to observe and describe "community" in real-world online writing courses, to examine and analyze how social constructivist composition pedagogy was or was not being manifested in some sample courses. In this chapter, I bring together the five paired case studies of the previously described instructor/student pairs, in the contexts of their respective courses, to examine the phenomenon of online community, with a particular emphasis on its effects on student writing. The findings here are based on my course-long observations of the live courses; the participation, interaction, and communication among the members of those communities, particularly of my key informants; in-depth interviews with key informants; and my observation and analysis of documents representing the participating students' writing.

Specifically, my approach to the subject in this chapter is to examine the similarities and differences between instructors' intentions regarding community in their online writing courses and students' actual experiences with community, because as Halsey (2007) has stated, for those of us who wish to improve our teaching of writing there is great value in understanding the relationships between our intentions and our students' experiences (p. 177), and this is particularly true in the area of social constructivist pedagogy in online writing, where there is often such a disparity in the reported successes and failures of achieving community in online writing courses (Fleckenstein, 2005, p. 173). Such a comparison, along with an examination of the individual courses and comments from the instructors and students themselves, allowed me to draw conclusions about what social constructivist principles were in fact successfully being achieved in these sample courses and, perhaps, why.

This chapter is divided into five subsections, one for each course and paired case study. Each subsection is organized along the following lines, in this order:

- A description of the course, for the purpose of contextualization. In particular, the policies and practices that bear directly on the community of the course are described in detail, with examples. Where appropriate I also discuss specific assignments.
- A summary of the instructor's ideas about and most pertinent comments on community in online writing instruction. This is for the purpose of establishing exactly what that instructor might have been trying to achieve regarding the community of the course.
- A summary of the student's ideas about and most pertinent comments on community in the online writing course. This is to establish how the student actually experienced the community of the course.

- An analysis of the student’s writing done for the course. In particular, I examine the student’s interactions with others in the course as they pertain to his or her writing, and I examine the student’s writing in light of his or her comments on how that writing was influenced by participation in the community of the course.
- A conclusion comparing the community ideals the instructor intended to achieve with the student’s actual experience of that community. I will also offer my observations of what aspects of community seemed to work well, what did not seem to work as well, and why.

As a reminder of the personal characteristics of each instructor/student pair, the reader can refer to “Participants,” beginning on page 66. Each course described below was an eight-week, summer session course (half the length of typical fall and spring courses at the study site), and “111” indicates a first semester College Composition course, while “112” designates a second semester course. Each course was delivered via Blackboard, and College policy at the study site required all online students to participate in two on-campus, proctored activities.

Case Study 1: Michael and Alexander

Course Description

Michael’s course was an English 111 course, the first semester section of composition. As a relatively new instructor, Michael was teaching his first online course when we met for the study, although he was concurrently teaching an additional online course at another institution. Although the course I observed was his first fully online course, Michael regularly incorporated technology into his traditional writing courses, including some of the online tools that he used in

this course. In fact, his description of the degree to which he used technology in his face-to-face courses made those courses sound almost like hybrid courses of traditional and online elements.

The easiest way to present the rather extensive and varied work for the course I observed is to simply include that portion of Michael's syllabus:

Papers	Points
Paper 1: Personal Essay	100
Paper 2: Profile Essay	100
Paper 3: Synthesis/Critical Essay	100
Paper 4: Research Paper Rough Draft	100
Paper 5: Research Paper	100
Paper 6: Wix Website Paper	100
On Campus Proctored Exams (2, 50 points each)	100
Twice during the semester you will meet on campus for a proctored assessment.	
Journal Entries (Blog)	
When assigned, you will complete a blog journal entry.	50
Online Activities	100
Throughout the course we will Participate in various online, assigned activities Such as finding and discussing videos or other activities.	
Peer Review Participation	100
Participation in peer-review Exercises will earn you up to 100	

Points

Participation	50
Total Points:	1000

Of the course-work, thirty percent of the students' evaluation fell into the category of overtly community activities: public journal entries (blogs) "online activities" consisting largely of discussion, peer review, and generic "participation." Since the papers themselves were subject to peer review, they too might be considered public. In addition to the stated course activities, Michael also included some other interactive features in his course. For example, he created a strictly optional Facebook page for his course, a site where students could go just to socialize; he also supplemented his teaching materials for the course with the use of Wix websites usually pertaining to writing-related issues, sites he had designed himself and which often prompted students to interact via answering survey-type questions.

The extensive incorporation of varied online technologies—blogs, websites, videos, Googledocs, etc., in addition to the standard features used in Blackboard, like the discussion board—was a very noticeable feature of Michael's course. He was perhaps the most technologically savvy instructor I interviewed, and he expressed a strong belief that the technology used in an online writing course was a critical feature in that course's success. Michael offered his students the widest array of technological tools I have seen used in any course, and he frequently expressed his frustration that the quality of technology available to online teachers was not what it ought to be.

Although it would not be easy to deduce from the syllabus excerpts below, another notable feature of Michael's teaching in this course was his strong resistance to the traditional centralized role of the teacher as well as to many traditional modes of delivery in education (for

example, lecture); in fact, Michael's vision for the role of the teacher was a perfect illustration of the re-envisioning of that role that Hawisher and Selfe (1991) stated should characterize the electronic, social constructivist writing class (p. 57). He did not want to be overly directive in his teaching in a general sense, and he did not want to tie his students down to a specific schedule, making them log in at certain times or adhere to a daily schedule.

Here are a few policy statements relative to community from Michael's syllabus:

Online Format

Because of the online nature of this course, the structure of the course has been set up on a week to week basis. You will be required to engage in all activities and assignments for each week and when that week is over those assignments will no longer be active. You can complete the assignments at your own pace and do the work whenever you want during the week as long as it is completed by week's end.

Paper Due Dates

Papers will typically be due 1-2 weeks after they are assigned at the end of that week. It is very important that you submit papers when they are due. You will submit all papers via a discussion board posting on Blackboard. This discussion board link will only be available the day the paper is due. If you fail to submit the paper while the link is active, it will not be counted. If mitigating circumstances arise, you may contact about that and we can discuss the situation. If a paper ends up being turned in late, it will receive a 20 point deduction for each day it is late.

Attendance Policy

Attendance will be taken via your participation in our weekly Blackboard discussion forums. You must actively participate in the discussion to be counted as present. Four absences will result in an "F" for the course.

These policies might seem to be at odds with the fact that Michael would have preferred a more laissez-faire approach to teaching, but he stated he knew students would need structure and accountability to succeed, especially in a fully online course. Looking at the attendance policy, students were allowed to miss four of fifteen discussion board assignments, or just over one-

quarter of the required posts, but they were still required to do all the other work for the course. So in addition to the thirty percent of the grade that was based on community activities, students also had to regularly participate in the public discussions with their classmates.

Michael took a very interesting and creative approach to building community in his course, as can be seen in his first assignment for the class. Rather than have his students post typical introductions on the discussion board, he instructed them to find an online video of a Rube Goldberg device, post the link to that video on the Blackboard discussion board, and describe how such devices could be related to the writing process. Here is what Alexander wrote, and his entry (describing a Rube Goldberg mousetrap) was typical of what other students posted in both its length and content:

How does the Mouse Trap work? *You turn the crank and snap the plank and boot the marble right down the chute, now watch it roll and hit the pole and knock the ball in the rub-a-dub tub, which hits the man into the pan the trap is set here comes the net.* This was the diddy sung on a 1991 commercial for the world's most famous Rube Goldberg device. What exactly is a Rube Goldberg device? A comically involved, complicated invention, laboriously contrived to perform a simple operation. This is how *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines Rube Goldberg.

When creating a Rube Goldberg device it is essential to have a plan. This is also true when writing a paper. Having all the materials you need on hand, and knowing exactly how you are going to use these materials. J.K. Rowling didn't just happen to have Ginny Weasley open the Chamber of Secrets at the end of Harry Potter 2, she had it all planned out with the diary and Lucious Malfoy from the beginning. Just as this is true with writing, you cannot just decide to throw in steps as you go with a Rube Goldberg either, unless you're McGyver.

Of course it is possible to write without properly preparing, that is why we have millions of trashy romance novels for 99 cents at the grocery store. It is also possible to build a Rube Goldberg without much planning. I specifically remember throwing a five step Rube Goldberg

device together in two hours for my 11th grade Physics class. The point is, without planning your product will always be mediocre to sub-standard. There is a reason why I received a C on my project and there is a reason why a majority of grocery store authors aren't writing *New York Times* bestsellers.

Interestingly, Michael did not require his students to respond to each other's posts, but from my observations, which were confirmed by Alexander, the exercise was a great success with students, many of whom did in fact comment both on their classmates' selection of whatever devices they found and their explanations of how those devices related to the writing process. Unlike most standard introduction exercises, these students did not know much factual information about each other after this activity, but they were very enthusiastically conversing with one another. The innovative Rube Goldberg activity was fascinating to observe and very representative of two elements typical of Michael's teaching: creativity and the incorporation of technology, and as Michael stated he used those two things at least in part because he believed they fostered community—specifically, discussion, participation, and interaction—in his courses.

Looking at Michael's course from a social constructivist perspective, several things were clear. First, although Michael professed neither specific training nor an extensive theoretical background in social constructivist writing pedagogy, he was intuitively an enthusiastic proponent of many of its principles and practices. He incorporated group discussion, interactive activities, and peer review into all his writing courses (Howard, 2001, pp. 58-60), and he eschewed the traditional centralized role of the instructor (Rickly, 2004, p. 46). Many of his practices and policies were designed to engage students in building community in his writing courses (Williams, 2006, p.149) and to hold them accountable for being active community members. While Michael and Alexander ultimately reported, at best, mixed results when it came

to the successful formation of a community of students who really influenced each other's writing, a strong framework for doing so was established by the instructor.

Summary of Michael's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

At the beginning of the study, when first asked about social constructivist pedagogy, Michael only guessed at its definition from the context of knowing I was studying community in online writing classes. "I probably read something about that in one of my classes, but I can't remember it—I'm sure I could probably guess!" he joked. However, that answer did not mean he was unfamiliar with the theory—just that he could not at the moment recall a formal definition, perhaps not surprising as his recent graduate work had not been in composition. As I shared my prepared definition with him and we discussed the manifestations of community in writing courses, it became clear that Michael not only understood social constructivist pedagogy but regularly and extensively employed it in his courses.

When asked about community and its role in writing instruction, Michael was one of only two instructors who talked about community in a general sense, without immediately complicating it by drawing comparisons between traditional and online classes, an important distinction because it was perhaps indicative of his initial belief that the online environment—employed correctly—did not necessarily complicate the forming of community but could in fact promote it. "I think community is very important," Michael said,

I feel that that sense of comfort, being able to feel comfortable with the people who are around you and in sort of your learning community, to be able to share what you're writing, to be able to ask them for their opinions and value that opinion—to create that kind of level of comfort and security is important, and I think that can really help to foster good writing, when you can make that happen.

And, as seen in the above Course Description, Michael put his beliefs about community into practice in the activities he designed for his students and holding them accountable for being active community members through his grading policies.

Although Michael was in the midst of teaching his first online courses, he very insightfully foresaw some of the challenges the forum might pose to creating community. Right away he foresaw the effects of what another instructor labeled “lack of physicality,” and Michael added to that challenge the prescient observation that the lack of shared time (synchronicity) might hinder students’ sense of community. As well, Michael intuitively did not want to create the sort of mail-it-in course that many online students might expect. Even before his first online course started, Michael was determined to “entice” his students into “that sense of community,” was anxious about how he was going to accomplish that, and was highly creative in his use of multiple strategies to try to build community. In fact, my observations of Michael’s first online course led me to think he was an excellent example of Neff and Whithaus’s (2008) admonition that writing instructors teaching online re-examine the strategies and techniques they use in their traditional courses and make changes specifically designed to meet the unique challenges of teaching online (p. 59).

Michael initially discussed the effects of the online environment on his students’ writing in technological, rather than social, terms. He saw the *medium*, the technology—for writing and for the class—as being a primary influence on his online students’ writing: having different forums like blogs and websites and incorporating visual media into text-based writing (and the creativity and enthusiasm those things would engender) was what would lead to improvements in students’ writing. This experimentation with different tools and forums characterized Michael’s class throughout the course. One social aspect of online community that Michael did cite as an

influence on his students' writing—as many other instructors mentioned—was the public nature of writing for the online course, not as a concern students would have about the quality of their work being evaluated publicly but as a “sense of freedom” granted by the anonymity of the online community. There would not be “twenty other people’s eyes” on the student writer, as when he or she spoke up in a face-to-face class. Michael stated that in his traditional classes students were reluctant to share work, while when he used an online forum for their writing “they’re more than happy to put all their stuff out there on a website.” This sense of freedom, I would argue, is difficult to qualify as having either a positive or negative effect on students’ writing (it could be either or both), but in Michael’s experience it was undeniably a *different* effect of the sense of community on students’ writing online. Michael’s insight about the influence of the public nature of the online writing course was an important point, and very interestingly that influence manifested itself heavily in the experience that Alexander would have in Michael’s course, although not in the liberating manner Michael predicted.

Michael felt his students’ writing would be most influenced by these two factors particularly prevalent in the online community: technology and anonymity. In anticipating the technology of the environment to be one of the primary forces that would affect student writing, he would not have been surprised by previous findings that issues with software and hardware, as well as simple unfamiliarity with the technological tools through which they must access their course community, were found to be hindrances to students’ writing (Coffield, Essid, Lasarenko, Record, Selfe, & Stilley, 2000, p. 294) and that simple improvements in technology—or the use to which we put the technology—can have a big impact on students’ writing (Duncan, 2005, pp. 80-81); as one of the main ways in which he hoped to improve his students’ writing, Michael was intent on using improved technology, making better use of existing technology, or both.

Michael also clearly believed—or at least hoped—the anonymity and freedom of the online community would result in what others have described as increasing opportunities for interaction and participation (Halfond, 2008, p. 53), particularly allowing more reserved students better chances to participate and share their ideas (Blair & Hoy, 2006, p. 41), and fostering students’ voices (Rickly, 2004, pp. 43-44), all of which, he hoped, would result in improved student writing.

Half-way through his first online writing course, he was surprised and pleased at the high level of participation he had seen out of his students; however, much of that participation was in response to directives from him and from things that were or may have been interpreted by many students as mandatory aspects of course-participation. In contrast, Michael’s course Facebook page, which he had created just for fun as a complementary and explicitly optional social activity, had received little student participation. This distinction between what was explicitly required of students regarding community and what was not he felt to be important in understanding successful community in the online writing course. Michael’s experience at that point had also convinced him that building a successful community online was challenging. He had found that community was “so much less prevalent in an online setting, and I had all these high aspirations when I went in of creating that sense of community, but I haven’t really been able to achieve that.” Michael was encountering a lack of the often taken for granted community of the traditional classroom (Guglielmo 2005/2006, p. 104, 105). For example, he found simply getting students to communicate with each other via email had proven difficult, and his overall assessment—perhaps unduly negative, in my view—of his course so far was that he hadn’t “been able to do much in terms of creating that community sense.” Michael took most of the responsibility for that on himself, stating that he was “fumbling around” and “trying to figure

out” the community aspect of his online course. He had previously stated that the level of participation he had seen from his students was pleasingly high in the areas of communication and participation in required aspects of the course, but he was, by the mid-point of the semester, seeing that beyond those requirements (posting on the discussion boards and sending him emails) students were not forming the kind of community he felt was automatically achieved in his face-to-face classes. So, within a short time in a single interview, Michael described the level of *participation* in his course as high but the level of *community* as low, an interesting distinction.

Like some of the other instructors, but to an even greater degree, Michael expressed strong concerns over his ability to form personal connections with and among his students, which he considered an important dynamic in successfully teaching writing, online or face-to-face. Michael saw himself as very involved in his course’s community, but not in an “instructor-instructing” role. He not only wanted to be part of a shared community with his students; he expressly did not want to play the part of the separate, didactic instructor, what Rickly (2004) referred to as “teacher-centered hegemony” (p. 46). He felt he interacted individually more with his online writing students than those in his traditional courses, and online, especially, he strove for an informal tone. He described himself as more of a website administrator than a traditional teacher when teaching online (this was an interesting take on the role of the instructor, but, as will be seen, Michael later felt he should take a more directive role). Michael also said he saw no real relationships forming among his students, although he did not necessarily attribute that to the online environment. Typically, he took the blame upon himself, suggesting that he perhaps had not emphasized student interaction enough. Either very insightfully or very intuitively, Michael repeatedly touched on two factors that could influence community significantly: shared

time (“everyone isn’t on the class at the same time”) and required interaction (“I really haven’t mandated that”).

Michael, very interestingly, listed as his number one factor for student success a blatantly social element: “willingness to participate.” Partly that meant doing the necessary assignments that he hoped would contribute to improvements in the students’ writing, but much of what he talked about could be seen in terms of community: the investment of time in the participatory aspects of the class and the willingness to access and take part in the various opportunities he created for students to interact with him and with each other. Michael saw characteristics of student success primarily in terms of social factors: participation and motivation to interact with others, which is what Freedman (1999) stated was the single biggest difference he observed between online and face-to-face courses, Freedman noting the *online* classes were the more interactive of the two.

Michael stated that the importance of community in the online writing class was, for him, a “50/50” proposition. He personally valued the social aspect of the course and how it related to students’ writing, but after all his considerable efforts to make his online courses fun, interactive, and social, he suspected his students simply did not value the community of the course as he did. In what is by now a noticeable trend among these case studies (and what would turn into one of the major conclusions of the study), Michael’s advice to other instructors regarding community was to clearly “define the parameters” of what the instructor’s goals were regarding communication, interaction, and participation and to communicate clearly to the students their responsibilities in meeting those goals.

Overall, I would characterize Michael’s views on community in online writing in the following manner. Michael, who had admirably done as much as any of the instructors I

interviewed to engage his students socially, seemed upon reflection to struggle with putting the importance of community activities into perspective, and he was not certain of its role. He personally felt social interaction was important but had not really seen how that interaction manifested itself in improved student writing. As did other instructors, he noted that he had strong writers in his online classes who participated very little in the interactive portions of the class. Michael ranked community as “somewhere in the middle” in importance and advised students to pay as much attention to it as to any other aspect of the course, and he noted that he could imagine (but had not yet really seen) students using classmates’ writing as models for their own work and collaboratively figuring out “what works and what doesn’t,” but he seemed to hedge on the importance of community when he said that students should see it as important if the individual instructor saw it as important or set up a course with community involvement as a priority. Michael was not sure of the influence the community of the course was having on his students’ writing. He felt he himself had little influence on students’ writing, seeing changes in writing as largely a matter of the motivation of the individual student as to whether or not he or she would take advantage of the opportunities the course offered to improve his or her writing. However, Michael also saw student interaction in the course as having the benefit of offering writers an audience, “a sounding board,” for their writing, and that alone would have some impact on students’ writing if they would simply pay attention to that audience, although that less-than-ringing endorsement was a considerable departure from Michael’s initial enthusiasm about the potential benefits of community.

Summary of Alexander's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

When I first interviewed Alexander one of the students Michael had pointed out as being successful in the course] at the mid-point of his class with Michael, I asked him to describe what he thought of as the community of a writing course and he listed the people who might make up an academic community—defined by their roles, instructors and students—and the demographics of the students—the range of ages, different ethnicities, etc. He described community activities: “With the online community, from what I’ve seen, it’s basically the communication with other students, with the discussion boards, and [Michael] actually did an attempt to start a Facebook group for our students, but there are only seven members, so I don’t know how successful that is for him.” Interestingly, too, Alexander’s notion of community was heavily influenced by the idea of competition; he routinely judged his own performance in the course—both in his level of participation and the quality of his writing—by comparing himself and his work to his classmates and their writing. For Alexander, his naturally very critical view of his own writing was also heightened by the public nature of the online course, as he was highly aware of the fact that he was making his work available to a larger audience, as has been reported previously (Napierkowski, 2001, p. 1).

Alexander gave a qualified endorsement of the importance of community in his writing course:

I think it’s important because there’s different channels where you can have questions answered. There are the discussion boards, and [Michael] is making himself available through email, through a social networking tool. I mean, being that this is my first [online] class, in all honesty, it hasn’t been as challenging as some of the other classes. I haven’t had to seek too much help, but I think it’s good having those different avenues

and, I guess, the encouragement of getting feedback from your peers, which it is on the syllabus and every once in a while it's kind of reiterated in the weekly assignments: "Feel free to comment on each other's work."

Two interesting observations can be made here. First, although identified by Michael as a strong writer and a successful community member in the course, Alexander was unusually critical of his own work and sometimes questioned his abilities, so for him to describe the course as unchallenging should not be taken as an indication of arrogance; rather it was a reflection of the fact that he felt many students in Michael's class were getting by with little substantive participation and mediocre work. Second, Alexander's comment that Michael's general admonition to students was to "feel free to comment on each other's work" perhaps showed a disparity between what was theoretically required by course policy and the tone Michael set with his students, which at least by Alexander was perceived to be rather *laissez faire*. That trend is also seen in the following comment, in response to a question about how much a part of a community Alexander felt in this course:

In this particular class, I feel like a student and a spectator. I don't think there's too much interaction, because it's not required. Like I said, I choose to read through a majority of the class's papers because I have access to it, and I gauge my work against theirs, but if you're not like myself you really don't—there's no penalty if you don't, you know, so you could just be a student who posts your discussion, your paper, and call it good.

Alexander, "a student and a spectator" (see Brown, 2003, p. 154), described the community of the course as being fairly limited (a subjective evaluation) but put that in terms of course policy (objective): because participation and interaction were not required—or not required much—there was little going on, and students were aware there was no penalty for their lack of

community activities. He also compared his writing class to an online Economics classes he was taking (also with little interaction) and said he felt the shared content of the Economics class was more conducive to student interaction than the personal essays of his writing class.

As seen in Michael's policies under "Course Description," and as will be seen later in an examination of Alexander's course-participation and writing, it was not entirely accurate to say activity within the course community was not required, but it is significant that a successful student like Alexander perceived that to be the case and reported his impression that his classmates shared that view. With little to compel them to interact with one another, and without a shared course content to bring them together in discussion, it seemed—at least based on one student's evaluation—that the enthusiasm that had greeted Michael's first interactive assignment (the Rube Goldberg videos) had waned by the mid-point of the course, an evaluation that seemed to support Michael's later view that the community was faltering.

Alexander also described communication as fairly minimal (and he seemed not to consider discussion board exchanges as direct communication) and unequivocally stated his preference for traditional classes, not just in English but in other subjects. He described the asynchronous nature of online communication as an obstacle both to communication and understanding course content (Hegarty, Bostock, & Collins, 2000, p. 209), and he was frustrated in waiting for responses from others (Anderson, 2006, p. 117) and felt much of the communication he did experience was inferior (Hara and Kling, 2005, p. 559) to what he imagined a face-to-face writing course would offer. Dale (1997) stated the importance of the time students "engage in the process and communicate with each other and the teacher" (p. 50), and this applies both within a course, when, for example, asynchronous communication keeps a student such as Alexander from proceeding with his work, and in the overall length of the course,

a concern several instructors voiced about my observing the shortened, summer versions of their courses.

Alexander described his writing process for the course as an almost exclusively individual effort, although if he encountered a problem he would look at his peers' papers to see how they might have handled that problem, a practice done largely to gauge his understanding of and approach to a given assignment against those of his peers, mostly to determine if he was on track; it is significant, though, that he did not actually ask those other writers for advice. Like some of the students discussed in later case studies, he wanted feedback mostly on the grammar and punctuation of his completed work, but he sought that feedback not from a classmate or his instructor but from his wife. In fact, he said outright, "As far as the teachers and the discussion boards go, I won't ask a question unless I'm just completely off and have no clue. I honestly don't see myself using the students for questions that I can't figure out on my own." Alexander stated the largest outside influence on his writing was seeing what topics his classmates came up with for the major research paper for the course, so that he could use that information to make sure he was approaching the assignment correctly, not wanting to be "that guy" who had picked a boring or inappropriate topic. In "competition mode," he used his reading of others' ideas and work to gauge his own ideas, even going so far as making the very interesting decision to avoid writing a paper on the same topic another student had chosen, because he did not want his own work to be compared to that student's, possibly unfavorably. When asked how community might be of more use to him, Alexander—who had not actually engaged in the practice—speculated that it could be good to find a model to follow among one's peers, a writer whom the student felt was doing an exceptional job in the work for the course, and to directly inquire into that person's process (interestingly, that is exactly the theoretical use of community by the

students that Michael had also mentioned), but Alexander was less interested in interacting with his peers than in seeing his instructor play a more active and directive role in the class community (see Diken, 2003, p. 270).

Alexander seemed to feel strongly that he was not getting what he wanted or needed out of his experience in the course, either in terms of direct instruction or in terms of interaction, even though he ultimately ended up with a very high A (in fact, he had achieved the maximum attainable points for the course). By our second interview at the end of the summer he had already signed up for a face-to-face section of English 112 and said he had not even considered taking the course online. It is very important to point out, though, that Alexander saw much of his somewhat negative experience in the class as due to the online forum and the students' lack of enthusiasm, not any shortcomings on Michael's part. Alexander said,

I haven't met the guy, but I think he's got loads of personality, for being an English teacher [laughs]. That's actually why I took this class, to be honest—I'll admit I went to "RatemyProfessor.com," and I generally do that before every class, just to get a feel, because I feel like my personality meshing with the teacher's personality will result in a better end for me. So being that he got very good reviews on that Rate-my-professor site, and from his communications, he doesn't sound like an English teacher, you know? He's not boring, monotonous, bland. He's got smiley faces and little comments, and, you know, he's writing with apostrophes, saying "gunnin'," not "gunning," things like that, and that makes you feel a lot more easy. When I write a paper I don't like to think do I have to click on this word and find a synonym for it because I'm going to get ten points taken off? He allows you to be who you want to be on papers.

Alexander felt he had a clear impression of Michael's personality and that the online forum had not hindered their interaction or relationship, and it was evident that he had a very positive impression of his instructor. Michael had expressed as one of his goals the creation of a course community in which students were relaxed and had a sense of freedom, a goal apparently successfully achieved and one appreciated by Alexander; it is not surprising, though, that a student like Alexander, who judged his own work by such high standards, would sometimes want more direct intervention from his teacher, but the disparate position as both a fellow community member and a very directive teacher would be almost impossible to achieve for any instructor.

In conclusion, Alexander's experience in the community of the course and its influence on his writing had not been what he had hoped they would be, and neither the content nor the community of the course had been particularly helpful to him. As for the content, he attributed that to the fact that he had long been writing in the professional community and in other college courses before he took English 111 with Michael, so Alexander had already learned along the way many of the aspects of writing covered in 111. As for the community, he noted several reasons it had not influenced his writing, and he was very careful about how he assigned responsibility for that. First, Alexander admitted his own writing process was private and he rarely asked for help. However, he did read his classmates' work extensively and apply what he saw to his own ideas and writing; he simply did not discuss that fact with anyone in the class, an example of an "invisible" influence that community (and the public nature of student work in many online classes) can have on students. Second, he stated he felt many students—himself sometimes included—did not take the interactive aspects of the course as seriously as they should have; they had failed to take advantage of opportunities Michael had created, and that was

their own responsibility. Finally, he liked the tone of the course Michael set, along with the multiple avenues for writing and interaction in the course, but Alexander—careful not to be critical and to stress this was his own subjective impression—felt students should have been held more accountable for their participation; additionally, he would have liked to see Michael play a more directive teaching role, once again evidence that it is often the students in social constructivist classrooms, not the instructors, who have more difficulty with students and instructors taking on non-traditional roles (Diken, 2003, p. 270).

Analysis of Alexander's Writing and the Community of the Course

Alexander was recommended for the study by Michael because Michael thought he was one of several students who was both a strong writer and an active participant in the community of the course, the latter perception on Michael's part perhaps being very telling of community in this course. Alexander certainly did most of what was required of him (so much so that he earned a 100% in the course), but an examination of most of his participation in the public aspects of the course discovered how little he really interacted with others and explained why he described himself as a "spectator"; additionally, looking at the writing projects he did for the course suggested how little the community of the course influenced his writing.

Because of the limited public material that represents Alexander's work for the course, it is possible to examine most of that material; unfortunately, when it came to his writing, Alexander's process, as he himself characterized it, was so private and resulted in such finished work by the time he made it public that there was little evidence of any changes made to his writing based on feedback from others. To begin, I look at the manifestations of Alexander's community participation, to contextualize the examination of his writing that follows.

Alexander was one of the stronger community members in Michael's course, but what that often meant was simply that Alexander was posting required work (although there were several out of fifteen discussion board assignments he did not post to at all), much of which consisted of "stand alone" posts; that is, students simply posted their own responses to Michael's prompts and were not required to respond to or discuss anything with each other. As an example, here was one of two posts of Alexander's in response to short stories read by the class.

In response to Annie Dillard's "An American Childhood":

I think she did a wonderful job of illustrating where she was and how she felt on that cold winter day. At first I thought she was using *too* many adjectives, and in my opinion when you do that, then it turns the reader off. For example, my wife tried to get me to read the Twilight Saga. After reading the first novel, I couldn't take anymore of Stephanie Myer's overly done writing, she was no longer just setting a scene and bringing life to the character's, it sounded like a disturbed teenage girl's diary. But being that this was a three page short story, in which the scene's changed rapidly, she did well in keeping the reader well informed of the changing surroundings.

These comments represented Alexander's sole contribution to the first of these two "discussions" and the second was similar. He neither responded to any other students' comments, nor did other students respond to anyone else. They simply posted what they had to say, and that was it. As Alexander said, he read over others' work, but there was no requirement to do so and he felt many students did not read others' ideas. Additionally, these short story responses seemed largely unconnected to the students' writing; they did not end up writing papers on the stories, for example.

This type of one-shot post was common on many discussion boards, and the lack of interaction among students helped to explain Alexander's assertion that he did not feel a part of a community in the course. For example, the first two major papers for the course were a personal narrative and a profile paper. While students were required to post their papers via the discussion board, they were not required to read or respond to each other's work. Classmates' papers were available to those, like Alexander, who chose to read them, but there was no required public peer review. In fact, Michael posted some comments to each student's paper, but these were attached files and students would have to click on them to see what the instructor had to say. Michael was clearly putting in a lot of time responding to students individually, but they were responding to each other minimally if at all.

Significantly, one interactive discussion board assignment Alexander did not choose to post to was the students' examination of and commentary on each other's rough drafts of their counter-argument papers. This was the first opportunity in the course for Alexander to receive peer feedback on his work, but he chose to keep his work private until he posted the final draft of the paper. Here was an example of the instructor creating an opportunity for students to interact and influence one another's work but a student deciding for personal reasons to simply ignore that opportunity. It is also indicative of the fact that Alexander (similar to Bonnie in Liz's course, discussed later) felt he could safely ignore an assignment requiring him to participate.

Pertaining to the three writing projects mentioned thus far, there was no chance to examine Alexander's work to look for community influences, because he simply never made his work public until he had completed it. His grades on his papers were all A's, so it could be argued that he did not need any peer feedback, but for a writer like Alexander who was so meticulous in his criticism of his own work it is remarkable that he would not avail himself of

the chance to benefit from others reading and commenting on his writing. However, he was reading his classmates' posted work carefully but had so far chosen to lurk as an almost fringe member of the community, posting not just when required to do but more specifically only when he was also comfortable doing so.

In one of the few interactive discussion board assignments of the course, it was clear that Alexander was more comfortable sharing ideas he was not fully committed to and which were not representative of his writing abilities. Toward the mid-point of the course, students were required to post potential sources for various topics, in order to create databases they might use for papers on those topics. They were also required to comment on each others topics and sources and to ask questions. Alexander posted comments to three of his classmates, and here was one typical example:

The topic is interesting because it will help save our planet and be the major pull out of the current economic trough.

My opinion is that "going green" and being "eco-friendly" is a very important part of everyone's future. I hope that people take this issue very seriously soon and it does not end up being some sort of "craze" or "fad" that just goes away.

Q1. Do people look at the "green" movement as just a fad?

Q2. Why do some consider that others *must* be affiliated with left-wing extremists in order to see the benefits of an eco-friendly society?

Alexander's comments were brief and formulaic (representative of the quality of other students' comments as well), but his questions did reveal he was thinking seriously about the various topics to which he responded. Because students were free to comment on those topics they found interesting, they were not necessarily required to respond to anyone in particular, meaning

some students received no comments on their proposed topics, and Alexander heard from no one on his own proposed topic of obesity (a topic he did not end up pursuing).

On his research paper for the course (on the topic of unemployment), Alexander received the sole public community feedback on his writing that might have resulted in any changes (that is, feedback on a draft before it was submitted for a grade). Toward the latter part of the course, students posted their rough drafts of their research papers and, perhaps because of Michael's realization that he needed to be more directive, were actually required to read each other's work and post comments and suggestions. Michael gave the students the following guidelines:

When you go to make comments on other students' papers, you should look for the following:

Does the thesis clearly state the topic of the paper, the author's unique view on that topic, and what the paper is trying to demonstrate or prove?

Does the introduction provide a good ramp up to what is to come in the paper?

Is there a transition statement in the first paragraph? Does the first paragraph cover an appropriate idea? Does the paper use source material in the first paragraph? Is it in proper MLA format?

Aside from these things, feel free to comment on whatever else you like.

Alexander received the following feedback from two of his classmates:

I am interested to see where you are going with this. Are you more interested in the grossly inaccurate reporting of unemployed or are you going to make some proposal of what the country should do as a whole.

I can tell you from experience, just having gone through 6 months of being unemployed that things are tough. But there are many of jobs available for those who look hard enough and wish to work. It took me one week to get a part time job once my company laid me off.

So one issue is "what is the actual truth in numbers" and the other issue is "what should each individual be doing to gain work".

And:

I think your introduction paragraph could be a little stronger. I think you could use our current recession as a part of your introduction and compare it to the Great Depression. You could define unemployment and how it is the government gets the data. State a couple of reason why unemployment rate is up. And then ask your question. What is America going to do?

I think you pick a great subject and it is very relevant to our current economic situation. You MLA format on second paragraph bring in back out with the rest of you paragraphs. I think you have great statistics.

I am looking forward to finish product.

Alexander did not respond to the first post, but to the second he replied:

I appreciate the feedback. The paragraph that is indented is actually following MLA format because you are to indent a quote, as I have done, if it is longer than 4 sentences. But thanks for catching that, because had it not been a quote, it would have been incorrect.

Alexander ignored the more substantive suggestions and, interestingly, in one of our discussions, he said the incorrect comment on his MLA format had actually angered him when he initially read it. On the research paper his classmates commented on, Alexander made not a single change from his rough draft to the final draft he turned in for a grade. I have not included any of Alexander's papers because there was either no way to measure changes (no drafts for comparison) or no changes were made.

In summary, although it was possible to examine Alexander's participation in the community, there was simply no textual evidence to analyze regarding the influence of the course community on his writing. Although selected as a strong community member in the course, Alexander was actually participating in a perfunctory manner; as with Bonnie in Liz's course, I saw an A student who was substantially neglecting the community aspect of the course, with no repercussions from the instructor. It cannot even be said Alexander was simply doing

what was required, because there were participatory exercises he actually skipped; additionally there were times when he communicated via the discussion boards but received no replies to his posts. Any influence of the course community on his writing was invisible until his last major writing assignment, and even there I found only “feedback,” not “influence.” Had I not interviewed Alexander, I would have been unaware of the invisible influence of his even reading others’ posted work let alone using that practice so competitively when critiquing his own writing. My examination of the observable aspects of Alexander’s participation in the community of Michael’s course and the effects of that community on Alexander’s writing show strong evidence of why he would report that he did not in fact feel a part of a community and that his experience of community in the course did not influence his writing in any measurable way, this despite the many opportunities for interaction and mutual influence Michael had created.

Comparison: Instructor Intentions and Student Experiences

From what I observed from Michael’s course, along with what I learned in our conversations, I saw Michael’s intentions for the course to be the creation of an informal, fun, and interactive experience for his students, one in which technology was used in creative, diverse, and engaging ways, and one in which Michael himself was an active part of the community but in a non-traditional teaching role. Regarding community and its influence, Michael began the study by stating he felt it was very important and, when fostered successfully, it could have a great positive impact on students’ writing. He cited “willingness to participate” as the most important factor in a student’s success in his course (although, as has been demonstrated, Alexander succeeded without participating much). From the beginning of the course, Michael’s thoughts on community seemed to be split between the subjective and the

objective. On the one hand, he was very focused on the creation of a subjective atmosphere for the course; he wanted students to have a “sense of freedom” and a high degree of comfort in the course, believing that would allow them to express themselves better in their writing. On the other hand, Michael incorporated community-building policies in his course; notably, his syllabus suggested thirty percent of a student’s evaluation would be based on his or her participation in interactive elements of the course.

This dynamic between allowing students freedom and holding them accountable would characterize much of Michael’s approach to teaching. From our interviews, it seemed clear to me that Michael strongly wanted to avoid what he called the “teacher teaching” role and that his preference would have been for students to voluntarily engage in the many opportunities he had for them to express themselves through writing and technology. However, his previous teaching experience had shown him students also needed structure and accountability, and as this course went on it became clear he was not seeing the level of participation he desired out of the students. It might be mentioned here that while most instructors would undoubtedly prefer voluntary engagement on their students’ part, one emerging theme of this study was that relying on volunteering typically failed (see Chapter Five).

Though he did not think of social constructivist writing pedagogy in formal terms, in his practices it was clear Michael valued and implemented that pedagogy. In the actual manifestations of the course, the adherence to that pedagogy was mixed. In the realm of technology, Michael provided many creative forums for students to interact with one another, such as the discussion boards, student blogs, and an optional class Facebook site. However, many of those forums and assignments were, in fact, optional. Michael’s teaching was generally a “carrot” rather than a “stick” approach; he introduced his students to blogs, for example, in the

hopes (based partly on his past teaching experience) that they would embrace the continued use of their blogs out of enthusiasm for such a (for many) novel forum; the reality, though, was that few students did anything more than the initial required assignment to create a blog and provide the class with a link to it, and for the vast majority of students (so far as I could tell), including Alexander, the blog experience simply disappeared after it had been completed. This seemed typical of most students' participation in the many activities Michael set up.

Alexander's experience of the community of the course (but not necessarily the community's influence on his writing, which will be discussed separately) seemed from my perspective to have differed seriously from what Michael intended for his students, and I believe Alexander's experience was representative of that of most students in the class. On the positive side, Alexander clearly had a very favorable impression of Michael and felt that Michael was not only an active participant in the community but that he had also succeeded in establishing himself in the more informal, advisory role he had hoped to achieve, rather than as either the central figure of the course community or as the pedantic instructor; Alexander, hedging slightly because he did not want to be disrespectful, actually stated Michael felt "almost like a peer," a description I believed Michael would have been pleased to hear.

However, Alexander also described himself as a spectator in the class and stated he felt no real sense of connection or relationship with his classmates, that he did not in fact feel part of a community. Partly, it would become clear, that feeling was due in part to Alexander's growing dislike for the online environment and his growing preference for (and the realization that he benefited far more from) face-to-face classes, no matter what the subject. But it was also apparent from Alexander's comments that his feeling of being uninvolved also grew from the fact that students simply were not communicating with one another frequently or substantively.

Alexander recognized that there were many chances to get involved and interact in the course that most students were not taking advantage of, and he felt this was partly attributable to poor attitudes, motivation, and work ethic on the part of many of his classmates and partly due to the fact that they simply were not being held accountable for participating, in spite of what the syllabus and grading policies stated. By the end of the study, it was clear Alexander was disappointed with the community experience of the course and felt he would have been better off taking the course in a traditional classroom.

One reason I believe that Alexander's experience of the community of the course was typical of that of most students is because Michael, too, as the course progressed, expressed frustration with that aspect of the course. Michael was clearly highly motivated to deliver a positive interactive experience to his students, and he had put a lot of thought and work into the course. At one point, he was pleased by his students' participation but recognized it was not equating to a real sense of community—they were simply doing what they were required to do, but those activities were not “connecting” them with each other. He had even noted the difficulties he sometimes had in getting students to email one another regarding certain course activities. Unlike Alexander who mostly put the responsibility for community failure on students, Michael saw the fault for that as being his, even though he felt his face-to-face classes generally did form successful communities and that in those classes he was able to form important personal connections with students; online, though, Michael described himself as floundering and struggling to understand why things were not working. Toward the end of the study, he reluctantly concluded that his approach of “enticing” students into a sense of community had not worked out that well and that he probably needed to emphasize the importance of participation more and enforce it to a greater degree. Seeing his disappointment, I

was reminded of Guglielmo's (2005/2006) comment on her own online students: "What I had not expected when designing the course was the lack of participation in collaborative activities even among those students that had proven themselves 'A writers' or 'good students'" (p. 105). From my perspective as an observer, Michael, like some of the other instructors, was overly critical of himself when assessing his own responsibility for the failure of the course community to live up to its potential.

While Alexander's participation and interaction, or lack thereof, might have been typical for students in the course, the same cannot necessarily be said for the lack of influence the community had on his writing. Michael intended for students—often voluntarily but sometimes as a requirement—to read each other's work, discuss ideas, offer comments on one another's writing, and revise their own papers based on the feedback they received from other members in the class (including, in some cases, Michael himself). Practically the only such activity Alexander seriously engaged in was the reading of others' work, and to his credit he probably did that more consistently and seriously than most other students; he certainly looked over his peers' work more intently than any other student who participated in the study. As for discussion of ideas (not the students' own work) in a general sense, Alexander's participation was typical in that he and the other students often simply posted their own ideas and did not respond to each other. As far as actual peer review of written work for the course, Alexander both shared his own work less and commented on others' work less than did most of Michael's students. Alexander was so private in his writing process that no one in the class ever saw anything that was not virtually a finished product, a practice that usually is not allowed even in face-to-face writing classes. Like the other students in the study, Alexander was a strong writer, and his work probably had less about which his classmates could suggest changes, but it must

also be admitted that they were given little or no opportunity to do so: in one peer review assignment Alexander did not participate, and in the second he posted what was essentially his final draft.

Based on my observations of the course and on my comparison of these two key informants' perspectives, I drew several conclusions about the community of their course and its influence on student writing. Michael's class was a well-designed course, one I would have been excited about as a student, and it had great potential for connecting students with one another. Michael's personality, innovative use of technology, and informal and upbeat tone were very positive factors, strengths that even Alexander, who was not particularly happy with his experience in the course, cited enthusiastically. However, much of that potential for community was not realized, and I believe that was due to two factors, primarily. First, the majority of the students in the class simply were not the self-motivated "community volunteers" Michael was relying on for active participation; in short, most students were more like draftees: they did what was required and little or nothing more. Second, I would have to agree with Michael's assessment that he would have had greater student participation had he emphasized its importance more and actually enforced (or enforced earlier in the semester) the grading policy regarding community activities. As an outside observer, I did not understand how Alexander could have received a 100% for the course, given his sometime absences in certain participatory exercises. I believe the conclusion that he might have to enforce participation was a difficult one for Michael, philosophically, and that conclusion raises difficult questions for instructors, a theme developed in the following chapter. He stressed as important a student's *willingness* to participate and he did not want to compel students to take part in what he thought should be fun,

creative, and motivating writing activities; however, by the end of the study he had concluded that many students simply did not innately value the community experience like he did.

Given the lack of student motivation and participation, community influence on students' writing was not what it could have been. However, that being said, from what I could discern in the public aspects of the course, many students did in fact both use and benefit from the limited peer review activities to a much greater degree than Alexander did. Their successful use of their classmates as resources to improve their writing was most likely due both to the fact that (in many cases) their writing had more room for improvement than did Alexander's and to the fact that they were, frankly, much more willing to put their work out there for their peers to comment on and then to apply those comments to their drafts. In the assignments where Michael required his students to engage in peer review, and where they actually complied, those features of the course were reasonably successful and Michael's intentions for his students were realized.

Case Study 2: Paul and Kathleen

Course Description

Paul's course was an English 112 College Composition II course. Paul was a veteran online writing instructor who had regularly been teaching both composition and technical writing online for years, at the study site, at another community college, and at the institution where he taught full-time. The coursework for his students consisted of three papers, mandatory discussion board posts, and two proctored on-campus activities. Attendance was also a factor in a student's performance, and violation of the course attendance policy resulted in failure for the course. As with all 112 courses, Paul's course (as required by the Department) was split between

a focus on literature in the first half of the course and on research-based writing in the second half. The grade break-down from Paul's syllabus was as follows:

- 30% Small Papers (2 @ 15% each)
- 30% Research Paper
- 30% Discussion Board Posts (10 @ 3% each)
- 10% On-campus Proctored Events (2 @ 5% each)

Right away, Paul's emphasis on community could be seen in that fully thirty percent of a student's grade was based on his or her participation via discussion board; also, Paul's students were required to respond to one another in this forum, and their credit for discussion board assignments was based not only on posting their own ideas but on their responses to others as well. Given the grade percentages, it was extremely unlikely any student in the course could choose to ignore the community component of the class (or even to do poorly in that area) and have much chance of receiving a passing grade. One additional note must be made: Paul stated that in his typical, semester-length online writing courses he normally included peer review of the students' papers; however, given the significantly shortened summer version of the course he did not feel his students had the time to include that activity (he did give students the option of soliciting early feedback on their drafts from him); so in other sections of this course participation in the form of peer review would have been emphasized even more .

Several statements relevant to participation, interaction, and communication showed up in Paul's syllabus and his assignment guidelines:

Attendance Policy: You should be "in" class at least twice weekly. **This is an Internet class, so you should ALWAYS have access to it.** This includes traveling, illness, etc. With the exception of military service, all absences count. Per college policy, 2 consecutive weeks and/or 3 total weeks of inactivity (i.e. no postings, papers, e-mails, etc.) will result in your withdrawal from the class.

You are expected to spend the same amount of time (2 ½ hours weekly, not counting writing of papers) in class as if you were on campus. I will post a weekly reminder announcement about assignments/notes no later than Saturday, but generally on Thursday. However, you should

check in periodically to post assignments, read the thoughts of your peers, and check for any additional announcements.

Discussion Board Posts: There will be 10 required postings during the semester. Postings should be **at least 250 words** and coherently written (i.e. proper grammar, spelling, etc.). Detailed instructions will be provided with each post. **No credit will be awarded for late posts or to posts that do not meet the length requirement.** You must also respond to at least 1 other post (min. 50 words) each week. **Posts are due on Wednesdays, and responses are due on Fridays.** I will provide feedback on posts as needed.

Weekly posts must be at least 250 words long and posted on time to earn credit; no partial credit is awarded. I strongly suggest creating your posts in Word, doing a word count, and then copying & pasting onto the discussion board, including the word count. In some cases, no credit is given because you did not respond appropriately to the question; I will alert you if that is the case. . . . You must also respond to at least 1 other student (min. 50 words) for every discussion board post. **Posts are due on Wednesdays, and responses are due on Fridays.** . . . I generally do not respond to posts, although I do review all of them; these are graded on completion only.

In these statements was not only an emphasis on participation and interaction to the tune of thirty percent of a student's grade but also detailed guidelines for what was expected of students regarding their community activities. This was a typical practice of Paul's, based on his extensive experience teaching online: giving clear instructions so students knew what was expected of them. In addition to the mandatory discussion board element in Paul's class, he also had a Cyber Café forum in which students could simply socialize with each other or ask questions about the course.

To further characterize Paul's course, it is important to discuss the instructor's role and the students' roles as they were established in this particular course. Paul was the first of the instructors I interviewed to actually use the term *facilitator* to describe his role in his online courses (see Dale, 1997, p. 17), and he specifically distinguished between that role online and a greater emphasis on playing a more traditional teaching role in his face-to-face classes. In fact, Paul felt that students who took online courses automatically were (or at least needed to be) more self-directed learners and were looking for more of a facilitator than a traditional teacher. One of the things that most struck me about Paul in our interviews was that, unlike most of the other

instructors in the study, he did not seem overly worried about the students' experience of community in the course being primarily his responsibility. I believe this attitude was a product of his long experience in teaching and his philosophy about student responsibility. Like Kardish, the other veteran instructor in the study, Paul saw himself in his online class primarily as a guide and a resource for his students, but he understood that students were responsible for taking advantage of that resource and that they would do so or not based on their individual choices (for example, Paul was happy to look at students' rough drafts, but did not require them to seek that early feedback). He set up the structure of the course (and the community) and the standards to which the students would be held, but he also recognized what I came to think of as the "you can lead a horse to water" phenomenon in developing community in online courses: as the instructor, he created opportunities for students to connect and share with one another, and he held them accountable for doing so to a certain extent; however, the degree to which students embraced the interactive and participatory elements of the course was up to them.

Without repeatedly lecturing students on the importance of their participation, it was interesting to see the degree to which Paul got them to participate simply through his discussion board policies of minimum word lengths and the requirement to respond to one another. For example, Kathleen's first discussion board exchange (student introductions) in the course was fairly typical of what most students would post and receive in return:

Hello everyone, my name is Kathleen. I have just finished my first semester at [the study site] and I am working on my second one. I am nineteen years old and graduated from Thomas Dale high school. I always made good grades in high school, but my SAT score is the reason why I am not at a four year university. I have never been good with testing, so I was dreading the day I had to take them. However, I think I made a smart decision by staying at home because it is cheaper and I will get more work done. I would like to major in teaching, but I am undecided of where I want to transfer too because I do not mind being at home. If I do end up teaching I would love to teach third graders. When I was in high school I took a class called Teach for Tomorrow. What I basically did was shadow a teacher and I helped her with the students and came up with

lesson plans. I loved it. When I am in school I am always pushing myself to the next level and trying to get the best grades I possibly can. Sometimes I do tend to stress myself out a lot, but I know my hard work will pay off in the end.

Besides school I am just a normal teenager. I am a middle child of three and I have three Australian Shepherds that I absolutely adore. When I have free time I am usually spending time with my friends or hanging out with my boyfriend. I just moved into a new house so my life has been hectic lately with trying to get my life back in order. I am working this summer at a summer camp for Parks and Recreation, and my job is to create activities each day for the children to do and to watch over them. I think it is the perfect job for me because I love being creative and outdoors. I am a very shy person at first but once I warm up to someone I am a complete goof ball.

I am excited to take this class and see what else I can learn. English has always been a subject that I have loved. However, I still believe there is more to learn in the subject. I have always had great English teachers so I usually end up with an A in the class. Hopefully I will be able to accomplish the same thing in this class. I wish everyone good luck and it was good reading about everyone.

She received the following replies to her introduction:

Hi, Kathleen! I think you're absolutely right about community college being the smart choice. There are so many advantages to staying close to home. I'm using [the study site] as a way to work around SAT scores too, because I don't have any. Of all the possible ways to demonstrate one's strengths as a student, timed testing must be one of the worst, don't you think?

Hey, Kathleen I just finished reading your post; we have some things in common. First of all I was dreading the day I had to take the SAT also, and usually I am not good with testing, especially timed testing. I also tend to do the same thing as you when it comes to pushing myself to the next level with school work. I can not believe I am in the same class as you, what a small world!

In turn, Kathleen responded to one of her classmates:

Hi Kaitlyn, I am Kathleen. I decided to reply to your post because we seemed to have a lot in common. I have also thought about transferring to Longwood University because I have heard they have a great teaching program. I also took online classes because it worked with my schedule. I felt with work and having enough time with my friends, online classes was the best way to go. You seem like you are very busy all the time and that is exactly how I am as well. I love shopping as well, and I am trying to convince my parents to buy me a four wheeler since we moved. Who knows how that will go? My boyfriend is in love with the Dallas Cowboys too and all of his friends like the Redskins so there is a lot of smack talking when football season comes. I enjoyed reading about you and hopefully we can talk more throughout the class.

By the simple expedients of minimum word lengths for posts (250 for the student's own and fifty for responses to others) and the requirement to respond to at least one classmate, Paul regularly achieved a significant degree of interaction and communication among his students, mostly by

providing leadership and clear directions. Additionally, Paul largely stayed out of such discussions, commenting only when he felt it necessary, so the students quickly became the driving force behind the community aspect of the class and from my observations remained so throughout the course, a point to be explored in more detail later.

Kathleen had been recommended by Paul as an active community member, and she did seem to go somewhat beyond what was typical participation for some students, but as an example, the three students with whom she was conversing in the exchange above regularly participated to about the same degree as Kathleen, so it could be said that Paul's students for the most part were actively engaged in the course.

In summary, from a social constructivist perspective, Paul's course design reflected that pedagogy in its inclusion of community to a significant degree. Paul very successfully set himself up as a facilitator (Dale, 1997, p. 17), avoiding the teacher-centered paradigm (Rickly, 2004, p. 46), and engaging his online students in more self-centered learning and writing (Williams, 2006, p.149). The course structure included student-centered discussion and interaction (Howard, 2001, pp. 58-60), and, along with the actual writing for the course, community was obviously a concern of the instructor and a significant part of the course experience for the students. Paul had a very realistic view of the balance between his responsibilities and those of the students when it came to creating a positive experience in the community of the course, and in his course the students were challenged to take the initiative in their own learning and to take advantage of the of the opportunities Paul gave them.

Summary of Paul's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

Paul was one of two participating instructors whose classes I had observed in my pre-study, so I knew from the beginning he was including a significant community element in his online writing courses and that he was practicing some of the typical manifestations of social constructivist pedagogy (Howard, 2001, pp. 58-62). From the start, Paul had an accurate working definition of social constructivism and showed an ongoing awareness of the theory; this was a little surprising to me since as an established instructor it had been some time since Paul was in graduate studies and those studies were not in composition theory. He stated:

I know that with social construction people form their ideas by working in the group together, as opposed to working in solitary—having peer collaboration, having group-led discussion, and of course online communities should be doing the same thing, because that's of course how you set up the classroom—the actual bricks and mortar classroom—so the goal would be to do the same thing in a different format online.

Paul was one of the instructors who also immediately defined the differences in community in his online courses versus his traditional writing courses. As Liz also said, he felt the community in his online course was typically more business-like, whereas students in the face-to-face class were more likely to bond and become more “buddy-buddy.” Paul, too, cited the same lack of personal or non-class-related interaction in his online courses and the same focus on the course material. He summed up the on-campus and online writing classes as “two definitely different types of communities—neither good nor bad, just different.”

In Paul's discussion of the particular manifestations of community online, he spoke specifically about procrastination, high attrition, and rude behavior, obviously immediately thinking of some of the effects of a lack of a sense of real community, rather than the causes of

that lack of community. It seemed a given to him that a lesser sense of community was inherent in the online writing course, although he felt it was difficult to determine exactly why the online environment affected students greater in those ways (see Berry, 2000, p. 198), and he was more concerned simply with addressing the problems that inherent lack led to.

Like Michael, Paul too cited students' forthcoming-ness as the first effect he thought of when considering the influence the online community had on his students' writing: writing that was generally "more personal." He didn't phrase it as Michael's "sense of freedom," but instead stated that his online writers "really are able to pour their souls out, because they're just sending to this faceless person." Regarding the confessional nature of that writing, both Paul and Stan (in the fourth case study) used the comparison between students relating to an instructor online versus seeing that teacher in person, to emphasize online students' lack of accountability for either the confessional nature of their writing or the quality of their writing. Paul went on to elaborate that students' sense of audience as writers was also different online (Napierkowski, 2001, p. 1), being careful, however, to note that individual classes—online or traditional—and their senses of audience awareness could vary greatly as well. He noted some issues that affected the online social environment, such as tone (for both the writer and reader) and the level of formality in students' writing (particularly in discussion board postings), both things that affected the projected or perceived persona of a student (or instructor) online (Lamonica, 1996, pp. 209-210). And Paul also brought up the interesting matter of the asynchronous nature of much communication online (see Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007, p. 309) and how it could become a barrier to accurate communication among the members of the class community. Finally, regarding the "minutiae" of writing—mechanical issues, grammar, punctuation, etc.—Paul saw the online environment as a hindrance to his students improving this aspect of their

writing, stating that those types of things were more difficult to explain when one did not have the “captive audience” of a face-to-face class and must communicate electronically (Romi, 2000, p. 43; Hara & Kling 2005, p. 559). It might be argued that dealing with such surface-level errors in writing is not a community issue, but Paul saw it largely as a communication problem between instructor and student, which suggests it falls into the realm of community; it could be argued, though, that since addressing those types of errors is difficult to do online then doing so might also be a technology issue.

In discussing the community of his current course, Paul talked about a number of changes he had made with that aspect of the course in mind, and his comments showed the importance of the experience and reflection a veteran instructor can bring to bear on his teaching. He talked specifically about recent practical changes in his own online teaching—things he had learned from the past—and how those changes had benefited the community aspect of his course. First, he was more deliberately emphasizing to his students the importance of the participatory aspects of the class (a practice Liz, Michael, and Stan all realized they should have implemented). He combined that instruction with practical things to facilitate students’ participation: for example, including the link to the Testing Center website to help students schedule their in-person course activities, along with communicating more frequently via email about things like course deadlines. These may seem like minor things, but writing instructors new to the online forum might not be aware of how much such little “extras” can affect their students’ experiences in their courses (Hegarty, Bostock, & Collins, 2000, p. 209). Along the same lines, Paul felt that his own regular, daily engagement with the course (which undoubtedly changed the frequency and immediacy of the feedback and communication students received from him) had made a positive difference in the community of this particular course, when he compared it to other courses when

he had had less time to check in on the courses every day (see McCartan, 2000, p. 187). Finally, like some other instructors, Paul had recently added a Cyber Café to his online courses, a discussion board forum specifically designed, in Paul's case, as a space where students could publicly ask questions about the course (and see others' questions) and where Paul's answers would be seen by everyone; his experience so far had been that students were making use of that public forum and it had been useful to the community aspect of his courses.

Regarding participation in the community of his online writing course, Paul described successful students by traits that could be attributed to just about any teaching forum: discipline and following directions. However he did point out that those traits were especially important in the online writing course. Because he acted primarily as a facilitator in his online courses (as opposed to a more traditional teaching role in his face-to-face classes), leaving students free to choose the level and frequency with which they interacted with him, self-discipline on the part of the students was critical. Like the other veteran, Kardish, Paul did not track students down and continually remind them of things like due dates, assignment guidelines, and the requirements for participation in the course. In fact, although their online classes were set up quite differently, Kardish and Paul, the two most veteran instructors, had similar attitudes regarding putting the burden of involvement in the course back on the students themselves (the importance this focus on student accountability was one of the major findings of the study; see Chapter Five). Paul described himself as the facilitator of the course, and in my observation he represented a role somewhere between Kardish's active-but-professionally-distant role and Liz's hands-off role (both discussed later). Paul was available to his students but to the degree an individual student chose to seek him out. He was the person who set up the possibility of community in his courses but was not the heart of that community. In fact, his involvement, it seemed to me, was largely

dependent upon the students and would be more behind the scenes, as he tended to participate “extra” via individual email communication with students, rather than on the discussion boards, although he was present there, too. This would mean that students’ impressions of Paul would vary greatly depending on how much they sought him out; those who solicited a lot of extra help would see Paul as a very engaged instructor, while those who did not would see only his less-interactive public persona on the discussion boards.

Throughout the study, Paul was fairly consistent in his measured and somewhat neutral comments about the importance of community in his online writing courses. He had begun by comparing community online with community in face-to-face classes and stating that difference was neither good nor bad: just different. He had also pointed out that the community experience was largely dependent on the demographics of a given class or even on individual students. At the end of the study he again pointed out the relativity of community in given classes, noting how the first students to communicate and participate in a class could set the communal tone, for better or for worse. His concluding comments suggested that the importance of community in his students’ actual writing did not particularly stand out to him one way or the other and student success in writing was far more dependent on factors other than a student’s individual involvement in the course community or the character of a given course’s community as a whole.

In summary, I would characterize Paul’s position on community in the online writing course as realistic and balanced. Paul simply accepted as a given that community did not form in online writing courses like it did in on-campus classes, and he was not overly concerned about that. He valued the social aspects of the course—especially if they actually translated to improvements in students’ writing—well enough to see a well-developed course community online as a positive thing, a bonus perhaps, but if that community did not develop he would not

necessarily consider the course a failure. Paul was more concerned with keeping students motivated and felt that could be better addressed, often, through the instructor dealing with students individually. Also, Paul was focused on tangible results (retention rates, students completing all assignments, meeting deadlines, and the quality of the students' actual writing) more than on a subjective positive community experience. He felt once instructors realized the community aspect of an online writing course was very likely to be different from that of a face-to-face course (and possibly inherently less significant), they could simply accept that fact and focus on other equally or more important elements of the course and of writing instruction.

Summary of Kathleen's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

When first asked about community in her online writing course, Kathleen had a rather well-developed notion about community, based partly on her current experience in Paul's course and partly on her recollections from her previous college writing courses which had been face-to-face courses. Kathleen began her explanation of community by saying it meant not only people coming together in the same space but being familiar and comfortable with one another, suggesting that community to her was more than simply proximity. She specifically mentioned group discussions and peer review as the activities she associated with community in a writing course, and she felt in the past those aspects of community in her writing courses had been important in improving her writing. She said she had often made many changes in her writing based on peer and instructor feedback, because their comments had resulted in her "writing for the reader."

Although her views about the community of Paul's class would undergo great change between the first and second interviews, Kathleen started by saying that her online writing class

was not only the most interactive online class she had taken but was possibly the most interactive of all her classes, including her traditional college courses. This is pretty remarkable, considering that of all the participating instructors Paul probably stressed interaction the least, largely leaving the degree to which students participated in the community of the course up to their own needs and inclinations beyond his fairly modest requirements on the discussion boards. Kathleen did stress, though, the importance of those requirements, and it appeared that this single exercise had resulted, for Kathleen, in her most interactive college learning experience: she expressed her preference for this degree of interaction and even said it resulted in more of a classroom-based feeling because she and her classmates were responding directly to each other's ideas and comments. She noted other online classes had not "made" students interact, so the level of interaction in Paul's class was good, but on the other hand she noted that most students did not go beyond what was required; as an example, she stated she felt most students did not use the optional Cyber Café.

It later became clear, though, that Kathleen felt the degree to which she was required to participate in the course did not result in a real sense of connection with others and that for her mere participation did not necessarily equal the sense of familiarity or comfort she had used to define community. She felt distanced from her online writing instructor, in contrast with the high degree of connection she had felt with her instructor in her previous traditional composition course. She explicitly cited the online environment as a barrier to meaningful communication with Paul (see Jones, 2004, p. iv), and she did not feel she knew him very well or had much insight into his personality. She characterized her email communication with him as brief and very straightforward. She said:

I kind of feel like he's just there for questions and then he just grades our work. I mean, he's there for help, but I think Dr. ____ [in her face-to-face composition course], she was there all the time, and I feel like I had a better relationship with her, because she knew how I wrote; she gave me advice right then and there, and I could ask her questions any time—where I can ask [Paul] questions any time, but I don't really . . . it's hard to relate to someone when you don't really know anything about them, or you haven't seen them, and sometimes people aren't really comfortable talking to someone through email that they haven't met in person or they don't really know anything about.

Likewise, Kathleen felt little sense of connection with her online classmates, something she missed from her previous writing class. She acknowledged the successful introduction exercise in the beginning of the course but said later she had just “forgotten people,” forgotten what information went with what classmate, a problem other students reported, noting they only remembered, if anyone, the people with whom they regularly interacted. In fact, Kathleen ended up reaching out via Facebook (just the public social networking site itself, not a course site such as the one Michael had set up for his class) to the one student in Paul's class whom she had already known, having attended high school with her, for outside-of-class interaction and discussion about the course, and the person she actually got the most feedback on her writing from for Paul's course was one of her roommates, but “he doesn't necessarily give me advice to put stuff in my paper, because he doesn't know what we're learning, but just the grammar stuff he checks over.” It must also be noted, though, that Kathleen did not take advantage of all the opportunities for feedback Paul provided; she did not, for example, submit drafts of her papers to Paul before turning them in for grades.

However, Kathleen was not sure how the community of the course might be improved. Peer review was not utilized in her online writing class (remember that Paul had removed that element from his course due to the shortened summer session), whereas she had participated in it and liked it in her earlier face-to-face composition class. Even when asked if she would like to see that practice in her online course, though, Kathleen gave only a qualified “maybe” and noted that she felt many students in the online class were less invested in the course than her face-to-face peers had been. She speculated that the feedback she might get from her online colleagues on her papers might not be serious or useful, pointing out that she felt many people’s comments on the discussion boards were short and lacking in details:

I just feel that some people who take online classes take it because they don’t want to come to school, and they don’t want to put that effort into stuff, so I feel like they wouldn’t be as detailed as the people where I’m in class, the teacher is there, they know they have to participate, whereas [online] I could send a paper in and our teacher would think they’re giving the greatest advice and they [classmates] could just be saying, “Oh, it’s great. Change this one period.” And you’re just like “OK”

Again, instructor enforcement of policies seemed a key. Even regarding discussion board posts, for example when the students were discussing the short stories they read, Kathleen saw a lot of perfunctory participation:

usually for this class you’re supposed to comment on someone else’s post, and it’s supposed to be a minimum of like fifty words, and some people only do a sentence. So a lot of people, when you have to reply back to somebody to get their advice on it, they kind of—they don’t really care.

She did note that occasionally ideas discussed on the discussion boards might find their way into her papers, giving one of the few examples of one of the students participating in the study definitely using some aspect of the course community to influence her writing in some way other than editing. In Paul's class Kathleen was sometimes experiencing the trivialized writing and lack of a sense of affiliation among classmates Fleckenstein (2005) found characterized some online writing courses (p. 150).

In contrast to her speculation about how peer review might go in the online writing course, Kathleen had seen the opposite effect in her previous, traditional composition class: she had not only seen peer review used effectively but she admitted had herself been more highly motivated in her writing; partly that was due to the subject matter of the papers assigned (her online composition class was literature-based, something she confessed to having little interest in) but partly it was due to her own sense of engagement in and connection to the face-to-face class versus the online course. Kathleen readily admitted that both course content and her own motivation played very big roles in students' investment in a course:

I actually think that I did better writing in my 111 class. I thought my papers were a lot better. I don't know if it's because—I'm the type of writer that if you give me a topic I can go for hours and just keep writing and writing and writing, where [Paul] kind of has a two-page limit where before my papers had to be five to seven pages, each paper, and we had compare and contrast papers in my English 111 class, all sorts of different stuff, so I feel like my papers there was more time to do them, so I was more into them and I had more information to back up everything, so I feel like those papers I did a lot better on. I mean, Dr. ____ graded kind of hard, but I feel like this [English 112] is more related to

stories and it's not stuff you kind of want to write about; it's stuff you have to write about.

Kathleen's negative experience in the community of the course (and her perception that other students in the course might be unmotivated as well) was due to a number of factors completely out of the instructor's control: the online environment which Kathleen, like Alexander, just inherently disliked, the course content (the literature component), the limited time to work on assignments, and students' attitudes (including her own).

By the end of the course, Kathleen's frustration with her online writing experience was really starting to show; she compared it unfavorably to several traditional English courses she had taken, and she specifically cited the online forum as a barrier to connecting with others and getting much-wanted feedback on her writing. Once again, the case seemed to be that for these successful writers the community aspects of their online courses had only a limited influence—or at least what they perceived to be a limited influence—on their writing (the notable lack of community influence on the writing of successful students is a major point discussed in the next chapter). They used communication and participation in the course mostly because it was required and partly to ensure they understood the writing assignments and to get feedback on surface-level aspects of their writing like grammar and punctuation; otherwise, Kathleen, like the other student participants, reported writing for the most part independently, with the community aspects of her course, such as they might be, sometimes largely separate from her actual writing. One of the questions Berry (2000) asked was what types of writers or learners are best served online (p. 203), and in looking at strong writers in online classes, that question is quite relevant. Clearly, Kathleen was having success in her online writing course, but it seemed that was in spite of the forum in which she felt isolated and unengaged in her class.

Kathleen cited as the strength of the course community Paul's use of the discussion board for students to share ideas, and she specifically said that actually requiring students to participate was in her opinion very necessary. Her chief regret regarding the community of the course was lack of interaction with her instructor, but she admitted she had initiated communication with Paul very infrequently. In offering advice about community to online writing instructors, Kathleen, once again referring back to her previous face-to-face writing course, felt that the more exposure students had to each other's writing the more they could benefit and it is safe to interpret Kathleen's comments as meaning she, too, would have preferred more interaction online with her peers as well as her instructor. She also made the unusual recommendations that the entire online class should be required to meet in person at least once per week (essentially asking for a hybrid course) and that peer review of papers be mandatory. Regarding the latter, she said the extra work required would definitely be worth the benefits students would see in their writing. In spite of the fact that Kathleen had done well in this course without as much community interaction or influence as she would have preferred, she still insisted that community was very important, and she advised online writing students to participate actively, even beyond what they might be required to do by their instructors.

Analysis of Kathleen's Writing and the Community of the Course

Like the other students, Kathleen was recommended for the study by her instructor because she was having success in the course both with her writing and her participation in the course. Since Kathleen did not receive any peer feedback on her papers, the two elements—writing and participation—are in her case only somewhat related to each other. An examination

of her participation in the public aspects of the course first serves to set the context for a look at her writing.

Discussion board postings were the sole requirement of and forum for student participation in Paul's course. As a reminder, Paul usually required a student to post 250 words on his or her own ideas and to respond to at least one classmate's ideas with a response of at least fifty words. Discussion board topics fell into three categories. First, there were two optional discussion forums: one was a forum in which students were to post thoughts on knowing their audiences for their writing, and the other was the Cyber Café where students could post questions about the course or assignments and have those questions answered either by other students or by Paul. The second category of discussion board topics was the discussion of various short stories students read for the literature-based portion of the course. The third and final category focused on the major research paper for the course, and students were to post their proposed topics and, later on, to report on how the process of writing the paper was going.

Although Paul regarded Kathleen as a good participator, and although Kathleen herself expressed the desire for a greater sense of connection with her classmates, interestingly she did not participate in either of the optional discussion board forums I observed. She neither posted nor replied to the "Know Your Audience" forum nor to the Cyber Café. After our first interview, I was frankly surprised to learn that she never took part in the latter. I knew from our conversations that Kathleen read the Cyber Café posts (she never mentioned the other optional forum), but she never asked a single question of her own there, nor did she respond to any other student's question. The fact that Kathleen was suggested by Paul as an active community member, along with the cursory participation I saw in some other participating students, suggests

instructors might have false impressions of what students are active community members beyond surface-only participation, an idea to be developed in the Conclusions chapter.

The majority of the discussion forums were used to discuss students' ideas on the short stories they read. I have not included an examination of all of those discussions, because the pattern for them was identical. Here I simply look at a typical example of Kathleen's work in those short story forums. In one of the short story discussions, Kathleen posted the following on Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums." It is included in its entirety to show the level of thought and detail Kathleen typically brought to her posts.

I believe that the story by John Steinbeck, *The Chrysanthemums*, was hard to comprehend. I believe that the themes revolve around someone doing something they love while trying to maintain other things. For example, Elisa was always working in her garden and had the best chrysanthemums around, because she stuck to what she loved. However, it was kind of like she was missing out on other things in the world like going out with her husband, being a good wife, or missing out on the conversation her husband and some men had at her house. Elisa seems like she is by herself in her garden most of the time and even though she loves what she does I think she would like to do other things as well. I think she is scared of doing something in her life and thinks she needs the same schedule each day. She seems like she believes she has everything under control and does not want anyone to interfere with it. For example, when the repairman came to try and fix things and sharpen her tools she hesitated. He was trying to get money and she did not want any help from the man. It was an unfamiliar face with an unfamiliar talent and she believed that she could do anything that man could do. However, when the man told her he knew someone who was interested in growing chrysanthemums her full attention went to him and she finally let the man help her with things.

I believe that the repairman helped Elisa realize that there are other things in her life that she could open up to. I think the man showed her that she has the passion for what she does but she is capable of doing so much more than that. She realizes that she is a good wife, a great planter, and does anything she puts her mind too. I think I would tell her even though she may not have the same interest as some people and they may not respect everything she does she has to only make herself happy.

John Steinbeck's story, *The Chrysanthemums*, is a great depiction of how easy it can be for people to get set in their ways and become afraid to stray off the set path. It shows how being overtaken by such things can cause a loss of both self-worth and freedom. Although the main character, Elisa Allen, seems content with the life she lives, she still has the natural desire of exploring new experiences. One of the themes in the story is the struggle she has with limitations. Elisa wants to be a self-reliant woman but she also wants to be the perfect wife and not break the "rules". However these limitations are not a result of her husband's opinions, but rather an internal battle with her own ideals.

The traveling repairman's presence causes her to begin to think "outside" of the box, and opens her eyes to the unthinkable concept of her being a strong woman. She begins to gain confidence in knowing that she could fix the pans herself and that she could possibly be capable of living a rugged life on the road. When he comments on her Chrysanthemums, her pride shines and she is able to see past the limitations that had constrained her. The theme of the importance of a high

self worth is present toward the end of Steinbeck's work. Elisa's new found assurance was shattered when she saw her prized flowers had been carelessly tossed out like trash. As the truth set in that the repairman had been playing off her emotions, she reverts back to her comfortable mindset. My advice would be that taking the leap into new experiences may be scary, but it is well worth the happiness they may bring.

Kathleen's post was about 640 words long, beyond what was required, and as was usually the case it was one of the most substantive posts by any of the students. Even though Kathleen did not write a paper on this story, she had clearly read it closely and thought about it carefully. She then posted the following in reply to another student:

Hi S____. I agree with what you are saying about Elisa. I think that when she met the repair man she was jealous of him. He seemed to not know which direction he was going in life, but he seemed to enjoy that the most about his life. Elisa seemed like she knew what she was passionate about in life, but she had the same schedule every day. You could tell she wanted something bigger and better in her life. She was trying to juggle being perfect at so many things in her life, and yet she still knew there was something else out there that she may be missing out on. I think she knows what is best for her, and should not give up on something that she thinks will make her happy.

Again, her typical response went far beyond the word length Paul required and was much more feedback than many other students received, which was often, as Kathleen described, "just one or two sentences." However, as was also the case more often than not, no other student replied to Kathleen's post. It was easy to understand how, after clearly taking her own role as a community member seriously and then hearing virtually nothing back on her ideas and comments, Kathleen would feel she was missing out on community connections in the course.

The final category of discussion board assignment had to do with the students' (non-literature based) research papers. Early in the course the students had to post their proposed topics, and then at the end they had to report on the progress of their writing for that paper. Again, Kathleen posted a detailed discussion of her proposed topic and her plan for writing her paper, that post being over twice the length Paul required. Again, Kathleen posted long (four times the required length), detailed, and encouraging comments about a peer's proposed topic. And again, Kathleen received no feedback from anyone on her own work; this suggests a more

mandatory, round-robin type of system (similar, as will be seen, to what Kardish used) was needed to ensure every writer received peer feedback. The pattern continued on the final discussion board conversation, where students discussed their progress thus far with their papers, with two noticeable differences. First, in her own discussion of her work Kathleen made this comment: “Since my paper is not fully completed and I am still making some finishes touches, I won’t be attaching it to my post. However, later on in the week I probably will attach it to my post for anyone who would like to read it.” She never did make her paper available to other students. Second, she finally did have someone comment on her discussion of the process she was going through on her research paper:

I agree with you completely! Starting my research paper was a major pain in the rear, and extremely overwhelming! I was able to get most of my information through EBSCO, the online database. It had all sorts of articles from newspapers and magazines! I would like to read your paper, I had no idea that there were different categories of breast cancer, that’s news to me!

As best I was able to determine, that post was the sole input from anyone in the class that Kathleen received on her major writing project for the course. She also did not send an early draft to Paul for feedback before she turned the paper in for a grade.

In discussing the influence of the community on Kathleen’s writing, I will work backwards since I just discussed the final research paper. At no point did anyone in the course see Kathleen’s actual paper before she turned it in for the grade. Others read about her proposed topic and her writing process for the paper, but they offered either no commentary or negligible commentary on her posted ideas. By Kathleen’s own report, she did have her roommate look over the paper for surface errors. She also specifically said, in regards to the research paper, “I don’t think anything really has influenced my writing in this class,” except, she pointed out, in a negative way: “I think the lack of interaction definitely affected my writing. I didn’t make any

changes. I just kind of wrote what I thought I was supposed to do. You couldn't really get any advice or anything to change. I didn't really talk to anybody about my paper."

However, regarding the two papers she wrote about short stories, earlier in the course, it was a somewhat different story. Kathleen said,

The friend that I knew from high school, she is probably the one that I talked to the most out of my class—just on Facebook and stuff. We talked about papers and stuff, you know, what she thought it was about and what I thought the story was about, and then we would write about it. So I think she probably would be the person that impacted my writing the most, because she's the one I talked to.

(As a brief aside, regarding Kathleen's friend from high school, the one person from the class with whom she would discuss aspect of the course outside of class, it is worth noting that Kathleen did not consult this friend for feedback on the final paper, which suggested to me Kathleen did not really feel that relationship was a helpful community influence for her.)

However, the influence discussions of the stories had on Kathleen's writing was not limited to her outside-of-class conversations with her friend. After reading the story and posting her own ideas (and her responses to others), she would carefully read the entire discussion if the particular forum was about a story she planned to write about. "Some of what people say really relates," she said, "and you think, 'Oh, I can put this in there, too.'"

As one example, Kathleen wrote a paper comparing Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* and their treatment of mental illness. In Kathleen's initial discussion board posts on these two pieces, her "advice" was simple and prescriptive. The Gilman's protagonist "needs to go to things such as parks or restaurants just to see that the world is not as bad as she may think," while Wurtzel "should not dwell on the past. Instead of starting

off fresh with her life she would rather sit in her room and be upset about what has already happened.” However, the class discussion of these two pieces complicated the issue of mental illness considerably, which may have been an influence on the position Kathleen ultimately took in her paper:

I have always thought that depression is a short term thing and eventually fades away.

When I read the two short stories *Prozac Nation* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* it opened my mind to how sometimes depression cannot be resolved by the help of anyone other than the person who is dealing with it I have realized an important fact; I learned that sometimes you just have to leave people alone to deal with their issues even though your first instinct is to try and make their problems better.

That position, and even some of the wording in it, can be tied directly to other students’ posts, so it is safe to say that the content of Kathleen’s paper, while it might have simply reflected the evolution of her own thoughts about the topic, was also probably directly affected by the discussion in which she took part.

In conclusion, when comparing Kathleen’s assessment of the influence of the community on her writing, which overall was somewhat negative, with my observations of the connections between the two, it is important to distinguish among several factors, which include the actual influences on Kathleen’s writing, the potential influences on her writing, and her application of those influences, actual or potential. To begin, in looking at the discussion board conversations about the short stories Kathleen wrote about, there does seem to be evidence that the ideas in her papers differed from the initial ideas she expressed, and that difference is likely due to the influence of her peers’ opinions. Second, there were opportunities for the community to influence her writing which Kathleen did not take advantage of; notably she did not submit early

drafts to Paul, she did not ask questions about her work of anyone in the course, and she sought help outside the class which she could have sought within it. On this point, though, it is important to point out that Kathleen regularly went above and beyond what was required of students on the discussion boards, posting sophisticated and detailed ideas, doing her best to help her classmates, but never receiving in return the level of help she gave. Finally, where there were participatory aspects of the course that related directly to students' writing (such as with the conversations about short stories), Kathleen did apparently make use of those opportunities to make changes in her writing. Overall, Kathleen's assessment of the influence of the course community on her writing was varied but appears to have been accurate. When discussing her short story papers, she did see an influence on them, and there appears to be evidence to support that conclusion; in discussing her research paper, she saw no outside influence from the class on her writing, and that too seemed to be the case when I looked at that assignment. Her overall negative assessment of her experience in the community of the course, though, seemed to be largely subjective and based on a comparison with her previous face-to-face composition course.

Comparison: Instructor Intentions and Student Experiences

From my conversations with Paul and my observation of his course, I saw that Paul had a very balanced and realistic perspective on community and its role in his online writing course, and his course-design reflected that balanced view. Experience had taught Paul that community in the online course was inherently different than in the traditional course—not better or worse, just different—so his expectations and intentions for community in the online writing course were adjusted accordingly, although he first stated that the community-related goals would be the same for both courses. He did value the social constructivist tenets of participation, interaction,

and discussion, therefore he made thirty percent of students' grades based on participation in the community of the course. Through both that percentage and his clear, detailed instructions to students regarding the quality of participation he expected on the discussion boards, it was clearly his intent to communicate this emphasis on community to his students. However, Paul did not try to recreate the social atmosphere (the "buddy-buddy" interaction) of the typical traditional course either through his own personality and influence or through the use of tools like Facebook or extracurricular activities. He was content to keep the interactive aspect of his online course focused on the writing-related goals of the course.

Another adjustment Paul intended for his online course was a change in both his role and the students'. Paul saw himself in a more traditional teaching role in his face-to-face courses, but it was his goal to be more of a resource and facilitator in the online course. Referring back to my "you can lead a horse to water" characterization, I also think Paul intended for his online students to take the initiative in their own learning to a greater degree, which as has already been seen Michael's class did not necessarily work. However, as long as they complied with the requirements for the community aspect of the course, the degree to which they sought out additional interaction with each other and with Paul was entirely up to the individual students. Paul was more focused on objective things like students completing assignments on time, showing up for the proctored exams, and writing high-quality papers. As for the latter, Paul felt he was more likely to affect that aspect of the course through personal intervention on individual papers than through any broader public role he might play in the course. He expected students to seek him out in that capacity if they felt they needed to. Similarly, he felt students would use the community of the course to the degree they needed to, which meant for him that the successful formation of a course community could be relative: one student might use those resources to

improve his or her writing, while another with access to the same community resources might not.

Paul's intent, in my view, was to create a course community that on the one hand held students accountable for a certain degree of participation which he felt would benefit them but on the other would—or at least could—be used by students according to their individual needs and preferences. It was also my assessment that students who were mature and motivated and who were strong self-advocates would have success in so using that community.

When I first interviewed Kathleen, my initial impression was that her experience of the course community differed strongly from what Paul intended for his students, but as I examined the transcripts of our interviews and Kathleen's work in the public aspect of the course, I moderated that view somewhat. Although Kathleen ended the study by characterizing her experience of the course community (and its influence on her writing) in language that clearly showed her disappointment, she had started out by describing Paul's course as one of the most interactive—online or traditional—she had taken part in. Even at the end of the study she stated as one strength of the course Paul's use of the discussion board assignments, and in particular his rather high standards for the quality of those discussions, evidenced by the minimum word lengths he required. And as the examples included throughout this case study show, Kathleen was usually an active and substantive participant in those discussions. Also, in addition to doing well in the interactive discussion board assignments, in two of the three papers for the course Kathleen's work showed evidence of having been influenced in the shaping of her ideas by the class discussions of the stories she wrote about.

It is true, however, that Kathleen's major paper for the course was not read by anyone else in the course, so it was not influenced by any other community member. Still the question

remains of why Kathleen would report so negatively on the lack of community or connection she felt with others in this course. I believe there are a couple of reasons for her perception that the community of the course largely failed her, while Paul, on the other hand had characterized the community of this particular course as an overall success.

First, Kathleen repeatedly compared the online course she took with Paul with her previous face-to-face composition course in which she not only had multiple opportunities for peer review but had also clearly had a much closer working relationship with her instructor. It did not seem that Kathleen was willing to accept the inherent differences in the two types of community that Paul recognized based on his long experience. She, like Alexander, wanted a face-to-face component added to the online writing course. Kathleen clearly strongly preferred the face-to-face forum, especially for writing classes, and admitted to being less motivated in her online course.

Secondly, due to what I saw as an online-induced shyness with her instructor, Kathleen did not seek out greater contact with Paul, although she clearly desired that greater contact. Had she done so, and especially had she submitted her drafts for early feedback from Paul, I believe she would have perceived her relationship with him—and thus with the community aspect of the course—very differently, as I am sure the students who had done so did.

Based on these conclusions, I can say that Kathleen's experience of the course community did differ from Paul's ideal goals for his students, but that difference was due to factors beyond his control. Also, it cannot be said that Kathleen's experience of the community or its influence on her writing was necessarily representative of other students. To begin with, in one way Kathleen's experience of the community was better than average: she did a very good job posting and responding to the discussion boards, and she probably benefited from articulating

her own ideas clearly and in detail and from reading others' work closely and responding to it; that would seem to be borne out in her two papers on short stories. Unfortunately—and this clearly did disappoint her—she never saw other students put the work into responding to her very good ideas and comments that she herself put in. It is easy to see that this could leave her with a bad impression of those exchanges.

Second, because other students did in fact take advantage of Paul's willingness to read and respond to their work, they undoubtedly had a more positive impression of Paul's engagement in their work and thus of connectedness with someone else in the course. This was an opportunity I believe Kathleen, with her strong desire for more personal connections in the course, would have benefited from greatly. Similarly, she did not seek help from others in the course on her writing (except when she and her friend discussed stories on Facebook), although arguably, once again, as a stronger writer who was getting good grades in the class she might have felt she did not need additional help.

Based on comparing these two key informants' descriptions of their intentions and experiences, respectively, and on my observations of the course, several things were apparent regarding community in the course and its potential influence on students' writing. Paul's emphasis on participation was objectively represented by its thirty percent proportion of a student's grade, a percentage shared with other courses I observed, but Paul generally had higher standards (and more clearly defined standards) for the quality he expected of students' posts, which meant students' exchanges were typically more substantive than was perhaps normal for most other classes, which I believe was one of his goals. Additionally, in a typical sixteen-week semester, Paul included peer review of papers in his online writing course, so normally participation and communication would have been emphasized to an even greater degree.

Beyond his objective emphasis on participation, Paul created a course in which students were free to seek him out as a resource to the degree they desired. After clearly communicating he was available to them, he let students choose their level of interaction with him. Because of this, outside of the required elements of participation, a student's experience of the community of the course (at least as related to the instructor) would be largely individual and could vary greatly from someone else's experience.

Such was the case with Kathleen. Although from my observation she participated in and benefited from the opportunities Paul had structured into the course to a greater degree than she felt she had, Kathleen's disappointment was largely due to missed opportunities, chances she had for greater interaction but did not pursue. Additionally, her own preference for the traditional classroom and her own lack of engagement in the too-fast summer online course strongly colored Kathleen's view of her experience, which is why she could characterize the community of the course as lacking and failing to influence her writing as she would have liked, while Paul viewed the course community as an overall success since it had resulted in high retention, high participation rates, and a high passing rate. Comparing the two, it appeared to me Kathleen was simply looking for a course other than the one Paul was actually offering.

Case Study 3: Liz and Bonnie

Course Description

Liz's course was an English 112 College Composition II course, and it was the third online course she had taught. Despite its title the nature of this course was somewhat split between a writing course and a literature course, which was a feature of the Department's requirements for the course, not an individual instructor's choice. The coursework for Liz's

students consisted of a syllabus quiz, three major papers, weekly journal postings (on the course discussion board), weekly peer reviews (also posted on the discussion board), two on-campus proctored exams, and attending two plays or book readings and writing a summary/analysis of each. In lieu of the latter, a student could choose to write either one or two additional essays. The stated attendance policy was worded thus: “Students may not fail to log in or participate for more than two weeks FOR ANY REASON!” In terms of grading value pertaining to the community elements of the course, the weekly discussion board postings (journals) were equal in weight to one of the major papers, as was the case with the weekly peer review postings.

Related to attendance and grading was the fact that Liz utilized contract grading in her course. This was significant in part because it put the rather liberal attendance policy (a student missing two weeks in a row in an eight week course) into proper perspective. In order to get an A in the course, a student had to complete every one of the items listed above in the course work satisfactorily. A student settling for a B could miss one of the “outside” assignments (attending a play or book reading or writing an alternative essay); a C student could skip both such outside assignments. Any student failing to complete any requirement beyond that automatically failed. So, although the attendance policy might seem lenient on the surface, the reality was that to have any hope of passing the course students must complete the vast majority of the work on time and in a manner that met Liz’s very specific guidelines for “quality, academic writing.” It is also important to note that two of the major course requirements—posting to the discussion boards and peer review—were directly related to community.

Also showing a significant emphasis on community was the fact that Liz used the “Groups” tool in Blackboard to organize her students into small groups, cohorts of several students each who would work together throughout the course, particularly in the area of

reviewing each other's writing and giving one another feedback. As part of her introduction of students to the peer review aspect of the course, Liz posted on her syllabus this statement: "You will be required to share your written work with classmates. If you do not want your classmates to read something, you should not submit it for this class." Other than that note and the listing of discussion board postings and peer review in the course work section, Liz made no other mention of participation and interaction or other community-related elements of the course on her syllabus.

Although not strongly emphasized overtly in the syllabus, Liz's valuing of the element of community in her course was clearly inherent in her policies. First, she automatically organized students into small groups for the purposes of discussion and peer review, one of the hallmarks of social constructivist pedagogy in composition (Howard, 2001, pp. 59-60). Second, the discussion board and peer review aspects of the course were not only equivalent in value to two of the three major papers for the course but were actually essential to a student's passing the course. Even those students who were prepared to accept grades other than an A could not choose to forego participation in these community exercises; failure to be an active member of the course community, at least in theory, necessarily barred the student from passing.

On the discussion boards and peer reviews of writing, as she did with the writing assignments themselves, Liz emphasized quality of communication: length, detail, substance, and insight. She also started early in trying to build rapport between group members. For example, in Liz's first discussion board assignment, she had the small-group members (usually four in number) interact specifically with each other, rather than with the whole class, which seemed to be the more common practice among instructors in this study. She directed students to introduce themselves, ask questions of other group members, and respond to the questions

others had for them. This first assignment serves as an example both of the types of interactive assignments Liz favored and the substance she was after. Bonnie, whom Liz had recommended for the study based both on Bonnie's quality of writing and her participation in the community of the course, serves as a good representative model for what Liz wanted students to do on the discussion board:

Hello everyone, my name is Bonnie. I am a thirty-one-year-old, single, working parent. I was married for eight years and have been on my own now for three. I am so lucky to have two beautiful, healthy children. A___ is seven and is what every mother could hope for. She is confident, intelligent, compassionate, an all around wonderful person. Z___ is five and amazes me every day with his intellect and wit. I chose to use my divorce as an opportunity for self improvement.

I did not enroll in college until last fall. Due to necessity, I began working forty hours a week my senior year in high school and continued in that direction. However, I cannot fairly say that I would trade the "education" I have gained along the career path I have traveled thus far. I was in banking for a few years, where at a young age, I held a supervisory title. Since 1998, I have worked as a legal secretary and paralegal in both civil and criminal law. I know that I can make a living doing this, but, I want to spend every day doing something conducive to my personality. I plan to obtain my Associates from [the study site] and my Bachelors from VCU in Business with a focus in marketing. I finally decided "what I want to be when I grow up." It is invigorating to proclaim that I am going to pursue a career in sales, preferably within the medical field. The task ahead of me is intimidating. I have spent many hours silently questioning the impacts of the time spent away from my children while trying to reach my goals. I find peace in reflecting on the day the three of us walked hand-in-hand across the campus to meet with my advisor. My daughter squeezed my hand. "Z___, this is where mom goes to college." He smiled at me and replied, "Mom, I am going to college."

Questions:

M___: Have you taken a speech class and, if not, do you plan to?

C___: What thoughts do you have as to where you may apply your art major?

D___: Can you tell me a positive and negative opinion you have of VCU?

To be sure, not all students went into such detail in all discussion board assignments, but Bonnie's post did what Liz wanted the introductions to do: establish the identities of group members and get them talking back and forth to each other. Bonnie's introduction was detailed and personal, explaining to her group members who she was and what her circumstances and goals were. Her questions to others were either in response to information they had provided about themselves or, in the case of the last, to elicit information about an institution that she and her fellow group member had in common. Her group members in turn answered her questions, and Bonnie responded in detail to the questions they had for her. Although Liz had not set minimum or maximum word lengths for these posts, Bonnie and her group members engaged in a substantial conversation (Bonnie's contribution alone came close to one-thousand words), and my impression on reading that conversation was that by the end of it the group members had a very clear sense of each other's personalities and goals; in short, they were beginning to form their community for the course from the very first day of the class.

Liz herself was notable in this first exchange and in many subsequent conversations by her absence, which was by design; as with will also be seen with Kardish, Liz sought to decentralize her role as instructor and found the online environment conducive to doing so. One of Liz's other stated goals as an instructor, communicated in our first interview, was to improve at facilitating group work in all her writing classes, both online and face-to-face, and her efforts toward that goal were clear throughout this class. Although she would sometimes question whether or not she should be more active in the course community, whether she should play a

more central role, Liz's class for the most part was one of those I observed in which the student-centered tenet of social constructivism (Rickly, 2004, p. 46) was notably present. In fact, in Liz's class the course-design substantially included student-centered discussion, interaction, and peer feedback (Howard, 2001, pp. 58-60), and, along with the actual writing for the course, community was obviously a concern of the instructor and at least could be a significant part of the experience for the students.

While Liz described herself as sometimes struggling to find her role—or rather the right balance between “presence” and “absence”—in the community, she also reported mixed success with the community of the course as the summer session went on. Attrition had some negative effects on her small-group arrangements (see Ross, Morrison, Smith, and Cleveland as cited. in Wheeler, 2006, p. 175), and participation (and the quality of that participation) among some students was not what she had hoped for, as some students—in spite of Liz's emphasis on the importance of doing so—clearly did not take the interactive aspects of the course or their roles as community members as seriously as they should have. Strong, responsible students like Bonnie could succeed in both the writing and community aspects of the course, but others would struggle considerably in one or both. Liz herself characterized the success she had in fostering community (and its influence on student writing) as mixed at best, and upon reflection said she wished she had emphasized that element of the course even more.

In summary, this is how I would characterize Liz's course from a social constructivist perspective. Relatively recently out of graduate school, with a degree in composition and rhetoric, Liz was thoroughly familiar with the theories and practices of social constructivist composition pedagogy. She espoused those values and sought to incorporate them into her writing courses. Liz's social constructivist values manifested themselves in her course design,

evaluation, and practices. She tried to avoid the teacher-centered paradigm (Rickly, 2004, p. 46), and engage her online students in more self-centered learning and writing (Williams, 2006, p.149). The course-design definitely incorporated student-centered discussion, interaction, and peer feedback (Howard, 2001, pp. 58-60). The course I observed was Liz's third online writing course, and she described herself as having received very little training in teaching writing online (see Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, pp. xii-xiii) and as being in a transition stage in which she was experimenting with adapting the theories and methods she used in her face-to-face courses to her online writing instruction, a transition others have suggested new online writing instructors take more seriously and think through more deliberately, rather than simply transplanting, as-is, face-to-face courses online (Neff & Whithaus, 2008, p. 59). I would agree with Liz's own assessment that the community aspects of her course worked to a limited degree, although my observations and my conversations with Bonnie led me to believe Liz had more successfully achieved her goals than she believed. Liz required students to become active members of the course community and provided them opportunities to do so. While it might be true that some students would have wished for more instruction in the community aspect of the course, it was equally true that a motivated and responsible student like Bonnie could have a very positive community experience in Liz's course; similarly, the degree to which a student might experience positive community influences on his or her writing was largely dependent on the attitudes and efforts of the individual student.

Summary of Liz's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

Because of her recent graduate work in composition and rhetoric, in addition to her own philosophical bent as a writing instructor, Liz had a clear grasp of social constructivist theory and practice from the start of the study. She described it:

It means that the teachers provide minimal scaffolding and not necessarily minimal instruction but that they give the students as much freedom as possible over their work, and between the student and her or his peers they work together to enhance each other's writing, to improve it, to make meaningful suggestions. Social constructivist to me means that the students themselves are responsible for a lot of their own learning.

Her idea of community mirrored Diken's (2003) "creating a space where students and teachers can experience being among others and interacting in its true sense (p. 263).

Liz also asserted that community was "very significant" to her in her writing courses and expressed her ambition to improve her teaching in that area, especially when it came to "facilitating effective peer review in groups." Interestingly, she also immediately began describing community in her online writing course by contrasting it with that in her face-to-face writing courses, one of several instructors to define online community by that comparison. Although Liz felt the online environment was a challenge to building community, she also stated that her online students were a "more professional" community, more focused on writing and helping each other than her on-campus students, who socialized more. Liz noted that while the online forum seemed to prevent—or at least fail to encourage—some of the casual socializing she saw in her face-to-face writing classes, this was not necessarily a bad thing. Online, she saw a lack of the casual "chitter-chatter" typical of her traditional courses. This might be a function of the more well-developed sense of audience some online writing students have demonstrated

(Napierkowski, 2001, p. 1) as well as an example of the online writing course allowing instructors “to provide students with a real-world opportunity to examine and participate in a professional discourse community” (Guglielmo, 2005/2006, quoting Knowlton, p. 104).

Similar to another instructor (Kardish), Liz thought that at least some of her online students were stronger writers than her students in traditional courses “because of the collaborative environment” that she saw, specifically, online. Even the quality of ideas she encountered in her online classes were often “far superior, intelligent, and nuanced, than the responses that you get in the in-class setting.” She also cited the public nature of writing for the online class, along with the safety that the online environment created when critiquing another’s work, as contributing to “radical” and “more meaningful revisions and changes” in students’ writing, as opposed to the lack of substantive peer feedback she generally saw in her face-to-face classes, wherein there was almost “a consensus” among students to be kind and give each other very moderate and generic feedback on their writing. However, Liz was careful to distinguish the dichotomy she saw between two groups of online students: those who were “more focused” and “far superior” than face-to-face students versus those who would use the anonymity of the online community to “hide” and “slip in shoddy work.” So in her experience, the online community could have both good and bad effects on students’ writing. As Liz also observed, students could use the community of the online course either to excel or to descend below even mediocrity; as Fitzpatrick (2006) stated, the success or failure of peer interactions in online writing courses is largely dependent on “the expectations, attitudes, and participation of students” (p. 124). Those who fully participated in the community of Liz’s course not only gave each other more substantive feedback on each other’s writing, but doing so had a direct and positive impact on quality of their writing, as has been found in other studies of online writing students (Berry,

2000, pp. 194-95); however, the students Liz saw who would use the online community to “hide” and “slip in shoddy work” were demonstrating the trivialized writing and lack of substantive communication found by Fleckenstein (2005, p. 150) and Hara and Kling (2005, p. 559) respectively. Here again, what individual students made of the community could make or break both their experience in the course and their writing.

As the semester went on, in this particular class, peer-review—a key feature of all her writing courses, online or face-to-face—was hindered by typical problems for online writing classes: unexpectedly high attrition in the course (Ross, Morrison, Smith, and Cleveland as cited in Wheeler, 2006, p. 175), some students’ unwillingness to participate and communicate with their group members (Fleckenstein, 2005, p. 150), and the technical hassles (Duncan, 2005, pp. 80-81) of having to switch students and their work from one group to the next in order to merge groups that had lost members. Still, when comparing this class to other online courses she had taught, Liz characterized this one as “about average.” As she had previously, Liz mentioned the “dichotomy” of her online classes: high-achieving, highly participatory students versus those who barely—if at all—took part in the community activities of the class.

Liz brought up several influences on community that other instructors had not. First, she mentioned the writing skills—or lack thereof—of students as affecting the community of the course. I interpreted this to mean, first, that students who were weaker writers were less likely to become actively involved in a course the subject matter of which was not one of their strengths, and, second, that since the online forum was exclusively text-based, those weaker writers were not only less likely but perhaps less able to participate in the interactive aspects of the course (Coffield, Essid, Lasarenko, Record, Selfe, & Stilley, 2000, p. 294). Liz also mentioned the accelerated pace of the summer course as having an unexpected influence on the community of

the course: at the mid-point of the course, she stated that the attrition for class had not been as *high* as it should have been, meaning in this summer course she was still dealing with a number of non- or less-participating students (who might have been negatively influencing the rest of the students in the course) that she would have normally lost in a regular semester; this is interesting because it raises the question of whether or not attrition—generally considered to be a negative influence on community (Ross, Morrison, Smith, and Cleveland as cited in Wheeler, 2006, p. 175)—might not, in some cases, be a positive influence on the remaining students. Finally, Liz mentioned an “ultimatum” email she sent to prompt students to participate in the course to a greater degree that had “definitely influenced” more students to participate. Here is the pertinent part of that email:

Please also note that peer response (responding to research ideas/questions) and journal/HOMEWORK (ie-bibliography, posting source material) completion are equal to one essay apiece. **Therefore, I refuse to acknowledge or accept a student's rough draft (coming momentarily) until she or he completes ALL the homework for this week. THIS MEANS YOU WILL FAIL IF YOU DO NOT DO YOUR HOMEWORK FOR THIS WEEK!!!!** Please also remember that this is an accelerated class, and if you don't think you can complete all your work, you may want to withdrawal before the 26th. If you don't respond to any of your peers' ideas, the highest grade you can get is a C IF everything else is perfect. Ditto for the homework assignments/journals.

Liz said she felt this approach was “not necessarily a positive thing” but was necessary, because students had not been following similar directions from the syllabus. From what I was able to observe from the various classes, Paul's and Kardish's more direct approaches (discussed in the last case study) were more effective in eliciting the student-behaviors they were trying to achieve.

From Liz's perspective, she described herself as more “hands-off” in her online classes. She also saw the instructor's role—at least her own—as being more professional than social. She did not routinely participate in the discussion board postings of her class and wondered whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. She tended to interject herself into the course on a more

individual rather than public basis, as she responded to and commented on her students' individual papers. Whereas another instructor explained his role in terms of what could be called professional distance, Liz explicitly stated that she was *not* a part of her course's community. Despite describing her role as hands-off, Liz, when discussing in interviews her relationship with her students, sounded very engaged, particularly with the students she felt were taking the course seriously, doing good work, and soliciting her feedback, but she also pointed out that those deeper relationships were largely the result of the *students* initiating greater contact with her, noting that she would not "force" students to communicate with her; this idea was an omen for one of the key findings of the study, discussed in detail in the following chapter: the role of student responsibility in successful community.

In addition to some generic traits necessary for student success that Liz mentioned, she primarily focused on students' use of technology and their literacy skills as being crucial keys to success in her online writing courses. I would interpret both of those abilities as, primarily, community-related attributes, because a lack of either of those abilities creates a significant barrier to participation in the online community (Coffield, Essid, Lasarenko, Record, Selfe, & Stilley, 2000, p. 294). Several times Liz discussed reading and writing as key skills students must have to succeed in online courses. In these cases, her focus on their writing skills was not centered on the papers they turned in but on their ability to communicate easily and well in the text-based environment of the online class, likewise their reading skills. She felt reading and writing were the means by which online writing students "hear" and "speak" to other members of the course community; if either of those means was noticeably lacking, the students' ability to fully participate in the community of the course was seriously hindered.

Liz thought course participation was about equal in value to a major paper in the course: a three on a scale of one to ten. But, Liz's advice to students was that they should pay more attention to the socially interactive aspects of the online writing course than she had previously required her own students to do. She thought this deficit had to be overcome on two fronts. First, instructors had to better motivate students to take part in the participatory elements of the course; this might be done through encouragement, but Liz (like Paul and Kardish) mostly spoke in terms of requirements or policies. For example, she considered making grades for papers half dependent on student peer-grading and half dependent on the instructor's grade. In addition to an increased instructor-driven approach to student engagement in the course, Liz also noted that students, on their own, should also value participation and interaction. Specifically, she felt that if students realized what they were doing when responding to their peers' writing was applicable—by design—to their own writing then they would be more likely to take peer revision and course discussions seriously, a sort of selfish motivation in which participation in the community benefited the individual.

Liz began the study by saying she believed the role of community in writing to be “very significant” and stating that she was frustrated at her own shortcomings in effectively implementing community-building into her online writing classes. Two months later she reasserted her belief in and respect for social constructivist theory but stated she felt community did not influence students' writing the way it should or at least as much as it should. She also pointed out that the social aspect of a course could actually influence students' writing in a negative way, and she seemed to have come around to a position of feeling the instructor's role perhaps played—or should play—a more significant and directive role in the class, less, perhaps, a facilitator and more of a traditional role than she might have advocated at the beginning of the

study. Liz agreed that instructors should try to create social interaction among students, but she qualified that it should not be community for community's sake. Specifically, she felt attention should be paid to group dynamics so that stronger students were not simply carrying weaker—or lazier—students. Secondly, she noted that high attrition must be taken into consideration when pairing students for peer review, and Liz noted that she would advise strongly emphasizing to students the importance of peer review in the course and what was and was not acceptable help to give one another. Liz agreed that the influence of the community on student writing could be significant and positive, even stating that that effect in one of her current classes (at an institution other than the study site) was “wonderful” and “brilliant,” but she, too, emphasized that the instructor “structure it well enough”—that is, effectively set up the community so that students would stay focused on the purpose of the course (their own writing) and learn to give each other substantive feedback. However, this positive community influence on student writing was only a potential—not a guaranteed—effect.

Summary of Bonnie's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

As a reminder, Bonnie was the only student who did not complete the study. In fact, due to ongoing personal circumstances, she only just managed to complete the course, although on the strength of her performance in the first half of the course Bonnie did end up receiving an A, which in retrospect I found surprising and which suggested to me Bonnie's grade was the result of special consideration of her circumstances on Liz's part. My own contact with Bonnie ended about two-thirds of the way through the summer session. As a consequence I was able to interview her only once, instead of twice as with the other students, and I did not have access to all the writing she did for the course. From the point at which Bonnie stopped communicating

with me, I was able to track her through her increasingly sporadic participation on the discussion boards of her small group; in one post she apologized to her group members for “falling off of the planet,” that is, for largely disappearing from the public aspects of the course. Even in my first interview with Bonnie, it was clear she was having a difficult time and was in private communication with Liz, making arrangements for extended deadlines, etc., although I was not privy to those communications. Still, even at the half-way point of the course, Liz had recommended Bonnie as both a strong writer and a good community member within her group.

When we first spoke, Bonnie talked about community in terms of actions: communication, group activities, and peer review. She stated,

I would take [community] to mean the communication between your professor and yourself and your fellow students. Also, group activities, which we’re able to do in the online courses; we’re very much in touch with each other as far as reviewing each other’s work and offering suggestions, just proofreading and things of that nature.

She distinguished the importance of community in two different areas: communication with the professor, which was “imperative,” and interaction with her group members, which was merely “pleasurable.” Interestingly, when she spoke of communication with and feedback on her writing from her peers, Bonnie stated quite plainly that she often did not take their suggestions but she thought the mere act of critiquing someone else’s work was probably beneficial to the *reader* if not necessarily the writer. Like the instructors in the study, Bonnie astutely pointed out that students would get out of the course community what they put into it; she then went on to describe specific features of the community of the course, like Liz’s use of small-group-based discussion boards and peer review; and last Bonnie stated that she personally used those features of the community she needed (like frequent communication with Liz, because Bonnie was

experiencing some personal circumstances that were affecting her in the class) while only perfunctorily using those she did not (like peer comments on her writing).

Bonnie described the community of Liz's online writing course as "potentially useful" but would not assign it a general characterization: "I think you're going to feel as involved in the group as you want to be." She described opportunities for interaction that Liz had created but that Bonnie herself did not take advantage of because she felt she did not need to. She admitted to only taking part in the required participation within her group, although she described her communication with Liz as "probably overboard" in terms of constantly emailing her about personal problems. Notably, Bonnie felt at the beginning of the course she got to know her online classmates better than her peers in traditional classes, because Liz had them all write an introductory post (see above under "Course Description"), which led to much more disclosure than in a traditional course. Based on her knowledge of her classmates and the public nature of the course, Bonnie also felt she could see many students who were not taking the course seriously, but she also knew some of her classmates were more involved in the community of the course than she and was certain that was beneficial to them; however, she said, "Not to sound arrogant, but I don't question my work that much when I do it, so I don't feel the need to communicate a whole lot as far as those things go." Bonnie did not feel she personally was failing to take the community of the course seriously: she felt she simply did not much need it.

Bonnie was much more enthusiastic in her description of her interaction with Liz, whom she described as wonderful, helpful and willing, and very encouraging. While Bonnie did not feel they had a close personal relationship, she also did not feel the online environment had hindered her relationship with her instructor, and she had a very positive view of Liz, even saying she fully intended to meet Liz in person if possible. This focus on the instructor, along

with a high sense of value placed on the instructor's feedback and interaction (and a concomitant lower evaluation of peer interaction and feedback), was characteristic of all the participating students in the study.

As a side note, my own observation of Bonnie's participation in the public community of the course would not have led me to describe her as a strong and active member of that community. Arguably, she was on the lower end of the participation spectrum among her small group of four students, even before her noticeable decline in activity in the second half of the course. Bonnie's participation in the first half of the course was about what was required, although her feedback to her peers was detailed and insightful. However, upon later analysis of her actual level of participation, I wondered if Liz's impression of Bonnie as a strong community member had been influenced by the fact that the two of them had communicated so frequently via private email. It is safe to assume that, due to that communication, Liz was probably much more aware of Bonnie as an individual—and of Bonnie's personal circumstances—than would be the case with most other students, and this detailed knowledge, along with Bonnie's many emails to her, may have resulted in Liz's impression that Bonnie was much more communicative and interactive in the rest of the course than she actually was. Additionally, Bonnie's circumstances make a strong argument for the importance of a first impression: in Liz's class and in her first interview with me, Bonnie made a very favorable impression that in my case certainly led to my trying to view her disappearance from the study in the most favorable light; I guessed that such might have been the case with Liz, too.

For the most part, Bonnie did not feel the community aspects of the course influenced her own writing much at all, and she partly attributed that impression to the fact that this was her second college writing course; she felt she had learned a great deal in her previous course and

that experience had prepared her well to succeed in Liz's course. As with Alexander, though, once again I observed the phenomenon of an unusually strong writer being less likely to benefit from the knowledge and suggestions from her peers, whose writing was generally not at the level of Bonnie's. Bonnie did, however, frequently solicit feedback from Liz and described herself as clearly writing with Liz in mind as both grader and audience. Bonnie both enjoyed giving and receiving feedback to and from her group members, but she repeated that she rarely made any changes to her writing based on their comments. She regularly looked over her classmates' work, looking for writing strategies and techniques, but she valued feedback and communication with her instructor over that of her classmates, and the instructor's input was much more likely to result in changes in her writing. While an insightful reader of her peers' work and a polite "listener" when they commented on her work, Bonnie stated she was in fact primarily interested in what Liz had to say about her writing. However, highlighting just how elusive understanding these dynamics can be, Bonnie once changed her answer in mid-response: she started out saying she saw no difference in her own writing in her online course when compared to her previous traditional writing class, but then she realized that online she had much more time and opportunity to browse through her classmates' work and carefully critique that work. This difference is more in the realm of reading and giving feedback on others' writing, but those acts would have at least an indirect impact on her own writing. She also described occasionally using someone outside the class to help her with her writing, using "different people for different things," and most of the examples she gave were in the areas of editing, proofreading, and surface-level changes in her writing.

Overall, she described a writing process that was largely private, and she availed herself of others' advice only upon having a paper completed to her own satisfaction:

While I'm actually writing, I don't ask anyone anything, unless it is like a mechanical question. I normally do communicate with my professors about what they want to see.

While I'm actually writing I don't really communicate back and forth like "What do you think? Does this sound OK?" or "Where should I go from here? Does this flow?" I don't really care what anybody else thinks, to be honest with you. I want to like it myself. I guess I am a bit arrogant because even if my grade were to suffer because of that, I want to like it myself.

Interestingly, Bonnie described being more influenced by others in her previous, traditional college writing course than in Liz's course, but she did not attribute that difference to the different forums of the two classes. Rather, Bonnie felt it was due to her improved writing skills and confidence by the time she took Liz's class. Bonnie also felt the writing she was doing in Liz's class was of the same quality and content it would have been had she taken the course face to face.

Unfortunately, because I was unable to interview Bonnie a second time, I did not learn what additional insights into community and writing she might have had or how her views might have changed. Nor did I get to solicit her ideas on things like advice for online writing teachers and students, as I had with the other participating students.

In summary, Bonnie had had what I would describe as an ambivalent experience in the community of the course, but I believe it is accurate to say she would admit that was largely due to her own choosing or, perhaps, due to the circumstances she found herself in at that particular time. She participated only to the degree required of her by course policy and Liz's grading structure, although when Bonnie did interact with her group members her participation was detailed and helpful. Her view on the importance of community was more enthusiastic about its

theoretical potential than about any real, tangible benefits she saw for herself; she did recognize that other students might both need the community elements of the course more and use them more successfully. Bonnie held Liz in higher regard than she did her peers, and she was more interested in Liz's feedback on her writing. Even with that interest in her instructor's opinions, though, Bonnie reported negligible substantive influences on her writing as a result of participating in the community of the course. She considered herself a competent and mostly independent writer, and her participation in the community seemed relatively isolated from her writing process.

Analysis of Bonnie's Writing and the Community of the Course

Liz recommended Bonnie for the study (at the mid-point of the course) as one of several students Liz felt was having great success in the course in both the writing projects and the required degree of participation. Due to the limited degree of Bonnie's participation, it is actually possible to describe all the public aspects of her interaction in the course, and doing so will establish the context in which her writing took place. I examine here in detail all of Bonnie's writing that was available for my observation, with a focus on how the community of the course influenced her writing.

For the first few weeks of the course, Bonnie participated substantively in all the required discussion board and peer review exercises. Her contributions were detailed and insightful but did not go beyond the contributions of the other three members of her small peer group in either frequency or length: she was simply meeting the requirements of the course. The sample post included under the Course Description for Liz's course is representative not only of Bonnie's typical response to a discussion board assignment but also of the responses of her group

members; Bonnie's introduction might have had a bit more personal disclosure than that of some other students, but generally her group was quite open and personal in their communications. In the second half of the course, Bonnie's participation began to falter, to the point that about three-quarters of the way through the summer session she apologized to her group members (via discussion board post) for recent absences; ironically, that was her last discussion board post. In the remaining few discussion board exercises, which included peer review on two papers, Bonnie neither posted her own work nor responded to others. The fact that she did get an A for the class in spite of this would seem to be in contradiction of Liz's policies and grading procedure, and I can only assume that through Bonnie's private communication with Liz some sort of exception was made due to Bonnie's personal circumstances. The disparity between Bonnie being suggested by her instructor as an example of a successful student and Bonnie's virtual disappearance from the community of the course undercut one of the major assumptions of the study but was also a precursor of similar findings in my analyses after the courses had been completed; that disparity will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.

Liz did not require her students to respond to all of each other's postings. Some assignments, like the introduction exercise, did require students to communicate back and forth with each other, but with the exception of the peer review of each other's writing, these were rare. As one example, group members were required to respond to each other's proposed topics for their research papers, a project that took place in the second half of the course, and it was this assignment which was Bonnie's last public appearance on the discussion boards. In spite of struggling to continue participating in the course, Bonnie apparently took her role of community member seriously when she could find the time, as this response to one of her classmates showed:

The recent economy has been connected to the loss of jobs and financial strain on families. Well educated people with degrees have been said in the media to be unemployed. I would assume that this would eventually lead to homelessness among many. I am curious however to read your paper and better understand how other elements of the economy besides a lack of employment have a direct link to homelessness.

I work for a prosecuting attorney and just recently had a conversation with a man released from prison for felony drug charges. This man was almost in tears when describing his situation to me. He said that he cannot afford a place to live and cannot get a job despite his extreme efforts. He claims to have sold drugs only in an effort to keep him from living on the street. Whether his story was honest or not, I do not know, but I do think it is interesting the circle of hopelessness the state of our economy has caused so many. I look forward to learning more when reading your paper.

Bonnie responded in similar detail and personal tone to both other group members and was in fact the only member to respond to everyone else's topic, going beyond what was required for the assignment, perhaps in an effort to make up for her previous absences.

Many other discussion board assignments, however, did not require the students to interact with one another: they simply had to post their own work. For example, one of Liz's early journal assignments required students to post their ideas of what constituted "good writing." Bonnie and her three fellow group members all posted well-polished, detailed responses, averaging about 425 words (the equivalent of a short paper), but there was no discussion of each other's ideas—each student simply posted his or her own work, so there were only four total posts for the entire assignment (Liz would later state she should have required students to respond to each other). Two things were interesting to note about this assignment. First, while on the surface it seemed this activity was not interactive at all, Bonnie did state she had read over her classmates' work carefully and enjoyed seeing their ideas, so arguably this

“one-shot” writing assignment did have an element of community to it, an important reminder that not all community elements, activities, or participation are readily observable in the public aspects of an online course; without talking to Bonnie I would have not known she felt this assignment to have been one that did connect her with her group members.

Second, as an aside, Bonnie, whom Liz perceived to be an active community member, had actually posted the shortest response to the assignment; I point this out because such observations, along with Bonnie’s later disappearance from the discussion boards, actually led me to conclude that she was the *least* active community member among her small group. This observation is important because it lends support for the conclusion that for Bonnie the community elements and writing projects for the course were largely separate from one another; as far as participation, she was simply doing what was required (early in the course) or was actually not participating (later in the course), while she put her limited time and energy into her writing for the course, which was done mostly in isolation and which she clearly saw as the more important factor in her success in the course.

Unfortunately, of the three major required papers for the course, I had access only to the first of Bonnie’s papers. Luckily, though, there were three drafts of that paper to compare, along with the peer feedback Bonnie received from her group members, as well as Bonnie’s own comments on their drafts. The general guidelines for that essay were “The writing experience essay requires a 1050-1400 word reflection of either a positive writing experience or a few positive and negative writing experiences.” Bonnie chose to write about an essay she had written for her previous college composition course, a piece about her relationship with her grandmother, but the focus of the essay for Liz’s class was Bonnie’s struggle to overcome an obsession to include every possible relevant detail in her writing, learning to condense and focus

her ideas, while at the same time letting go of the idea that her work must be “perfect”; basically the theme was that as a writer she had had to learn to subjugate the emotion she wanted to convey to the rules for good writing: focus, organization, etc., and she also needed to conquer her own hindering perfectionism in her writing. The title of the first essay for Liz’s course was “Less is More.”

Each group member was required to post to two other members’ drafts. Bonnie’s first posted draft of the essay was a little over twelve-hundred words, and these are comments she received from her group members (I have italicized suggestions for changes):

From M___: That was beautiful Bonnie, I hate losing people that are close to me and I have lost three of the closest people in my life. I have lost my Mom, Dad, and most recently my daughter who was just two months old. I can imagine all the emotions it took for you to write that reflection essay. I know I would have cried though it all. Talking about the special moments had to be so sweet and warm for your heart.

You’re an excellent writer Bonnie and *I would not make any changes to this essay. The grammar and the flow of your essay were perfect. All you will need to do is give it a title and I think you are done.* Great job, I really enjoyed reading your essay.

From C___: Wow – this is a great essay, I really only have positive things to say. I think the strongest part of your paper is the balance in describing the reason for writing the paper and the actual process of writing the paper. It was just enough background information so that everything made sense, and the way you switched between the two flows very nicely. I liked how you described how you do well writing creative papers, and therefore turned this writing assignment into more of a creative paper. You’re a really good story teller and I can see through this assignment that creative writing is your strong point. Your introduction is captivating, especially how you begin with a quote from the writing assignment. The intro very successfully sets up what

to expect in the rest of the paper. The conclusion was great; it summarized what the paper did for you and what you learned for it. Your use of vocabulary is also excellent!

I don't really have many suggestions for this paper! It is written beautifully. *The only thing I can think of would just be to read it over for grammatical mistakes. There were a few awkward sentences, and I've learned that reading out loud to yourself can really help to find them and make sure everything sounds right.* Besides that, great job!

Bonnie received a lot of praise but virtually no advice for substantive changes in her paper, and the advice she did receive regarding “grammatical mistakes” and “awkward sentences” was general, with no examples. For a perfectionist like Bonnie, it is easy to see why she would not value such feedback and would solicit her instructor for more specific advice. However, Bonnie’s own critiques of her classmates’ work were similarly focused more on compliments than advice, although her suggestions were both more specific and more directed at higher-level writing issues. Here are Bonnie’s posts to her peers:

To D___: The way you incorporate a personal story that connects you with your topic of writing serves as an excellent way to captivate your reader. I think the last sentence of your first paragraph in turn gave you an appropriate platform to redirect your focus from the sweet childhood story to the topic at hand, writing a reflective essay about a previous writing experience.

I find the content of your essay very informative regarding the problems music programs are facing in our educational system. It is always great to provide your readers with knowledge surrounding your chosen topic. The organization of the essay flows nicely. I feel that you effectively show your reflection by going back and forth connecting your experiences as a music student to your experience in writing about it. I find this to be the most complicated way of writing a reflective essay. I can only seem to comfortably include my reflection in the last paragraph of my writing.

I offer one suggestion. Be conscious not to find the majority of this essay focusing on the actual topic of the problems music programs face in our universities instead of on the experience you had in writing about it. This is a challenging goal because it requires a delicate balance.

Bonnie's comment showed she had read D's paper closely and reflected upon it with some care. She cited specific paragraphs and examples from the essay and connected some of D's writing techniques to her own. Though much of Bonnie's post is fairly general commentary, it is nonetheless more specific (and, I would argue, insightful) than her peers' comments on her own writing, and Bonnie had stated previously it was that kind of close reading, individualized to her work, that she valued as a writer. Her second post follows:

To C___: I think that your essay has great audience appeal. Your choice to express your experiences in three different styles of writing allowed there to be something that everyone can identify with. I feel that your introductory paragraph does a wonderful job of setting the stage for the remainder of your essay by briefly touching on the points you were going to address.

The structure of your essay keeps the focus clear. Each paragraph addressing a specific experience offers an effective way to compare the differences in your feelings about them. Your conclusion paragraph reflects beautifully on the content of your essay, which is the goal of a reflective essay. I think you are a better writer than you give yourself credit for.

I will offer two suggestions. First, is a tip I learned in my last English class that has helped improve the fluency of my writing. The "Known-New Technique", suggests that the first sentence in every paragraph summarize or reflect on the last sentence of the previous paragraph. I will admit, I thought this sounded trite to me initially. Corny or not, it was a required application from our professor. After applying this technique however, my essay flowed much more smoothly. Second, I would encourage you to set yourself free. You have a passion for art. Use the same artistic way of thinking in your creative writing and maybe you will find it more enjoyable.

It may be that Bonnie's work was less in need of higher-level changes than that of her peers, but it could also be that she was not receiving the kinds of feedback she valued and which she tried to give other writers. Regardless, her second posted draft of the piece showed very little change: an added fifty or so words (an increase of about four percent) achieved by a few instances of rewording and the addition of several sentences that Bonnie had apparently decided on herself. Interestingly, on the second posted draft the group members were not required to respond to each other's work and none did, which again spoke to the necessity of requiring such responses of the students if Liz wished those responses to happen. As far as I could observe, Bonnie received only the two posts included above as commentary on her work, although she might have received private advice from Liz. At any rate, the third and final draft of Bonnie's first paper was an exact, verbatim version of her second posted draft.

Since Bonnie did not post the required rough drafts of the other two major required papers, it is safe to assume the community of the course—with the possible exception of private feedback from the instructor—had no influence on her writing, nor did Bonnie herself influence the writing of her group members, since she did not respond to their work.

In conclusion, my observations support Bonnie's assertion that the community of the course exerted negligible influence on her writing. First of all, Bonnie did not participate fully in the community, either as a writer or a reader; personal circumstances and, to some degree, Bonnie's choice dictated that she was not a consistently active member of the community. In the one example available of the development of a major writing project, Bonnie got only token and generic advice from her group members, with no specific examples of changes she could or should make. It is not surprising then that she would report little community influence on her writing. The overall impression is that Bonnie was writing independently from the community

activities of the course, that she participated in those activities mostly out of necessity to comply with Liz's requirements, and that for the most part she did not feel she needed that community to improve her writing. That being said, two points must be noted. First, Bonnie did recognize the potential benefits of communication, participation, and interaction with others on a student's writing, and even though she did not take full advantage of the opportunities Liz created she might have done so had her trying personal circumstances allowed her to. Secondly, some of Bonnie's participation in the community of the course—and the potential influences of that participation on her writing—might be termed “invisible”; that is, some of Bonnie's reading of her classmates' work, which led to thinking about her own writing, were not publicly visible in the course, nor were Bonnie's private communications with the instructor. This is important to note because it would not have been discovered without speaking directly with the student, and it is an indication that community may have influences on students that are unknown to the instructor.

Comparison: Instructor Intentions and Student Experiences

From my interviews with Liz and from my observations of her course, I concluded that it was Liz's intention to design and deliver an online writing course that was deliberately grounded in social constructivist principles and which manifested those principles in the policies of the course and the activities of the students. In describing her intentions, Liz had stated that building community was a priority in her face-to-face writing classes and that she was attempting to transfer those community-oriented practices (group work and peer review) from those classes to her online classes; she also stated that she was still in the midst of figuring out how to do that effectively in the course I observed, which was the third section of composition she had taught

online. That she had received little training in how to make that transition is consistent with previous findings in the field (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, pp. xii-xiii; Neff & Whithaus, 2008, p. 59).

Liz began the study by saying she felt she needed to improve in effectively fostering community in her online writing courses, and at the end of the study she said she felt she had not achieved that goal—at least not to the degree she desired—in the course I observed. While Liz may not have achieved her intended goals, my observations of the course suggested she was unduly critical of her efforts. From the start of the course, Liz had the students connecting with one another through her introduction exercise on the discussion board. She also immediately sorted them into small groups or cohorts, typically of four students each. A number of activities and assignments Liz designed were largely community-driven: discussion board conversations and peer review of each other's major writing projects. Additionally, by design her grading policy, via contract grading, required students to involve themselves in all community activities of the course if they wished not only to receive higher grades but in order to pass the course at all; however, although that was Liz's stated policy, it was, as has been shown, changed in Bonnie's case. It was clearly Liz's desire to see the students interacting significantly with one another and becoming the real driving force behind the course, which was consistent with her understanding of social constructivism as meaning, in part, "between the student and her or his peers they work together to enhance each other's writing, to improve it, to make meaningful suggestions."

However, not all of the students' activities—even their discussion board activities—were interactive. In some cases students simply posted their own work for others to see (which was still a degree of participation in a public forum) and were neither required to read others' work

nor respond to it. I believe Liz hoped that, guided by those assignments in which they *were* required to interact, the students would extrapolate those other more participatory assignments to mean they should automatically engage in those same practices on the assignments where feedback and discussion were not mandatory. In my observation, though, most students did not go beyond what was required, and Liz agreed with that conclusion because at the end of the course she stated she wished she had required more involvement in the community from the students, and in the future she planned to do so. Again, though, I would point out that Liz had in fact strongly emphasized the importance of the community activities of the course throughout the weeks of the class, both through her policies and through additional communication with the students. In conjunction with what has already been discussed about Paul's requirements for participation (and as will also be seen in the following case studies), the community-by-requirement theme I saw begin to develop in Liz's class raised some problematic questions regarding the value of such a community, an issue that will be addressed in the Conclusions chapter.

It was also Liz's intent to remove herself from a central role in the community, to be "hands-off" as she described it, and I think she did achieve that. She specifically stated she was not part of the students' community in the course but questioned whether or not that was a good thing. As Liz herself said more than once, she was still in the process of figuring out her role as instructor in her online writing courses.

From my observation of Bonnie's participation and work in the course, along with Bonnie's own account, her experience in the community of the course (and its effects on her writing) differed to a noticeable degree from what Liz intended for her students. From what I saw of other students—notably Bonnie's three other group members—and from what Liz

described, the disparity between Bonnie's experience and Liz's intentions also reflected at least to some degree the experiences of the students as a whole. However, some qualifications must be made to that statement. First, the personal circumstances that distracted Bonnie from concentrating on and participating in all the community activities of the course did not apply, of course, to other students; in fact those circumstances undoubtedly prevented Bonnie herself from experiencing Liz's course in the same way she would have at another time under different circumstances. Second, there was a dichotomy even in Bonnie's experience of the community of the course in that she—more so even than the other students in the study, among whom this was a trend—seemed split between a theoretical or abstract valuing of, even admiration for, the community circumstances Liz was trying to create and the concrete or practical application of that community influence to Bonnie's own work.

Bonnie's experience was typical of that of the other students whom I observed peripherally in that none—or extremely few—of the students could be said to have really gotten into the spirit of the community Liz wanted to achieve. Most of them participated and communicated with each other only to the degree required, and even though Liz said her online writers were more professional than those in her traditional classes, and even though some of them did improve their writing due to the collaborative online environment, Liz ended the study feeling both the community and its effects on student writing could have been more pronounced. Some of that lack was due to factors Liz had no control over: attrition among the groups (and the subsequent disruptive reorganization of some groups), the shortened summer session of the course, and in some cases simply the attitudes and lack of motivation of certain students.

One key area in which Bonnie's experience of the course clearly differed from Liz's intentions for her students was participation and interaction. As stated previously, in the first

half of the course Bonnie posted to the required discussion boards and participated in the peer review exercise with the first major paper; those contributions were substantive and specific and might have actually exceeded what Liz expected from the students (which is probably why Liz recommended Bonnie for the study in the first place), but even so Bonnie did only what was required. Liz had described some students who went “above and beyond the call of duty” in participating in the course community (notably one student who had taken a struggling ESL student under his wing), but in my observation Bonnie was not one of those students. In the second half of the course, when, in her own words, Bonnie virtually “fell off the planet” as far as interacting with her group was concerned, her participation and communication clearly did not live up to Liz’s requirements, and it can only be assumed that Bonnie’s communication with Liz and the resulting arrangements (along with the quality of Bonnie’s writing) mitigated a potentially significant negative impact on Bonnie’s grade for the course.

The second area in which Bonnie’s experience in the community of the course diverged from Liz’s best intentions for her students was in the influence of the community of the course. As I have stated before, this might be do in large part to the criteria by which students were selected for the study, stronger writers being less likely to benefit and make changes from the advice of their peers. While it is difficult to quantify the effects reading others’ work had on Bonnie’s writing (she could not give specific instances in which doing so had resulted in her making changes to any of her work), in what should be a more measurable case of that influence—examining drafts of the writer’s work before and after peer review—no changes, let alone significant changes, in Bonnie’s work could be traced to the influence of her peers. This lack of influence was due in part to Bonnie’s lack of interest in peer review. While she said she valued their feedback, she also said she rarely sought help unless it was for a “mechanical”

problem and that she simply did not feel the need to communicate with her peers about her writing.

In discussing other students, however, Liz noted that, in spite of her best efforts, this emphasis on using peer review only to make surface-level changes was not unique to Bonnie or to the students of this course:

How you can maximize collaboration to yield better writing, especially in the area of revision? Because I find that—regardless of if it’s in 03, 111, 112—there’s something about revision that students just don’t understand. I mean as much as you try to show examples and ask questions that pertain to revision, they always somehow associate it with editing, which is completely different—it’s necessary, but revision to me is really what makes an essay evolve. So how you can use collaboration to yield better writing?

Bonnie’s focus on revising her own writing, then, instead of being unique as a characteristic of strong writers, might have simply been the common practice of most of the students Liz was seeing.

To sum up this case study, based on my observations of all the public aspects of this course, my interviews with the two key informants, and my analysis of Bonnie’s writing, I drew several conclusions about the community in this online writing course. First, Liz’s course was designed in such a way that it was true to her stated convictions about social constructivist writing pedagogy. Her policies and many of the practices of the course embodied the values and typical manifestations of that writing pedagogy (Moore, 2001, pp. 58-62). The course created opportunities for students to interact meaningfully, to be the driving members of the community, and to positively influence each other’s writing. Liz effectively removed herself from a teacher-centered role (Rickly, 2004, p. 46) in the class by using small group activities, discussion board

conversations, and peer review as key features of the course. She strongly emphasized student participation through her requirements to either pass or excel in the course.

However, it was also my observation that at least one student—Bonnie—did manage to do well in the course without participating to the degree expected, and the community influence on her writing was virtually non-existent. It cannot be said, though, that Bonnie’s experience was typical. Her mitigating personal circumstances and Liz’s generous allowance for those circumstances obviated what otherwise might have been very detrimental effects from lack of participation. The lack of community influence on her writing might also have been unique to Bonnie.

To the limited degree I observed other students in the course, I believe most other students who completed the course did participate more actively than Bonnie. I also believe that at least the other members of Bonnie’s small group did receive more detailed feedback on their writing (in some cases from Bonnie herself), and in two cases I was able to observe they appeared to make more significant changes in the drafts of their papers than Bonnie had in hers. Since I did not interview those students, however, that is at best informed speculation on my part, based on the public aspects of their writing I could follow on the discussion boards and through observing students’ posted drafts.

In conclusion, concerning strengths and areas for improvement in this course, I encountered a paradox. On the one hand, Liz’s policies and practices were well-conceived and theoretically sound. Liz herself was an engaged and invested instructor who provided the framework for a good community-and-writing experience for her students, some of whom did in fact seem to take advantage of the opportunities afforded them, a few of whom even went “above and beyond the call of duty.” However, many students seemed to participate either perfunctorily

or even below the stated minimally acceptable standards for the course. Since I did not see those students' grades I do not know how that lack of participation might have affected their grades; in short, I do not know to what degree Liz enforced her grading policy. Regarding community influences on writing, again Liz did her part as an instructor: she required peer review and offered guidelines as to how it should be implemented; but as she reported, she was dissatisfied with many of the students' implementation of that valuable tool. Through grading policy, Liz attempted to motivate students to communicate, participate, and interact (discussion board assignments and peer review were each equivalent to one of the three major papers for the course) but the results were mixed. Some students responded well and some did not. Given the disparity between the good job the instructor did with creating possibilities with the community of the course and the results for students, which results I believe Liz would agree were perhaps mediocre, this course, along with that discussed next, strongly highlighted for me the fact that often the success of an instructor's attempts to build community in the online writing course is largely due to, as Fitzpatrick (2006) stated, "the expectations, attitudes, and participation of students" (p. 124).

Case Study 4: Stan and Natalia

Course Description

Stan's course was an English 112, College Composition II, class, and as has been noted previously in the descriptions of English 112 there was a departmentally required literature component to the writing course. Stan had taught numerous online courses before in other subjects (most notably Logistics for the military) and he had taught numerous writing and literature courses, but this course was his first online writing course. The coursework consisted

of three essays (worth twenty percent each), posting of homework/journals, discussion board summaries of articles, and two proctored events (each of those four categories worth ten percent of the grade). Attendance via participation in all public aspects of the course was also factored into students' grades, and violation of the attendance policy would result in automatic failure in the course. Stan also included a Break Room discussion board forum, which was an optional, informal meeting space in which students could socialize and ask general questions of each other.

Stan's syllabus and grading policy, on the surface, did not seem to emphasize community activities to the degree that other instructors in the study did, but that was misleading. In fact, Stan was as concerned as any participating instructor with the importance of building community in his course and was actually more concerned than some; it was just that the focus on community in his course slowly became apparent as the course progressed, rather than being overtly emphasized from the beginning. In addition to simply listing grade percentages and policies such as rules for late work, the only real mention of community-related activities on the syllabus was regarding attendance:

Attendance is a factor in an online course, and lack of participation will result in failure for the course. Regular participation in the discussion forums, the on-time submission of required assignments, and the prompt notification of problems in the course all constitute "class attendance" online. Students are expected to participate in all class activities, submit all assignments, and complete all proctored tests and activities in accordance with the class syllabus and schedule.

Beyond that, students would begin to see piecemeal Stan's focus on communication, participation, and interaction, as when he assigned "reading buddies" near the due date for the first paper and had students engage in an electronic file exchange to review each other's work. Interestingly, it was Stan's practice to slowly introduce each participatory element of the course

as it became relevant to the schedule, rather than to offer a comprehensive overview of that aspect of the course from the beginning.

Several notable features stood out about Stan's course. First, Stan was the only instructor in the study to include required synchronous (virtual) meetings of his students. His two proctored events consisted of students meeting virtually via the Wimba tool available in Blackboard; students could either log on and participate via the course website or they could call in to participate via phone. Stan also incorporated a peer review system that assigned each student a "reading buddy" to critique his or her papers. Additionally, Stan's course was characterized by a creative use of technology (like the Wimba tool) and the use of many outside-of-course tools designed to put students in touch with a variety of web-based writing resources and to take the students beyond the "walls" of their Blackboard class site (see Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, p. 3); for example, in preparation for the first proctored real-time event Stan sent his students to the website of the author he had invited in to virtually chat with the class. Another notable feature was that anyone entering Stan's course very quickly got a sense of his engaging, informal tone and his enthusiasm for writing, which often focused on alternative genres outside of academic writing; as an example of both of those traits, Stan included in his introduction of himself a picture of and link to a Marvel comic book character, and the first author he invited into his course for the Wimba exercise was the writer and illustrator of a graphic novel, Alexis Fajardo, creator of *Kid Beowulf*.

Another factor that greatly influenced Stan's course, at least in the beginning, was not intentional: early in the semester, Stan's course email address encountered a technical glitch that prevented students from communicating with him via email. In spite of Stan's efforts, it took the technical staff at the school a couple of weeks to correct the problem, and that barrier to

communication loomed large in Stan's mind for the remainder of the course. He felt it set a very bad tone for the class by causing students a lot of frustration, and he felt it reflected poorly on him as an instructor, even though it was not his fault (see Coffield,, Essid, Lasarenko, Record, Selfe, & Stilley, 2000, p. 294, regarding technological hindrances to the online writing classroom). He subsequently spent a lot of time and effort trying to rebuild the kind of communication and atmosphere in the course that he had wanted from the start. This problem was especially grievous to an instructor like Stan, because he believed that the success of his writing courses depended to a very great degree on the extent to which he could form personal connections with his students, the extent to which they could learn one another's personalities and thus create what he felt was an important sense of personal accountability to each other, such accountability perhaps being especially crucial in an online course.

As a notable example of this, I include a portion Stan's introduction of himself to his students. Stan was the only instructor I observed who went so far to establish his personality and values about writing with his students:

Professor [Stan's informal nickname for himself] has both his BA and MA Degrees from ____ in English. His MA thesis concentration was the tie between the poetry of Frenchman Arthur Rimbaud and Jim Morrison, lead singer of the Doors.

He taught high school English for 6 years, three at ____ High School and three at ____ High School, before being picked up by the Department of Defense as a civilian educator. He is currently the Lifelong Learning Branch Chief responsible for developing online education and gaming capabilities.

[Stan] is an avid reader, a trait which will become heavily incorporated into this ENG 112 course. Not only does he love literature, he also collects comics, DJs, plays video games, and listens to his vast selection of music.

Because he doesn't believe that English should be seen as a prison sentence, he will bring all of his loves together into this course to trick you into learning.

Oh, he also hates having his picture used and, as such, has chosen Uatu The Watcher [the Marvel comic book character] as his avatar for this ENG 112 offering.

This was the tone he continued throughout the course, always prompting students to express their personalities and include their likes and hobbies in the course, as Stan himself did, showing them by example the type of community he wanted to achieve. As another example, like Michael did with his class, Stan sought a more creative way for his students to introduce themselves to each other beyond the standard “name and major” discussion board post. Early in the semester, he had each student post the lyrics of a favorite song and explain why it was a favorite, a good community-building assignment similar to Michael’s Rube Goldberg project. Natalia posted:

The song I picked was a “Brighter Day” by Kirk Franklin. The general theme of the song is how much God loves us and has sacrificed for us. It discusses how God’s love for us is unwavering and how he will always be there for us.

This is one of my favorite songs because whenever I feel down and I listen to this song I feel better. It reminds me that I am not alone and that whatever tough times I am going through there will be “brighter days ahead.” I think it is a song a lot of people can identify with because most of us at some point have felt overwhelmed and alone. This song reminds us that adversity is part of life and that as long as we trust in God and his plan for us we will get through those bad times and that there will be good times ahead. I find it comforting to be reminded that as long as we believe in God we are never truly alone and how true it is that if you believe in God your life will never be the same again.

Although (as was typical for her work), this post was more polished than many other students’ posts, Natalia’s post was representative of the manner in which students used the exercise to show some significant aspects of their personalities. Many students posted comments that left the reader with insights into their characters and values, which was exactly what Stan had done in his own introduction. Stan also personally replied to every student’s lyrics-post, ensuring (as he later stated was important to him) that everyone received a comment on his or her post, something he felt was very important. To Natalia, he said:

There really isn’t a better way to say what you have here. Good job being objective and personal all at the same time. I mentioned in an earlier thread how immediately passionate a song

becomes when it describes the area of unconditional love between two people, especially parents and a child. You have done a great job exemplifying that here once again.

Similarly, Stan posted encouraging comments to each student, sometimes prompting them to go further in their analysis of songs or in their explanations of those songs' importance or meaning. Whenever Stan had personal experience or familiarity with the band or song chosen, he would comment on that, establishing common interests and views with the students.

In my observations of Stan's course, it was clear that he valued and practiced the tenets of social constructivist writing pedagogy. His practice was to engage students in discussions that interested them, to encourage them to form connections and bonds with each other and with him, and to take part in the course community as active writers and readers of each other's work (Guglielmo, 2005/2006 p. 104). Like Michael, Stan's approach was to rely less on formal policy and coercive measures like grades and more on tapping students' interests and self-motivation to accomplish his community and writing goals for the course; this was a similar approach to Michael's and would have similar results. An important component in fostering community in the course was the connections formed based on community members really getting to know one another and thus feeling accountable to each other in their participation and work for the course. Perhaps more than any other instructor in the study, Stan made the effort to truly communicate his own personality, interests, and enthusiasm for the course material, as well as his sense of personal investment in students and their success, and it was apparent that Stan believed the online forum could and should result in the formation of relationships not otherwise possible (Palooff & Pratt, 2001, p. 3), the sorts of relationships at the heart of social constructivist pedagogy. One aspect of such relationships was Stan's effort to set himself up in a non-traditional teaching role (Williams, 2006, p. 149), more that of a coach and writing peer with his

students; similarly, he wished for the students to invest themselves in the course and its content, to throw themselves into the experience and collaborate in the creation of a community of peer writers which Stan likened to “a coffeehouse, a place where people meet for interesting conversations.”

Summary of Stan’s Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

When I first asked Stan about social constructivist theory in writing instruction, he laughed and joked about having to blow the dust off his brain and think back to graduate school, some years back. He offered a relatively accurate definition based on the context of my study, and once we discussed the prepared definition I shared with each instructor, Stan immediately recognized not only the theory but the many ways in which he incorporated it into his classes. When asked how he thought community would most likely be manifested in his first online writing course, Stan spoke about getting to know students’ personalities; setting them up in groups as audiences for (and sometimes even graders of) each other’s writing; classmates reading and responding to each other’s work; and connecting with students through very interactive technology like podcasts, online office hours (live chat), and making digital texts more personal through marking them up.

Stan was also one of the instructors who when first discussing community in online writing immediately contrasted that forum with the traditional classroom. He cited the technological difficulties of connecting with online students (Coffield,, Essid, Lasarenko, Record, Selfe, & Stilley, 2000, p. 294), particularly stressing the problem of connecting equally with students of different ages and, presumably, different levels of familiarity with different technologies. Stan’s response was also interesting because in his discussion of community with

his on-campus students he talked only about pedagogical issues: selection of texts, group work and peer review, getting to know students' personalities, but when discussing community with his online students, he spoke almost exclusively in terms of technology: delivery media and using different technologies to communicate and connect with students. Stan simultaneously saw the online course and its accompanying technologies as both a means of connecting better with certain types of students and a barrier to connecting with others.

Stan also couched his discussion of the challenges to community online in terms of personal interaction—specifically, he anticipated the biggest social challenge in his first online writing course to be how he himself would be perceived by students, how he would have to alter his communication style from the way he typically interacted with students in his traditional writing classes (although Stan had taught other subjects online before, this was his first online *writing* course; see Participants in Chapter Three). He was concerned about how his usually sarcastic tone—well received in face-to-face courses—could be misinterpreted online and how the rather hard line he usually took at the beginning of a course (in traditional classes) regarding course policies would sound overbearing in an online class (“They might think, ‘This guy’s an idiot!’”), when the ameliorating effect of face-to-face interaction was lost. Clearly, one of the things Stan was anticipating was the lack of spontaneity Guglielmo (2005/2006, p. 105) found in online classes and online communication. Stan, who was an animated, spontaneous, and downright funny interviewee and teacher, felt that in the online class he had to curb what he saw as real strengths in his teaching: humor, sarcasm, and the force of his own personality, an experience I could tell was frustrating for him.

Stan also brought up the issue of persona and personal interaction as being an important influence on student writing that underwent a change in the online class. Particularly, he was

concerned with how students perceived him online: “In an online community, again, just the tone or how I am, I don’t know if it’s going to come across as well.” Stan saw his personal connection with students, and their sense of accountability to him as an individual, as one of the driving factors behind those students striving to succeed in their writing, and the lack of that connection online, due to the barriers to personal interaction (McCartan, 2000, p. 187), could mean they took everything in the course—the class, the instructor, their own writing—less seriously, with concomitant consequences for their writing. What Stan saw in his traditional classes as an encouraging, coaching approach to pushing students to improve their writing he worried came across online as “obligatory” and something students simply ignored, “because there isn’t that intimacy of a classroom setting; that faceless nature, again, I think is going to come back into play.” Interestingly, both Paul and Stan compared students relating to an instructor online versus seeing that teacher in person, both instructors emphasizing online students’ lack of accountability for either the confessional nature of their writing or the quality of their writing. What Stan was essentially describing as an influence on his online students’ writing was a lack of investment in that writing due to a lessened sense of community online (Hegarty, Bostock, & Collins, 2000, p. 209). Stan’s beliefs about the effect of the community on his online students’ writing were framed almost exclusively in terms of the personal relationships he could or could not form with them via the online environment. Stan’s ongoing worry was that the online element hindered the type of relationship he felt was essential to forming a writing community, and with this concern, Stan was siding with one of the two competing theories in the field: Romi (2000), as one example, contended that the online course “reduces the meaningful interpersonal meeting which creates the open arena for developing these . . . social skills” (p. 43).

Stan had in the first interview shown a lot of prescience in describing what he might encounter in the community of his first online writing course. He had spoken of technical difficulties, problems communicating with students, his fear that students would not be motivated or invested in the course because it was online, and his concern that the online environment would hinder his ability to connect with students in a personal and meaningful way. I had observed in the first weeks of Stan's class the very unfortunate "email glitch" earlier referred to, a problem that was entirely not Stan's fault, one that had caused some serious miscommunication (largely through *lack* of communication) between the instructor and students (to the frustration of both), and one which took the IT department at the study site a long time to sort out. Stan was right: that problem at the beginning did get the course off to a rocky start, and he spent a lot of time very diligently trying to overcome the negative "tone" that had been set. This is a classic example of a technical issue having real social repercussions in an online course, because communication (and therefore connection) had been hindered (Coffield,, Essid, Lasarenko, Record, Selfe, & Stilley, 2000, p. 294). Stan noted a lack of substantive and nuanced communication as a distinguishing feature of his online class (Anderson, 2006, p. 117), whereas he had gotten used to the fine distinctions made in his face-to-face classes and was somewhat dismayed by how objective and rigid he felt he came across to his online students because all communication was text-based ("I want to do a voice-over") and by how many of his students didn't seem to *want* or be interested in a more realistic or subtle discussion: they just wanted to know what was required of them, so they could "get in and get out" and did not seem concerned with the freedom of thought and give-and-take that Stan valued. Finally, as the course went on, Stan missed the feedback (both verbal and non-verbal) that he relied on from his students in

traditional classes; he felt less able to gauge what influence he was having on his online students or whether he was teaching them effectively.

Toward the end of the study, in characterizing the community of his online Comp 2 class, Stan continued his discussion about feeling that his online writers were “mailing it in,” so to speak. He felt that far from getting into the spirit of participation and interaction he was trying to elicit (and which he felt he generally did elicit successfully in his traditional writing courses) his online writing students just wanted to “check the box and be done and get their grade” and were seeking from him very objective and quantifiable directions: four paragraphs gets an A, for example, on a discussion board posting; in general, they were showing a lack of any substantive exchange of ideas (Hara & Kling, 2005, p. 559) and often very trivialized writing (Fleckenstein, 2005, p. 150). It became clear in talking to Stan that one of the traits he really valued in writing students was a sense of investment in the course and the work being done, an investment that Stan obviously felt himself as a writing teacher; however, in the online course he felt students were not “willing to embrace it as much as they say they are,” which nicely sums up a key point of the study which will be discussed in the next chapter. This was an attitude he had found to be typical in the other online teaching he had done, regardless of the subject or the students being taught. To be fair, Stan also noted, he felt many *instructors* who taught online also seemed to be unmotivated or un-invested in their online courses; he felt that where students might take online classes for convenience, perhaps instructors sometimes taught those classes for the same reason or because they had been required to.

In Stan’s course, he felt several factors had influenced the community of the class, some good, some not so good. He felt the inability of students to communicate with him (and vice versa) because of the initial email problems in the course had been a significantly negative

element to be overcome, and he was probably correct, but he had mostly succeeded in working around that via use of the discussion boards. There, though, he still experienced, at least in some cases, the “mail it in” attitude he had previously cited. Many students were not doing the acceptable minimum when it came to responding to each other’s posts and did not seem particularly concerned even when they lost points because of that. In this class, Stan felt he was battling the attitude of students being content with lower grades as long as they “didn’t have to really respond and do the actual intensive work to build that community” (see Guglielmo, 2005/2006, p. 105). Stan was doing his part, willing to facilitate “huge, massive discussion” and encouraging students to take advantage of the high level at which he was willing to interact with them, but the results had not been “as awe-inspiring” as he had hoped.

Stan, although he did not use this term, described relationships in the course community largely in terms of problem-solving issues. On the negative side, he saw contentious relationships develop over the problem of peer review partners (his “reading buddies”) not doing what they were supposed to do in order for their buddies to be able to complete assignments. On the positive side, he saw helpful relationships form between more and less tech-savvy students, the former sometimes volunteering to help the latter out with the technical aspects of the course, sometimes even volunteering to post other students’ work for them. Likewise, he saw members of one already-formed group welcome in a late-comer who had had to miss part of the class due to a death in the family, in spite of the fact that it meant more work for the group members, highlighting the importance of the relationships students formed or were at least willing to form and the influence those relationships might have on the students’ writing (Simon, 1990, pp. 61-62). Stan, interestingly, felt he personally had had a big impact on the community (via the discussion boards) but that that impact had made little difference in students’ actual performance,

an intriguing distinction. Stan was very involved in the community of the course, but like most of the other instructors he interjected himself more directly into the community usually when he saw something that needed his commentary, such as particularly strong or potentially problematic work on the part of a student. However, there was another significant social aspect to his participation as well. If he saw students to whom others had not responded or had responded to in cursory or inappropriate ways, Stan would make sure he responded to those students (as opposed to getting more students to respond to each other), to make sure that they were included in the discussions of the class in a positive way.

Stan had begun the study by discussing community and its importance in an online writing class in relative terms. He had pointed out problems with technology and class demographics as having great influence over whether or not a positive community developed in a course, often making it difficult to achieve. Very interestingly, though, and in spite of the fact that through much of the course Stan felt he was struggling to connect with his students, by the end of the course Stan seemed considerably more positive in his attitude about community in online writing. In fact, he labeled it the number one, most important factor of the class. Even while questioning the degree to which community actually helped his students' writing, Stan felt that a positive community experience, with students in the class motivated to engage with the material and interact with each other in substantive ways, meant a successful class, and this was a phenomenon he felt the community members could make happen even in spite of poor course-design or poor assignments. Despite his desire to refrain from heavy-handed interference in the community of the course, Stan concluded that *accountability* was crucial in successfully getting students to interact with each other, enforced through course structure and grading policy; he reached this belief through watching his reading buddy system, stating openly that it had "failed

miserably” because students had not been held accountable for substantive participation in that aspect of the course. In another forum, though—his live chat sessions in Wimba—the exercises where all the students virtually came together with a guest author—had reinforced his initial enthusiasm for connecting with students and having them connect with each other. He concluded that it was the instructor’s job to use the tools available to build community effectively and that student-accountability was necessary for a successful community to take place, hopefully with the positive benefits to student writing he wanted such a community to have.

Like Michael, Stan would advise students to rank community participation in the online writing class right in the middle when it came to having success in the course: a five on a scale of one to ten. And, like Liz, Stan saw the importance of community participation for students’ success as coming equally from the instructor’s and students’ roles in the course. It was the instructor’s job, he felt, to create opportunities for interaction, using whatever technological tools were available: discussion boards, live chat, file-exchange and peer review, etc. To Stan, the tools were less important than their proper use and the opportunities they created for writing-centered student interaction. The individual student’s role consisted of being self-motivated, having a good attitude when interacting with others, and taking advantage of every opportunity the instructor created to participate, discuss, and give and receive feedback on the writing for the course. As long as the instructor did in fact create opportunities for real engagement, the burden then fell on the student, who, Stan said, would get as much out of the course as he or she put into it. Finally, in Stan’s mind, all these opportunities for social interaction were never participation for participation’s sake but were for the purpose of getting students—through interaction and exchange—to engage in “high level order thinking,” which would hopefully be reflected in the quality of their ideas and writing in the work they produced for the course.

Stan's views on community were critical, insightful, and nuanced to the point of sometimes being hard to pin down. It could be argued that Stan was the one instructor in the study for whom the role of community and its importance had not diminished the more he examined it, despite what he characterized as a generally negative community experience teaching his first online writing course. Most surprisingly, Stan, the one instructor who had ended the study saying community was potentially of paramount importance in an online writing class said he felt that community might not have *any* influence on student writing. He felt a student would generally leave the course with roughly the same degree of strength as a writer that he or she had begun the course with. In the "online Utopia" of a community of learners, he said, students would have an impact on each other's writing, but the reality was more likely to be people "checking a box" and simply getting through the course without really buying into the idea of the community. Stan had tried to use his course to get students to try new ideas, to avoid being "generic," and he sometimes saw students pushing the boundaries of their thinking in those discussions, but this seemed to be almost more a case of students using the course community for (as Michael had put it) a sounding board to work out their own ideas, but with little concern for anyone else's work.

Summary of Natalia's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

Something to keep in mind in understanding Natalia's views on community, online learning, and writing is that she was the most veteran of all the students who participated in the study (see her profile under "Participants," on page 72), and she had a long history of academic writing behind her, so she was very comfortable working and writing on her own, like most of the students who participated in the study (and which seemed to be the kind of student instructors

were likely to choose). Also like most of the participating other students, Natalia defined community in her online writing course as interacting with her classmates and instructor, primarily—in her eyes—through participation on the discussion boards, and she added the notion of forming a limited number of particularly close relationships with other students for the duration of the course. Natalia thought of discussion as being the heart of community, whether in an online or traditional course, but she also included in community activities group work and peer review, even echoing Stan’s term “reading buddies.” Regarding the importance of community in such a class, she said:

I think in a writing course [community] is especially important in terms of discussion, especially in English classes where you’re interpreting and it’s not really cut and dried like in a math class where it’s black and white for a lot of things, whereas in an English class it’s more based on how you read something and how you see it or interpret it, then talking to other people and seeing how they interpret it and you might say, “Oh, I didn’t really think about it that in that way”—you know, kind of getting to see how other people might think about it and you might look at it, too, in a different way.

In the first interview (at the half-way point of the course), Natalia described the community of Stan’s course as being very limited, stating that many of her classmates were participating minimally, and she herself was doing only what was required:

There are a few people who are kind of chatty and who I think will go back and kind of keep looking at the discussion boards and seeing what people posted and maybe write another follow-up comment. I personally am not one of those people [laughs]; I’ll go and post my assignment and kind of read through what people said, and post what I’m going

to respond to, but I'm pretty much not going back and looking to see what other people wrote.

However, even acknowledging this minimal participation in her online writing class, Natalia also admitted she was *more* participatory—in both frequency and volume—in the discussions in this class than she was likely to be in a traditional class, where her participation was not being recorded as it was on the discussion boards. She was also better able to overcome an innate shyness to participate online (Blair & Hoy, 2006, p. 41).

Surprisingly, given the degree Stan had attempted to share his personality and interests, Natalia also said she did not have a strong sense of Stan's personality in the course, and it was clear she initially (and in my view erroneously) saw the communication problems Stan had experienced with the email glitch as a reflection of disorganization on his part, a factor that left her feeling out of touch with the course, the instructor, and her classmates, experiencing some of the reported negative influences of the online environment on students in their writing courses (Young, Johnson, and Hess, 2006, pp. 1-3; Hara and Kling, 2005, p. 559). By the end of the course, though, her views of Stan's personality and the organizational issues in the course had both changed.

Of all the students, Natalia had the least to say about the influence of the online forum on her writing, stating that she could ascertain no effect at all and she would simply try to produce her best work in any class forum and her work would have been the same regardless of whether it was produced in an online or face-to-face class. Natalia stated that she did not use the discussion boards conversations in Stan's class at all when writing her papers, she only emailed the instructor for clarification about assignment requirements, and for her the reading-buddy

system Stan had set up was of little or no help on her writing even when it came to surface-level concerns, but this was due to multiple factors:

I don't really think for me it [peer review] plays a big part, because I know—when I posted my first draft, I knew it needed work, like putting things better, grammatically and structurally. I knew that when I did it, but I had to get the draft done and post it! [laughs] So I kind I did a rough edit, but I kind of knew what I would have done with it regardless anyway. For the second paper, my buddy never posted theirs or anything. I think part of it was because we had short notice with papers—you would only get like maybe a week to kind of know that you had a paper that was due and what you had to write it on. And by the time you had to give it to your buddy, you really only had a few days to write something that you had to post, to get it to a person, and then you had to be reading theirs. So I think logistically maybe because of the short notice that didn't work as well. I think maybe if you had more notice in terms what the topic was and so forth for the paper, then that might have worked better.

Natalia, who was already the most experienced academic writer of the group because of her previous extensive education (which, strangely, had included writing a Master's thesis), was also the only student who did not mention anyone from outside of the class who was an influence on her writing, although had I encountered her earlier in her college career she might have given a different response (that speculation is based on the fact that in describing her graduate experience she did talk about peers and an advisor who had helped her significantly in her writing). She had to speculate to even come up with something that *might* have influenced her writing in Stan's class: the opportunity to submit her work to the instructor (not to peers, which the class was already doing) and receive feedback on a paper before submitting it for a grade.

Although she started the study skeptical about the community aspects of the online writing course, it seemed by the end of the course Natalia saw more benefits to them than before, which was an interesting development. She cited the discussion board exchanges in her English course as more frequently used than in her other online courses but still wished there had been even more discussion board activity, indicating that by the end of the course she was finding that interaction of use to her (Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007, p. 309), even going as far as saying that her readings of various stories were shaped by the discussion board conversations surrounding those stories. Much of the discussion board use, however, she felt was for the purpose of students keeping each other informed in what she felt was a sometimes unorganized environment. Notably, Natalia also stated she felt peer-review should be required in all online writing courses but should not be limited to one-on-one pairings, as this left the student at the mercy of a single “reading buddy,” and too often her own partners in Stan’s class had failed to meet their responsibilities in peer review exercises. She had brought up two key points of courses needed better structure and student follow-through on paired or group activities continuing to be a problem. Still, Natalia’s views toward community participation had softened, and while she saw it as only somewhat important she did see benefits in sharing ideas and commenting on each other’s work, but she qualified her endorsement by saying the importance of community participation would be relative to the individual student and his or her experience with writing. She also added these thoughts:

I definitely think you feel more of a community when you do it on campus, just because you do get to sit down, talk to people, kind of get to know them and exchange information and form study groups or whatever. So I do think on campus you form more of a community, but that’s why I do think the way [Stan] did the two proctored events

[live Wimba class chats] might be a way to get more of that sense of community and kind of get to have a little interaction with your classmates, and you get to interact with quite a few more of them all at one time.

It is important to highlight the fact that, in general, the two live, virtual class meetings seemed to have gone a long way toward rehabilitating Natalia's overall characterization of the community of the course, and this was supported by Stan's report that he had received very positive feedback about those activities from other students.

When asked to advise students about the importance of community in the online writing class, Natalia's answers reflected her own independent nature:

Should a student pay attention to the community? I guess that kind of varies by the student and what their experience level is and so forth with writing. Some people just like to interact more with people, whereas other people are more kind of loners. I guess I consider myself more—I don't want to say so much a loner—but I'm OK with working on my own, you know what I mean? But if we have to work in a group or something, that's fine too. And I guess the best way to be good at the community is like with any class: you have to really do the assignments and just participate, and with online especially you have to be more of an independent person; you can't be the type of person who needs a professor reminding you "So and so is due."

Overall, I would characterize Natalia's views on community as the student-version of Paul's views as an instructor: she worked largely independently, participated in the community to the degree required, and chose to further engage in the participatory aspects of the course only as she felt necessary, which meant that as a strong and experienced academic writer she personally did not feel the need to seek out additional help or interaction from either her

classmates or her instructor; more than once Natalia intimated that less experienced or weaker writers were more likely to need and benefit from participation in the course community.

Natalia's own experience of the community of Stan's class had been ambiguous. It started out rather negative, due to the fact that the course got off to a rough start and to Natalia's perception that she simply did not need that community very much; however, as the course progressed and Stan made innovative use of available technology to bring the class together, Natalia began to feel part of the community to a greater degree and to see how students could make better use of interaction with each other and with the instructor to improve their writing. However, like Paul's very balanced view that the use of community and its effects on writing would vary greatly from student to student, Natalia also felt community was largely relative in both students' experiences of it and in its influences on their writing.

Analysis of Natalia's Writing and the Community of the Course

Natalia, like all the students in the study, was recommended by her instructor based on the strength of her writing and her participation in the course, the latter of which by now can be seen to be a questionable criterion for the selection of students for the study. However, due to the very limited public dimension of both of those elements, it is extremely difficult to analyze the relationship between Natalia's writing and the community of the course. There was a wealth of writing to look at but very little community activity pertaining to most of it. The writing and community aspects of the course included posted journals, summaries of articles, discussions of short stories, and three major papers. I examined all of Natalia's work, and samples of each category are included, along with what commentary I could bring to bear on how the community of the course related to each.

In general, Natalia was a very strong writer, and she was the most experienced academic writer of any student participating in the study. As far as her participation in the course went, she was a very substantive contributor to the discussions that took place in the class, but her strength there was in the detail and insight she brought to those conversations, not in the frequency with which she participated, because Natalia did not participate beyond the required number of times she had to post or respond to a peer's work. Natalia typified most of the participating students, and a comparison of all of them led to the conclusion that I had encountered very little *enthusiastic* participation on the part of the students.

The first category of public writing in the course was that of posting journals. In the initial Course Description for this class I included and commented on the journal in which Natalia described and analyzed the lyrics of a favorite song, along with the comments she received from Stan, so no other example is repeated here. The only other such journal entry was the introductions Stan had students post, and those were one-shot posts, meaning students merely posted their own information and did not respond to one another's introductions. Natalia's work there was typical of that of the other students, simply following Stan's guidelines and showing no evidence of having been influenced by any other source.

The one-shot, no-response format also applied to the summaries of articles that students posted. After posting their own work and, theoretically at least, reading over that of their classmates, students were not required to respond to each other, and Natalia specifically mentioned that she did not respond if she were not required to. She did, however, state that she did not like to be one of the first students to post, preferring to look over others' comments before she posted her own, so it is possible that her own work was influenced by her reading of others' posts. Because there was no prior discussion of or response to any student's summary of

these articles, though, it is impossible to ascertain any influence they might have had on one another; however, I have included here one of Natalia's article summaries in its entirety for the sake of showing the sophistication of her thought and writing:

David in "Taking the Relationship Public: Is There Ever a Good Time to Meet the Parents?" discusses how people know when the time is right to make their relationship public and the effect going public can have on a relationship. This is a topic people dating today are interested in because the dating rules have changed a lot as society's standards and technology have changed. Before, it was expected that people would get married and start a family but today many people are focused on furthering their education and career and therefore may not want to get married at all or may want to get married later in life. Also, technology has changed dating by making new forms of dating possible, such as internet dating and long distance relationships. These factors have made it harder for people dating to define the seriousness of relationships and determine when or if it is appropriate to make a relationship public. Examining David's article, we see that it offers insight into how difficult it can be for people to know where they stand in a relationship and the problems that can result when people do not discuss their relationship.

David illustrates the difficulty in determining when the time is right to go public with a relationship through examples from her relationships and her friends' relationships. Through these examples she shows how easy it is for misunderstandings to occur because people are not sure what the status of their relationship is and what they should call each other. The author demonstrates this by discussing how she introduces someone to her mother only if the person is potentially "the one," but once dated a guy who took her home for Christmas, to meet his family, after dating for only a few months. Also, David goes on to show how the terms boyfriend/girlfriend can mean different things to people and the awkwardness some people feel using these terms. David does this by describing how she dated a guy who introduced her as his girlfriend, even though he was dating other women, and how her friend Laura after "hanging out" with a guy for a year did not refer to him as her boyfriend and did not want to be referred to as his girlfriend. Through these examples, David demonstrates how easy it is for misunderstandings to occur and how these misunderstandings can end a relationship. Finally, David uses examples to clarify when the terms girlfriend/boyfriend should and should not be used.

David effectively describes the difficulty people have understanding where they stand in a relationship through her experiences and the experiences of her friends. David describes very descriptively the anxiety she experienced prior to meeting her boyfriend's parents and how her hopes for her relationships "wilted under the glare of her (mother's) all-seeing, all-knowing eyes." By using personal experiences people can identify with, David is able to establish an emotional connection with her readers. The problem is that David relies completely on these experiences to support her arguments and her credentials to discuss relationships. David should have also used research findings to support her arguments and verified her credentials by mentioning any degrees or training she has had on dealing with relationships. This would have made her readers feel more comfortable with her qualifications to discuss relationships. David also fails to investigate why it is difficult to decide when to make a relationship public. David describes her reasons for finding it difficult as being due to her coming "...from the most judgmental family in existence..." but never discusses the reasons her friends find it difficult to make their relationships public. In addition, David's arguments would have been more persuasive if she had explored not only the disadvantages but also the advantages of publicly acknowledging a relationship, such as how it can help clarify people's expectations and where they see the relationship heading. Finally, it is helpful that David provides examples of which behaviors do and do not justify the terms girlfriend/boyfriend being used to refer to each other. However, David's guidelines for using the terms girlfriend/boyfriend raises questions. For example, are her guidelines based on research or discussions with people about their relationships? Have people found her guidelines useful? The guidelines would be more effective if David had discussed how she came up with them and whether or not they have been shown to be useful.

David's article demonstrates how important communication is in a relationship. From the personal experiences she describes, we see that many of the misunderstandings could have been avoided if the parties involved had talked openly about their relationships. Instead, people misinterpreted where they stood in their relationships by assuming their feelings about the relationship were clear to the other person or as a result of not having a conversation about their relationship with the other person. Even though discussing relationships is uncomfortable, these examples illustrate how much time and energy could be saved by discussing relationships openly and understanding each others expectations. While David's writing is very entertaining and keeps her audience engaged, it misses an opportunity to help improve communication by not taking a more serious approach to the subject. For example, while the author's sidebar is amusing and explains when certain actions justify labeling each other boyfriend/girlfriend the author misses an opportunity to provide suggestions regarding how people can initiate a discussion about their relationship. Ultimately, the author conveys through her article that if you are not willing to have the relationship discussion then you should not read too much into how serious your relationship is and your importance to the other person.

David does a good job of demonstrating the pressure people feel to label their relationships and the confusion that can result when people have different expectations for a relationship. Recognizing that communication is important in every relationship, we must now discuss how effective communication can be achieved. While personal experiences can be used in this next phase, strategies that have been proven effective also need to be discussed. Finally, people must realize that communicating effectively is an ongoing process because once the question of when a relationship should be taken public has been answered, inevitably other questions, like is the relationship heading toward marriage, will arise and will need to be answered.

While it is lengthy, even a skimming of this sample shows the level at which Natalia was writing and demonstrates why Stan recommended her for the study. Her summary went well beyond the length, polish, and sophistication in thought of those of her classmates; she was simply writing at a level that few if any of her peers could match, so it was not surprising that in the one paper of hers to which a reading buddy responded that person had very little to say regarding recommended changes, the same pattern which was seen with the other participating students.

The only example I could actually find of a possible community influence on Natalia's writing was in the next category of assignment, the discussion of short stories and subsequent papers on those short stories. Before writing a paper comparing J. D. Salinger's "Teddy" with his "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Natalia participated in a group discussion of "Teddy," centered around Stan's question, "What would you ask Teddy if you had the opportunity?" (in the story, the title character is a young boy who can foretell the future). Natalia posted:

If I had the opportunity to ask Teddy a question, it would be why did he not tell the professors when they would die even though they wanted to know? Teddy said it was because he knew

they did not really want to know and they are afraid of dying. However, does this not mean that Teddy does have emotions and does care about other people? If he did not have any emotions then he would have told the professors when they would die even if they did not really want to know and could not handle the information. Since he cared about the professors not being able to handle this information and he does not really know the professors, then doesn't this mean he must also have feelings for his family, and not just an affinity for them?

Natalia received multiple replies from other students, more than any other posted question, all arguing both the merits of knowing beforehand one's time of death and the question of whether or not Teddy actually cared about other people. She also posted the following replies to two other students, the first in response to the question of "Is there an afterlife?":

I think that this is an interesting question to ask Teddy. However, I do not think that I would have the courage to ask it because I do not think I would be prepared for the response if the answer was that there is no life after death. I think not having the belief that there is something better awaiting us in the next life would make me question the point of being good and trying to help people. If this life is all there is then shouldn't we live for ourselves and not worry about helping other people or how our actions are going to affect them since there is no chance of salvation?

The second question she responded to was about reincarnation and, specifically, how many times a person might "come back":

I don't think this is a question that Teddy would be able to answer with a definitive number. I think Teddy would say that the number of times you come back depends on how close you are to reaching spirituality and how much progress you make in each life. I do wonder if you would come back at all if you were not making progress toward enlightenment or because you are not learning from your previous life would you not be granted additional chances to reach enlightenment?

In looking at the thesis of the paper Natalia eventually wrote about this story, it is possible to see some influences from the community discussion upon her ideas. The central point of her paper was that the main characters in both stories "find that only by rejecting society's standards, embracing their alienation from society, and through their deaths can they regain their innocence and attain enlightenment." Below is her concluding paragraph:

Throughout "Teddy" and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" it is apparent that the corrupt adult world has stolen Teddy's and Seymour's innocence. A materialistic society has left

both of them disillusioned. In an attempt to combat their disillusionment, they extricate themselves from the adult world by spending time alone and by committing suicide.

Freedom from society's selfishness and obsession with materialism helps both characters progress on their journey towards enlightenment and redemption. Salinger shows his audience that ultimately each person must find enlightenment in their own way and time.

Looking over the content of the group discussion, there are hints of similar ideas (disillusionment and enlightenment) that *might* have influenced Natalia (although those similarities might simply be based on the obvious content of the two stories), but nothing on the discussion board approached the level of insight or articulation that characterized Natalia's final paper.

Similarly, in the last category of writing assignment for the class, which was research-based writing that was not about the literature read for the course, there was almost no evidence of community influence on Natalia's writing. For the two remaining papers for the course, students were to participate in Stan's reading buddy program, but as discussed in the section on Natalia's perspective on community in the course, her partner only participated in the first exercise (for the second paper, he neither sent his own work to Natalia nor responded to hers). As Natalia related, on the first paper (the topic of which was regulation of the Internet) despite the fact that she did ask some global questions about her paper (specifically about the clarity of her thesis, the focus of the piece, and whether or not she needed to add details to the content), her partner simply gave her generic praise for the overall quality of her work and then pointed out a few surfaces errors and typos. Regarding the latter, Natalia said in our interview that she had known before she sent the paper she would have to fix those things, and she even hinted that she had knowingly left those errors in the draft both because she was in a hurry to get the paper to her partner and so that he might actually have something to offer feedback on.

In conclusion, while she was typical of the pattern seen in the other participating students, in Natalia I found perhaps the most obvious example of a writer whose work was so far beyond that of her classmates that they were simply incapable of offering her advice for substantive changes. By the time Natalia had reached Stan's course, she had such a wealth of experience with academic writing that she was completely confident in her own writing process and she felt no need to consult with peers and very little need to consult even with an instructor. That being the case, it is no surprise she reported virtually no community influence on her writing, an assessment my own observations seemed to confirm. However, toward the end of the course Natalia seemed to come to some of the same conclusions about community that some of the instructors in the study had reached: participation, interaction, and discussion were valuable for the purposes of sharing ideas and understanding different perspectives, even if those activities did not directly result in changes (let alone improvements) in students' writing. In fact, Natalia ended by saying she believed, in spite of her current experience to the contrary, that handled correctly community participation could actually result in better student writing, even for an advanced student like herself.

Comparison: Instructor Intentions and Student Experiences

From conversations with Stan and from my observations of his course, I learned that it was Stan's intention to present a challenging, fun, interactive, and technologically sophisticated class experience to his students, an experience in which the formation of community played a large part. For Stan, community meant not only a high degree of participation through activities like group discussions and peer review but also the formation of relationships and connections through communicating his personality and enthusiasm for literature and writing to his students,

hopefully with a reciprocal sharing of personalities and enthusiasm on the students' part. Having taught online before, Stan recognized some of the challenges and obstacles that forum presented to forming a class community, but he was determined to overcome those barriers through forming personal connections with his students as best he could. In many ways (including elements that pertained to community) Stan wanted to break his students' paradigm of the typical writing course; he sought to connect them with the larger virtual world outside their course Blackboard site, to expose them to the ideas of real writers who were doing real writing, and to show them through live web-based interaction that "online" did not have to mean distant or asynchronous interaction.

Like Michael, Stan preferred to use the "carrot versus stick" approach in his teaching. He wanted his students to be motivated through their own enthusiasm, so he strove to create a course atmosphere and assignments that allowed students to tap into their own interests; however, both those instructors had not had success with that approach. Like other instructors in the study, Stan saw himself as the person who created the course structure and the opportunities for interaction, but not the central figure of the course community. He was an animated and passionate participant in the community, but he sought to be more of a peer and coach than a traditional teacher. Stan also intended for students to be invested in the course and accountable to one another, to the course, and to him, and he saw this as happening largely to the degree students felt responsible to others in the course due to the relationships formed among the community members (Caverly & MacDonald, 2002, p. 36). Everything Stan communicated to me in interviews indicated he valued and tried hard to implement the precepts of social constructivist pedagogy in his course.

The formal or “official” manifestations of that pedagogy were less clear in course policy than in Stan’s personal communication with me. Little was stated to students at the beginning of the course about either their roles as community members or how course policy would hold them accountable for adhering to those roles. This, I believe, was due to Stan’s preference to, first, introduce the community elements of the course as they became relevant to the schedule he had planned, and, second, his desire to avoid being heavy-handed but to rely on the students’ own senses of responsibility. In retrospect, especially given Stan’s ending assertion that community was extremely important in an online writing course (despite the fact it might not influence student writing), Stan came to the important conclusion that he would have been much better off clarifying exactly how important the community element of the course was and giving students firmer guidelines for participation.

I believe it is safe to say Natalia’s experience of community and the degree to which it affected her writing were far from Stan’s ideal, for a variety of reasons, some of which were representative of the class’s experience as a whole and some of which were due to Natalia’s individual circumstances. To begin with, from the public aspects of the course that I was able to observe I believe, in general, the class as a group never formed the close-knit and accountable community Stan wished for. It is possible that the communication problems at the beginning of the course irreparably changed the community trajectory of the class, but that is impossible to determine; whatever effect those problems had, Stan did an admirable job in trying to overcome them, and the live Wimba exercises were such a great success at the end of the course that Stan jokingly said he was content to “ride the wave” of that success as a means of erasing his earlier frustration with the course. Beyond technical difficulties, though, the failure of the course community to live up to the potential Stan desired (and had made possible) for it was mainly due

to the failure of the majority of the students to participate fully, either in spirit or even to the point of actually doing all required activities. As I had seen in Michael's class, Stan's students simply did not live up to the more active and responsible roles required of them (see Diken, 2003, p. 270). At some point in the course (when for example Natalia stated her reading buddy was neither sending his work or responding to hers) students simply were not doing what they were supposed to do, and short of an extreme intervention on Stan's part I do not think the path of the course could have been effectively altered at that stage (especially with a shortened summer class like this one); in fact, Stan's case in particular highlights the importance of getting the community of the course off to the right start. My characterization of this typical student experience of the overall failure of the community of the course to coalesce like it should have was borne out by Stan's own acknowledgement that it had not gone as well as he would have liked and his (I believe accurate) assessment that that lack was due to students' attitudes of "mailing it in" and "checking a box" so they could simply get out of the course with passing grades.

Some reasons that Natalia did not experience the course community Stan had planned were not, however, typical: they had to do with her personal circumstances and the result was that her writing was not influenced by her participation in that community. First, Natalia was in what I saw as the now-familiar situation of a stronger writer being less likely to profit from the feedback of her peers than other writers; for Natalia, given her previous writing experience, this was especially the case. Not only was her writing at a level and of a quality that most students would have little to offer by way of critique (this might raise the question of whether instructors should emphasize simple "reader response," rather than "critique"), but she also had a very well-established and proven successful writing process that was done in near-total isolation. Second,

as a veteran college student, while Natalia was a willing participant in Stan's community activities, she also had a very balanced and realistic view of those activities. For example, having had many college courses previously, Natalia managed her resources of time and effort conservatively; in short, she did what she had to, she did it well enough to get good grades on her work, but she did not go above and beyond what was required of her. Additionally, Natalia had been through a number of courses (especially online courses) in which she had had to "survive," as it were, on her own without the benefits of much or any interaction, so she was less likely to see the community as crucial to her success and therefore was less likely to buy into Stan's notion that it was so important; in effect, she was a bit jaded regarding community participation. Even this evaluation on my part was supported by Stan's notion that community participation might not have any effect on a student's writing and he or she was quite likely to leave the course at roughly the same level of writing ability with which he or she entered it.

There was, though, an interesting point at which Stan's intentions regarding community and Natalia's experience of the community of the course intersected, and that was at the end of the course. Despite his general disappointment with the course community, Stan remained optimistic about both its importance and potential in online writing; similarly, despite having started off being skeptical about the course community, Natalia ended the study also optimistic about both the importance and potential of community. Both instructor and student seemed to be in agreement that it was the logistics and demographics of the community that needed to be addressed, not the concept of community importance itself. Designed correctly by the instructor and followed correctly by the students, they agreed, the community of an online writing class could definitely develop successfully and possibly result in positive changes in students' writing. I believe the fact that both participants ended the study on a positive note in their assessment of

community was because of Stan's ongoing efforts to motivate students and inject his own personality and enthusiasm into the course, as well as, especially, his use of the Wimba exercises to bring all the students together, real-time, toward the end of the course. A key point from this particular case study was that that innovation of Stan's was the single most positive community-building exercise I saw throughout the study.

In comparing my understanding of Stan's intentions and Natalia's experience of the community of this course, I came to several conclusions. First, Stan's vision for the course community was a powerful force behind the degree to which the community did form; specifically, his own personality and enthusiasm, the integration of non-traditional literature and web-based resources, and his use of the Wimba class meetings resulted in members connecting and interacting in ways that even Natalia, a veteran online student, had not encountered before and which resulted for her in a particularly participatory and unexpectedly positive experience. However, in some areas, I believe both Stan and Natalia would agree, Stan's vision needed more structure in order for students to understand it and work to accomplish it. Regarding course policies, Stan acknowledged toward the end of the course that he needed to establish clearer guidelines and expectations for the students from the very start of the course. Along with establishing expectations, even though he was reluctant to do so he would have to enforce those policies more vigorously, and students would have to encounter more punitive consequences when they did not meet their community responsibilities. Having said that, though, those actions on Stan's part would not have been needed had his students simply done what he was asking them to do. Like the other instructors in the study, Stan did create opportunities for students to be active community members, and participating responsibly in those opportunities would have resulted (for the student of average writing ability) in positive influences on his or her writing.

Case Study 5: Kardish and Ashton

Course Description

Kardish's course was an English 111 College Composition I course. Kardish was a veteran online writing instructor, and he stated he had spent years thinking through his philosophy for this particular course as well as developing its assignments and delivery. The coursework consisted of four major writing assignments (which included an on-campus proctored final exam) and extensive weekly assignments on the course discussion board. Attendance via discussion board participation was also factored into a student's performance, and violation of the attendance policy would result in a student failing the course. Although (in my experience) many online writing courses have no "attendance" requirement, remember that at the institution where the study took place, in addition to the two required proctored activities required for all online courses (first discussed in Chapter One), it was College policy that all online instructors require regular attendance and participation of students, and as has been seen in all the case studies here, that policy was followed consistently.

Two unusual characteristics of Kardish's course bear mentioning. First, this was a course in which students were "writing about writing"; that is, the content of their writing assignments (and most discussion board postings) was invariably about some aspect of writing, because as Kardish said that was his area of expertise, the area in which he had most to offer the students, and he also felt the meta-cognition and self-referential elements of students writing about writing (and often writing about their own writing) led to both improved writing and understanding of writing and to fostering community in the course since the students had a common topic (writing) to discuss. That fostering of community is the second very noteworthy aspect of Kardish's course: the entire course was designed so that participation in the community of the

course was crucial to a student's success in the class. Because peer feedback and interaction were built into the structure and grading policies of the course, Kardish reported, a student simply could not pass the course without participating actively. This course was a true example of Freedman's (1999) statement that in online courses students who don't participate "almost don't exist."

Kardish's heavy focus on the social constructivist values of communication, participation, and interaction are best demonstrated through a look at several statements on his Syllabus, along with various course policies:

- In an online environment, students take the leadership role in their learning while the instructor provides a curriculum and supporting materials and services. Online courses offer convenience and flexibility and a unique way of sharing information with others, but successful students must implement their own educational structures and routines. It is also essential that students develop their own "college communities" by initiating interactions with the course, other students, the instructor, family, coworkers, JTCC staff, and friends.
- Because this is a collaborative learning experience, in this course students are not permitted to work ahead or to earn credit for late work.
- Students have commented on past course evaluations that the **collaborative learning** requirements provide the most beneficial and satisfactory learning in this course. The more you engage with other students in your exploration of course material and development of skills, the greater your learning outcomes will be. Peer response activities are fun, they lead to tremendous academic growth in a short period of time, and they develop skills that you will be able to use throughout your academic and personal life.
- If you are not experienced or comfortable with peer feedback, I hope you will delay your misgivings and place your trust in yourself, your fellow students, your instructor, and the educational process of this course. I will provide you with specific direction on how to offer, solicit, and receive peer feedback.
- **Your peers** will read and respond to your work every week, offering both compliments and suggestions about your performance. To get the most out of this course, determine how you can leverage all of these electronic conversations to improve your performance as a student.

- Because you will become a better writer principally by reading, writing, and responding to each other, your most frequent feedback will come from others in this class. My responses will be reflected in your grades for each post and in comments I provide on the discussion boards and in the [Kardish's] Comments section of this course.

In these statements we find many of the key ideas associated with social constructivist writing pedagogy: community, interaction, collaboration, engagement, peer response, feedback, and conversation. Kardish's course reflected the student-centered philosophy of this pedagogy (Rickly, 2004, p. 46) as well as its typical practical manifestations (Howard, 2001, pp. 58-62).

Most significantly, there were fifty required weekly discussion board postings (calling for students to read and respond to each other's posts) which not only determined a student's compliance with the course attendance policy but were actually the sole differentiating factor in a student's grade. For example, to pass the course, all students were required to abide by the attendance policy (missing no more than eight of the fifty posts—and late posts were not accepted) and to satisfactorily complete the four major writing assignments and the final exam (which were all ultimately pass/fail grades, a student revising, if necessary, until the assignment was acceptable). What made the differences between the letter grades assigned to the students at the end of the course was simply how well they had participated in the course, as determined by the number and quality of their posts. Those posts were not graded pass/fail, so a student could not simply “show up” and receive full credit for an assignment; the quantity and quality of their contributions to the discussion board conversations were held to quite a high standard. Kardish wanted serious conversations and interaction from his students, and discussion board posts (but not necessarily replies) were generally required to be between two-hundred and six-hundred words—the equivalent of short papers.

If, for example, a student like Ashton wanted to receive an A in the course, she could afford to miss very few, if any, discussion board activities, and her own ideas as well as her responses to her peers had to be detailed, substantive, articulate, and carefully proofread. In short, by design, a student could do all other required work for the course but literally either would not pass or would receive a much-reduced letter grade if he or she were not a regularly active, engaged, and valuably contributing member of the course community.

As just one example of what was required of students in the participation and conversation aspects of this course, in an early weekly writing assignment in which Kardish asked students to research the writing process and reflect upon their own processes, Ashton posted the following:

There are many different pathways to go about preparing a paper but the journey and stops along the way are the same. Prewriting is the process in which you bounce around ideas of your paper such as brainstorming via clustering and mapping for example. Making sure you understand all the requirements of the paper, choose a position in which you will defend and back with fact and opinion. Come up with a list of questions you wish to address in your writing. Drafting is the process in which you begin to put your brainstorming notes to use. Its suggested to sit down and simply write, keeping your goal in mind and what your readers are looking for, without worrying with things such as spelling, sentence structure and grammar. In the revising process you go over your work looking for ways to improve your paper, focusing on content of your work, the organization of your paper and making sure your paper relays the information you are wanting to get across. Finally in the editing process you focus on things such as spelling, sentence structure.

I find that in my own writing I tend to skip right over the Prewriting process and jump right to drafting. This is a weakness of mine I look forward to working on throughout this class. In taking the time to Prewrite it may eliminate my frustrations in sitting staring at a blank screen for a while wondering how to begin my papers. I feel a strength of mine is revising, I enjoy reading and rereading my work

arranging sentences to make the general flow read more smoothly. In the future I will take the extra time and invest it in prewriting before sitting down to begin on a paper. I feel by skipping this important step in the past my work may not of been to its full potential.

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As an experienced online writing instructor, I was impressed that this post was unusually sophisticated in its length, substance, and editing—all in accordance with the guidelines Kardish had set for his students. However, while this post was typical of Ashton's work, it was not necessarily typical of the posts of other students in the course; in general, Ashton's contributions to the discussion board conversations were generally longer, more substantive, and more polished than those of most of her fellow students. In addition, Ashton received replies from three of her classmates, the average length of which was just slightly less than her original post, and she in turn replied back to those three students. Just among these four students (and this does not include any interactions they each might have had with any of the twenty other students) a written conversation of over a thousand words took place on the topic of the writing process.

The above example is fairly representative of the discussion board exchanges in the course. It is important to remember, too, that this discussion board assignment was one of only fifty over the course of the class, and as Kardish stated many students were posting above and beyond the required number of times, to say nothing of the extracurricular activities going on in

the Cyber Café discussion board forum, in which many students, including Ashton, were heavily involved. Ashton, designated by Kardish as a successful student in both the writing and community aspects of the course, might not be a typical example of the average student in the course, but she was an example of what Kardish wanted students to be and do. Since she was successful she represents the potential of the course as Kardish designed it, the possibilities of what a determined student could achieve in becoming a part of a substantive course community.

In summary, this is how I would characterize Kardish's course from a social constructivist perspective. It was firmly grounded in social constructivist writing principles. Kardish successfully set himself up as a facilitator (Dale, 1997, p. 17), avoiding the teacher-centered paradigm (Rickly, 2004, p. 46) and engaging his online students in more self-centered learning and writing (Williams, 2006, p.149). The course-design focused on student-centered discussion, interaction, and peer feedback (Howard, 2001, pp. 58-60), and, along with the actual writing for the course, community was a foremost concern of the instructor and a foremost reality for the students. In fact, in so far as communication, interaction, and participation were concerned, Kardish successfully built a community in that course to a degree that I had seen achieved in no other online writing course and in few other face-to-face writing courses. In my view, students who completed his online writing course would have been exposed to an ideal or nearly ideal social constructivist writing experience, as far as the design and the delivery of the course were concerned.

Summary of Kardish's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

When first asked about social constructivist theory, Kardish's response almost epitomized Bruffee's (1997, p. 400) classic definitions of social constructivism in writing. He

showed a clear understanding of the theory, its underlying principles, and its application to teaching writing, and Kardish described himself as “heavily influenced” by social constructivism “not just in composition but across the board.” Kardish’s thoughts on community stayed consistent throughout the study. He began by focusing on two aspects of community in writing: students needing an audience for their writing and students needing experience in collaboration and interaction to prepare them for the realities of work and school beyond the writing course; in our final conversation, Kardish reiterated his belief in collaboration and social constructivism as they pertained to those same aspects: the critical nature of interaction in work and school and the audience element of the writing class. As seen in the above Course Description, everything in the design and execution of Kardish’s online writing course manifested his beliefs about social constructivism.

When asked how social constructivist principles specifically differed in the community of an online writing course, Kardish cited two major differences: “lack of physicality” (which Michael and Stan also referred to as significant) and students’ expectation. Although Kardish was the only instructor to specifically mention the most obvious difference—lack of physicality—I believe, based on my later conversations, that the other instructors simply took that as obviously for granted. The second major difference Kardish mentioned was students’ expectations (see Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 124) that they would not be expected to participate actively in an online writing course. He noted that many students initially resented that expectation, but he attributed the success students tended to have in his course to his high expectations regarding community.

Kardish stated that, in his experience, his online students were generally better writers than those in his traditional writing classes, and he directly attributed that at least in part to the

sense of community formed online, although he did not claim to know exactly why or how that happened. Perhaps the public nature of writing in his online course (wherein students posted all their writing and were required to comment extensively on each other's work) resulted in the phenomenon he described: "I think that there is something going on with that community aspect that is rising-tide-lifts-all-boats," he said, which suggests to me perhaps an online zone of proximal development in which students are clearly learning from one another; or it could be due to the fact that Kardish required extensive involvement in both his course and in interaction with other students, and this forced students to be active members of the community, such participation leading to better writing. As Kardish said, "You can look at students, number of hits, their course-touch statistics, and they'll correlate with their grades," and the students who were accessing the course rarely were "not part of that community" and that lack was usually reflected directly in the quality of their writing, such students typically being D and F students. These conclusions of Kardish's were based on his looking at the correlation between grades and participation after the fact—that is, after past courses had finished and final grades were assigned—and should not be taken to mean Kardish assigned grades based on students' participation.

Kardish hesitated to define the sense of community in his online courses as "stronger" than that in his traditional courses, in fact dismissing such a comparison outright as "apples and oranges," but he did note that online students had to rely on each other much more—the nature of the course demanded it—and he cited multiple examples of students forming certain relationships through their patterns of postings on discussion boards, and those relationships were formed based on the students' perceptions of how such a relationship would benefit their own writing. Kardish, who kept track of students' extra posts in his online classes, could tell

exactly how many extra posts his current students had made—interaction above and beyond the requirements of the course, and he was even able to describe different communities *within* the class: social, academic, and a mix of the two. It is noteworthy that Kardish also mentioned this phenomenon: online courses often having an emerging core of, for lack of a better term, “community leaders” who led the way in participation and interaction (Dale, 1997, p. 42; Simon, 1990, p. 62), often followed by a middle group, and then a number of fringe- or non-“citizens” of the class community, a reflection of the different “expectations, attitudes, and participation of students” (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 124).

Kardish also believed that course content—the subject material the course focused on—heavily influenced the formation and success of community in his course; he felt that the students in his online writing course, who were talking to each other about writing, were much more interactive than the students in his online film course, discussing films and literature. He attributed much of the general success of communities built in his online writing courses to his focus on writing-as-content and on the students’ own writing. This content, he felt, gave his students many opportunities to interact with each other about subject-matter that interested them. In addition to course content as an influence on community, Kardish also pointed out the meta-cognitive and self-referential aspects of his course as contributing to the course community. Specifically, he got students discussing the class itself, the subject matter (writing), themselves, and their own writing. However, he also noted that identical assignments in his film class, assignments designed to prompt the same kind of reflection, had been much less effective.

Kardish continually reiterated his finding that students who tended to “touch the course” more frequently tended to have more success in the course. However, he noted that some excellent writers participated minimally, although this was rare. He also drew several important

distinctions about students. First, he noted, a student's participation could be perfunctory, as might be case with the student who participated in required activities simply to check off a necessary box in the course work, versus the student who engaged substantively with his or her peers and really used the social aspects of the course to influence his or her writing. Kardish also pointed out that success might be defined differently by different students: for some it might be simply passing the course, while for others success meant becoming better writers; for the former, he saw that deep involvement in the community of the course was not as critical, but for the latter it was a key component in improving their writing.

In spite of Kardish's stated—and demonstrated—belief in social constructivist pedagogy, he ranked social interaction lower in importance for student success when compared to a student's writing ability and intelligence; a “brilliant” student, he noted, could have success in the course with relatively little substantive social interaction. The key distinction here is in the term “substantive”: all students had to participate in the course, but a student could achieve an A on the strength of his or her writing in spite of actually applying few or none of the community aspects of the course to his or her writing (in fact, that turned out to be the case with the majority of the students in this study). Kardish also gave as a current example one student who was not a strong writer but who had used the interactive elements of the course to improve her writing and be more successful in the course than she might have been in a course where interaction and peer review were stressed less. Kardish reiterated his earlier statement that, first, there were aspects of community going on in his courses that he was unaware of or only somewhat aware of, and he also restated his belief that community did in fact have a big influence on his students' writing, although he stated that based on his intuition from years of experience, not on anything he could necessarily “prove.”

Regarding his own role in the course, Kardish saw himself as “the person who makes community possible” (he and Paul, the most veteran instructors, said virtually the same things in this vein) but not the driving force of that community (a role I believe Kardish would also espouse in his face-to-face classes, but it seemed in my discussions with him that he saw the online class as even less teacher-centered). Kardish stated frankly that his role was, in part, actually to *play* a role; he disclosed very little private information to his students, participating in the course when he felt it necessary either to further his pedagogical goals or to contribute to the sense of community he felt furthered those same goals. Regarding his own personal information, sometimes his responses were “fictional,” because he (as he felt was also the case with some of his students) was not comfortable sharing personal information, so he sometimes responded simply for the purpose of fostering or maintaining that sense of community. He also drew the distinction between the official or academic community (and purpose for that community) and the merely social aspects, which he felt some students and instructors would be uncomfortable with and which “muddied the waters” and could create problems. Kardish, for example, appeared as very interactive with his students but saw himself actually as professionally distant, perhaps unknown to his students; his guess was that some of his students would perceive their relationships with him as much deeper or closer than he himself did. He also stated his belief that students feeling a connection with their instructor was important, something they needed, particularly, perhaps, in an online class, as Blair and Hoy (2006) found, noting that the online environment not only fostered such a sense of connection but could result in *better* relationships among students and instructors (p. 40). Kardish also offered the interesting insight that the role of the instructor in the community of the course was often that of knowing when *not* to interact with students. Once the instructor had created the opportunity for participation and interaction,

he or she most often needed to step back and let the students build the community of the course for themselves, an interdependence that would also lead to them influencing each other's writing to a greater degree. So, in Kardish's view, a key component to a successful online writing community was the instructor knowing and following his or her proper role within that community, a role that was largely administrative, that of a facilitator (Dale, 1997, p. 17), rather than didactic.

Overall, Kardish's perspective on community in his online writing course could be summed up thus: He strongly believed in and practiced the social constructivist tenet that community could be a significant and positive factor on students' writing. He did not believe community was the most important factor in a student's success in the online writing course, but he felt it generally made a highly significant contribution to that success. He believed that it was the instructor's job in such a class to create the structure for and requirements of the building of community, but the instructor should not be the "heart" of the community: that role fell to students, a view shared by the other veteran instructor (Paul), and to some degree by Liz as well. The instructor created the opportunity for community through course design and structure, assignments, and holding students accountable for their participation in and contribution to the community, and then the instructor's role should diminish as students began to read and write for each other.

Summary of Ashton's Perspective on Community in Online Writing Courses

When first asked about community in her online course (at the mid-point of the course), Ashton, like the other participating students, had a narrow idea of what community constituted, which might be indicative of support for Brown's (2003) assertion that "community" might not

be the best metaphor to use when explaining our social constructivist aims to our students (p. 154). Ashton, who ironically was participating in probably the most interactive course in the study, gave the most limited response; she simply thought of community as a group of people in a shared space (virtual or real)—the most obvious and simple notion of community. When asked what she thought was important in being part of the course community, she responded, “Being active. You have to post and be active in the class or I don’t think you’ll do as well,” thinking in terms of discussion board posting and its effects on her performance. She thought of community as consisting of participation in the discussion board conversations of the class, and she thought of it in objective terms, such as how many times students were required to post assignments, but she also mentioned the purely social Cyber Café where some students, herself included, discussed what often were non-course-related issues. In fact, the most frequent and personal student-interaction Ashton cited was in the Cyber Café, a forum used simply for socializing in the course.

Ashton felt the community of Kardish’s course was particularly well-developed when compared to her many other online courses (she had taken most of her college courses online), due, she thought, both to the content of the course (writing) and to Kardish’s requirements for frequent and substantive interaction. She felt the online environment to be no obstacle to her relationships with her classmates and instructor, and in fact Ashton felt freed by the anonymity of the online forum to express her ideas more frequently and in more detail (see Rickly, 2004, pp. 43-44), and she also felt the quality of the feedback she gave others and received on her own work was better in the online class, due to students having more time to write their responses and a more writing-friendly forum (the computer versus hand-writing in the traditional class). Overall, Ashton felt her experience of community to be better in the online course than it would

have been in a traditional writing course; Ashton's comment echoed Blair and Hoy's (2006) finding that the online environment especially helped more reserved students, because it gave them better opportunities to participate (p. 41).

Ashton described community as being "very important" in a class, especially a writing class, and she categorized that importance into two areas: the effects of participation and communication on herself personally (in what might be characterized as social and psychological ways) and on her writing.

Describing how she felt about being in an online community, she said, "I personally took the class online—and most of my classes online—because I'm a very shy person; I don't like to talk in front of people and all that, so I kind of have the security of the computer in the online class." She felt that peer review, which was a big part of Kardish's course, if received in a face-to-face course, might affect her "emotionally or personally," while online she felt better able to both give and receive criticism (although giving criticism was still difficult), as well as being better able to overcome her shyness in general (Blair & Hoy, 2006, p. 41).

As for her writing, while Ashton felt she received good feedback from her peers due to the online community, it became apparent that she saw that feedback as of limited application to her writing. She consistently described the feedback she received from Kardish via individual email—not the extensive peer exchanges on the discussion boards—as the most significant course influence on her writing: "I guess probably, ultimately, [Kardish], because ultimately he's the grade-giver. And, you know, what my mom or husband and peers think, that's fine and dandy, but they're not the ones . . . obviously he has what he's looking for, so I'd have to say my teacher." Ashton specifically said she did not use interaction with her peers when shaping ideas or in the higher-level aspects of writing her papers; she stated that the discussion boards Kardish

required his students to post to were used, in her opinion, for more surface-level writing concerns like grammar and punctuation. For example, she noted, “I’ve not really bounced any ideas off anybody. You have your forms for each of your assignments that are due, and then you have to go in and reply. So, I’ve not really seen anybody going, ‘Hey, I’m thinking of doing this. What do you all think?’ I haven’t really seen any of that.” These comments were interesting because they suggested that the well-developed feeling of community Ashton cited was not necessarily a *writing* community, which was of course what Kardish was interested in achieving.

To a limited degree Ashton would use the discussion board assignments to refine her sense of audience, of what her peers might be doing in their own papers or looking for in the papers of others; however, when asked to describe a specific significant change she had made in her writing as the result of feedback from her peers, she replied, “I can’t think of a specific time.” Ashton did feel she learned a lot simply from the opportunity to read all her classmates’ posted work, which she most likely would not have had in a traditional writing course. Interestingly, Ashton felt that such increased exposure to peers’ work was a major benefit to an online class, as Dial-Driver and Sesso (2000, p. 2) had also found. Ashton did enjoy getting and receiving feedback to and from her peers, but she felt that feedback influenced her own writing to a limited degree and was confident enough in her own writing to filter that advice critically and implement relatively little of it (the idea that the community of the course did not necessarily or significantly improve the writing of the students who participated in it was a trend that would be seen with the other students in the study as well). She also valued feedback and communication with her instructor over that of her classmates, and the instructor’s input was much more likely to result in changes in her writing.

Throughout the course Ashton continued to see the primary beneficial interaction in the course as being with her instructor, but as the course had gone on she felt she and her fellow students had begun to use the participatory aspects of the course more confidently and to greater effect. While she was personally still not completely comfortable critiquing her peers' writing, she felt both she and they had grown more confident in that practice and she later described peer evaluation of her own writing as very beneficial, a change from what she had said before. Similarly, Dale (1997) noted the vital importance of the time students "engage in the process and communicate with each other and the teacher" (p. 50). This applies both within a course, when, for example, asynchronous communication keeps a student from proceeding with his or her work, and the overall length of the course, such as seen when Ashton and her classmates needed several weeks to figure out how to use the discussion boards for the kind of quality peer evaluation Kardish intended. Significantly, Ashton was the only student in the study who by the end of her course stated that peer review was a reasonable success.

Even so, in the end Ashton saw the "very important" benefit of community participation primarily as a confidence booster, helping her to feel a part of the class and become more comfortable interacting with others, with secondary benefits to her writing. In this area, Ashton followed the trend seen in the other students: when asked about community in a generic or abstract sense, Ashton professed to believe it was very important; however, when asked to apply its importance to her own writing, to cite substantive changes in her writing due to community influence, she was much less enthusiastic about the effects of the community; interestingly, though, at the end of the study, when asked again in a generic sense about community's importance, Ashton reverted to her earlier endorsement of its significance.

As a final note on Ashton's perspective on community in her online writing course, it is interesting to look at the advice she had to offer on that subject to both instructors and students. Ashton advised online writing instructors to "most definitely" make community interaction a significant and required aspect of their courses. She went so far as to say they should insist on this, even if students did not like it, as she herself had not liked peer evaluation in the beginning of her course with Kardish. She admitted she would not have participated and interacted to the degree she did if doing so had been voluntary or not such an integral part of the course; she also felt most students of their own accord would not become active participants in the community, that they would do only what was required and nothing further. She felt Kardish's very specific and somewhat demanding requirements of students to participate and interact were the single greatest factor in successfully building the community of the course, and she advised other instructors to follow that pattern.

Ashton advised online writing students to pay good attention to the community aspects of the course, as she felt interaction and discussion with peers, while perhaps not as important as the feedback from the instructor, were very important and beneficial, as long as the student made the decision to take those activities seriously and apply them as best possible to his or her writing: "Just really read your peer evaluations with an open mind, look over your work with their suggestions in mind, see what you could improve, what you need to improve, and if not then take it with a grain of salt, thank them, and go about your work." She went on to say, "It was a lot of work, but the work was worth it. I don't think I would have gotten out of the class what I should have had it not been so interactive."

In summary, Ashton had clearly had a positive experience as a participant in the community of her course with Kardish, and she had a high regard for both the course and the

instructor. She felt the high degree of participation and interaction required of her had challenged her but had been beneficial in increasing her confidence in communicating and sharing ideas with others, and she felt her writing had benefited as well. However, the actual influences of that community on her writing that she reported seemed relatively minor, although that did not diminish the importance of community in her mind. As a strong writer, it may have been that there was little room for improvement in her work, but she still valued reading and commenting on her classmates' work and having them do the same for her.

Analysis of Ashton's Writing and the Community of the Course

Ashton was selected for the study based on Kardish's recommendation that she was a student who was having success in the course in both the community aspect and in her writing. I will not examine in detail all of Ashton's participation in the course community but will instead offer some general observations to set the context for an examination of her writing and the influences of that community on her writing.

Ashton was a frequent and substantive contributor to the discussion board conversations of the class. She received an A for the course, and as will be remembered from the Course Description above that grade meant she had received at least a 92% in the weekly discussion board assignments that constituted the core participatory and interactive element of the course. As far as I was able to determine Ashton did not fail to participate in even one of the fifty required posts. The sample post included in the Course Description is representative of Ashton's involvement in the discussion board community, but a couple other examples will help to characterize her as a community member. In the first discussion board assignment, the purpose of which was for classmates to introduce themselves to each other, Ashton responded to and was

in turn responded to by no less than eight of her classmates, fully one third of the class, making her one of just a small number of students to be so involved in that discussion. She tended to be more active in more socially oriented discussion forums, but she never failed to be among the most participatory students in those forums that were more academically oriented, even those requiring criticism of one another's work, something Ashton had confessed finding uncomfortable. In the course's Cyber Café, a strictly social forum for the students, Ashton was extremely active, more so than any other student save perhaps one or two; she discussed everything from her major and her other courses, to her family life (including posting pictures), to entertainment preferences like movies and TV shows, just to name a few topics. In spite of her description of herself as shy, she appeared anything but reticent as a member of the course community.

Regarding the influence of her community activities on her writing, I was able to examine three of her four major writing projects for the course (the fourth, an on-campus proctored final exam, was not made available to me).

The first major project for Kardish's students was a personal writing goals essay. This was a five-hundred word (minimum) paper in which students were to develop and discuss four to six personal writing goals they would like to achieve in the course, in light of their educational or career goals and the stated objectives of the course. Additionally, they had to list three open-ended questions for other students about what was working well in their papers and what could be improved; these questions could not be about grammar or format. Finally, they had to respond (two-hundred word minimum) to at least two of their peers' questions, offering at least one compliment and one suggestion for improvement.

It is difficult to determine the effects Ashton's interactions with her peers had on this writing assignment, because it was not required of students to revise it if it met the assignment goals, and Ashton did not revise her paper. Students simply posted their work, commented on the work of others, and read the feedback they received from others. However, it is very interesting to examine the piece, because it shows directly what Ashton was hoping to get from the course and, by extension, from the feedback of her peers and instructor. Her stated goals in her own writing were to improve her confidence in writing, to overcome the difficulties of starting a paper (looking for the "perfect" introduction before she could continue), to gain a better sense of audience and how to make her topics relevant to her audience, and to improve in several areas of grammar and punctuation (proper word-choice and commas, for example). She characterized her writing as "overall OK though there is always room for improvement." Her questions for her classmates were: *How can I add more relevant content to my work without rambling? What paragraph do you find to be my strongest and why? What paragraph do you find to be my weakest and why? What goals do we share and why are they a goal for you?*

Ashton's stated goals were a mix of process, rhetorical, and editing concerns. It could be argued that she might expect little help from the community with the first goals of confidence and overcoming a form of writer's block, but the audience and grammar/punctuation goals were two that she later cited as having improved because of her interactions with others through the course. Arguably, even her confidence improved through participation in the course as she had the experience of sharing her writing with others and generally receiving very high praise for the quality of her work.

Ashton received feedback on her goals paper from two classmates. The first chose to respond to her because they were both Nursing majors, and that student quickly stated Ashton's

first paragraph was her strongest, since it got the reader interested, and that no paragraph was weak, before she went on to discuss some run-on sentences. The second student, also in the Nursing program, echoed the first's praise of the first paragraph and suggested the paragraph on improving grammar and punctuation was generic and could be applied to or by anyone. Ashton thanked both of these students and agreed with their advice.

Ashton responded to the papers of two different peers, and her feedback was generally more substantive than that which she had received. She started by complimenting each student and finding some point made that she could agree or sympathize with. She complimented a strength in each paper (as required) and then went on to offer a somewhat detailed analysis of a potential problem area along with suggestions about how that problem could be avoided in the future, typically by describing a technique she used herself. Although Ashton had said she was uncomfortable critiquing others' work, it was clear she took the job seriously and, in my observation, did it better than most of her classmates, avoiding platitudes and generalities and keeping her tone friendly and helpful.

Since the paper met the assignment goals, Ashton did not choose to revise it, so it is hard to determine what effect if any the give-and-take of peer review had on her writing; clearly it was not used on a second version of this particular assignment. It could seem, then, that the commentary she received was unneeded; however, given the nature of the assignment—Kardish's "meta-cognitive and self-referential" aspects of the course design—it is safe to assume that Ashton and her classmates were at least looking at their own and others' writing critically and thinking about how that criticism might be applied in future writing assignments.

Fortunately, in the next major writing assignment, students did revise, so it was possible to look at Ashton's early and revised drafts. This paper was focused on the students' self-

evaluation of their writing. For this assignment, students had read about and discussed four methods of evaluating writing: traits analysis, rubrics, holistic grading, and contract grading. They were to select one method of evaluation and apply it to their previous paper on personal writing goals. This was a source-based paper (one-thousand word minimum) in which the writer must discuss his or her chosen method of evaluation and why it was chosen, have one other person (outside the class) evaluate the goals paper using that method, report that evaluation, and reflect on the significance of that evaluation (what was learned, what questions remained, etc.). This brought both self- and reader evaluation of one's writing to the forefront of the students' awareness, a very effective assignment for making students aware of audience and the influence of others on their writing.

In looking at the comments Ashton received on her first draft (comments posted on the discussion board forum by various classmates who had read her draft as well as those of the instructor), it became apparent why Ashton had stated in the interviews that the changes she made based on others' feedback were not particularly substantive. Four people in the course (including Kardish) offered her fairly brief suggestions on her first draft. These suggestions had to do with some MLA format technicalities, some minor wording issues, one suggestion for rearranging a paragraph, and one bigger suggestion about organizing paragraphs in general. Such critique seemed typical of much peer response (whether face-to-face or online) with its emphasis on surface-level or basic skills concerns, rather than on larger acts of revision (Harris as cited in Howard, 2001, p. 60). In her final version of the paper, Ashton implemented the MLA and wording suggestions, made slight changes in the one paragraph someone had suggested she rearrange, but ignored the major suggestion about reordering her paragraphs in general. In the latter case, she had explained to her peer why she had arranged things as she did,

suggesting he might have misread what she was trying to do (Ashton was correct—the classmate’s suggestion seemed off-base to me, too). She did expand the final draft by about ten percent, adding more details throughout, but not based on any suggestions others had made.

As Ashton’s final draft on this second paper met the criteria for passing the assignment (as a reminder, these papers were ultimately graded—after revisions, if necessary—on a pass/fail basis), with very few changes from the original, it was clear that she was getting few or no suggestions for substantive changes because her writing simply did not need to be changed in any significant way. She was having success with her writing *before* any intervention on the part of other community members.

On the other hand, Ashton herself was giving feedback to others that was much, much more significant than that which she received. In some cases, Ashton’s post thanking a person for his or her feedback was longer than the peer’s feedback itself. The longest reply to her own work was about three-hundred words, much of which was praise for the quality of her first draft. In contrast, Ashton’s two responses to the drafts of her peers averaged 480 words and went into minute detail about improvements that could be made. A distinction about this disparity has to be drawn, though: Ashton’s work in her first draft was relatively polished to begin with, while that of the two students she responded to needed (and ultimately underwent) extensive revision. This highlights, again, the notion that Ashton, as a successful writer, simply was less able to benefit from the advantages of input from other community members.

This pattern repeated itself in the third major writing assignment for the course (and the last of Ashton’s work I was able to analyze), an individual development plan in which a student would “Write a report in which you provide a plan for developing the writing abilities needed to achieve success in your career.” In this paper (one-thousand word minimum), the student would

investigate his or her proposed career field to determine the writing tasks and abilities required in that field, describe those writing tasks and abilities, evaluate his or her current writing abilities in light of those career writing requirements, and describe his or her plan to develop the necessary writing skills to meet the career's writing requirements.

After Ashton posted her rough draft of her individual development plan, she received only two brief comments (one or two sentences) from classmates. One was a suggestion that she incorporate a “design element” into her paper (the students were experimenting with sub-headings, etc.), which she had already done. The other was a reminder that she needed to post her three open-ended questions with her original post (the rough draft), not as a separate post. That was the sum total of feedback she received from her peers on a paper of just over one-thousand words. To put this in context, other students were receiving much more detailed feedback from their peers, and once again Ashton herself was giving detailed and weighty suggestions to the peers whose work she chose to respond to. Why Ashton received so little input from her peers on this assignment is not clear. Perhaps, as Ashton stated in her final interview, by the end of the course she and her classmates were getting better at reviewing each other's work, and by this point in the course it may have been clear to most students that Ashton simply did not need much help with her writing. Still, though, it is surprising that no one chose to respond to the questions she posted about her work; what is less surprising is that she would make virtually no significant changes from her rough draft to her final draft—just a few cases of changing the wording of a sentence.

Interestingly, Ashton did get some significant comments from one classmate once she posted her final draft of the individual development plan, a 250 word critique of Ashton's final draft, half that critique being praise for its quality and half being suggestions for possible

improvements. Once again, though, of the suggestions for improvements, only one was for something other than some issue with grammar and punctuation. The classmate suggested Ashton add an additional introductory paragraph to establish context and reader interest in her subject, before launching into a bulleted list of her goals. This was the one piece of advice I observed in the peer review of Ashton's work that I felt could have made a substantive improvement in any of her writing, but ironically it came too late for her to incorporate, had she chosen to do so. One comment of Ashton's own in her paper was curious to note: she stated, "I feel that my writing abilities at this current place in my life are good. With that said, there is always room for improvement." With only a week and a half left to go in the course, this statement was almost an exact echo of one she made at the beginning of the course in her paper on personal writing goals.

Ashton, having received little to no help with her rough draft, went back on the final draft forum and followed up with the two classmates she had originally responded to. She praised the changes they had made between their two drafts (some of which had originally been her suggestions) and then once again offered some comments on how the papers could be improved further, in both cases calling for further development of ideas in certain sections, and in one case pointing out the paper lacked a conclusion. Typically, these two classmates once again got about 250 words of commentary from Ashton, far and above what she normally received on her own work.

In conclusion, my assessment of the influence of the community on Ashton's writing was in accord with her report on that influence. Ashton was very participatory in the course community and clearly enjoyed reading others' work, and her assessments of and commentary on their work were insightful and could be very helpful to those who chose to implement her

suggestions in their writing. While it appears Ashton did benefit, perhaps greatly, from the design and requirements of Kardish's course and the well-developed community he engendered, it also appears that participation in that community affected very limited changes in Ashton's writing. Her assertion that she used the community input primarily to gain a better sense of audience and to make only surface changes in her writing is borne out by an examination of the feedback she received and the few changes that took place in her writing as a result of that feedback.

Comparison: Instructor Intentions and Student Experiences

From all I observed in Kardish's class, from his course design and policies, and from his comments in interviews, I concluded that it was Kardish's deliberate intention to create and deliver an online writing course that was guided by and firmly grounded in the principles and practices of social constructivist composition pedagogy. The formation of an active community of peer writers was a primary goal. He planned to remove himself as the central figure of the course and to create a writing course experience in which students were the most important members of that community (see Williams, 2006, p.149). Kardish's view was that students should overwhelmingly be the most active participants in the community, writing for each other and reading and discussing each other's work. The vast majority of communication and interaction in the course was meant to be student-to-student, with Kardish acting as a facilitator. The focus on writing for the entire course was also designed in part to be a community-builder, giving students a common, shared content around which their conversations and interaction revolved. The instructor also, through the requirements and grading policy of the course, held students very accountable for being active, contributing members of the course community.

Ultimately, Kardish's intent was that the community thus created would have a significant positive impact on the students' writing (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, pp. 2-3).

From my observations and Ashton's own account, her experience in the community of the course very closely, though not completely, matched the goals Kardish wanted for his students. Without a doubt, Ashton felt herself to have been part of a real community of peers in Kardish's course, and her assertion was that she felt a greater sense of community in this course than in any other, including her face-to-face college courses; it must be remembered, though, that Ashton had expressed a preference for the online social environment, and by her own admission she participated less in her face-to-face courses, due to her shyness. From my observations of her classmates' participation and interaction in the course, though, I believe Ashton's experience of community in the course was generally representative of that of her peers, although that is just informed speculation on my part. Ashton stated that the course parameters Kardish had put in place did require her to be an active, contributing member of the class community—more than she would have been in the absence of those requirements—and that membership in that community had contributed significantly to her success, although, as will be seen, that claim was debatable. Ashton's communication within the course was overwhelmingly (in both frequency and volume) with her classmates, rather than with the instructor, showing that Kardish had successfully removed himself as the central figure of the class; however, Ashton did tend to value feedback from the instructor over that of her peers, something that probably was not in line with Kardish's intentions. Two things must be pointed out about this preference on Ashton's part: first, it might not be representative of the attitudes of her classmates, and, second, it shows support for Diken's (2003) finding that it is students, not instructors, who have more difficulty accepting an instructor playing a non-traditional, less central role in the community of the

writing course (p. 270). Ashton also felt that the focus on writing not only helped her improve her own writing but also, as Kardish planned, helped build the community of the course. The shared content, as well as the shared experience of dealing with the same issues that were the central focus of the course, helped Ashton and her classmates connect through both a common topic of conversation and through overcoming similar problems together. Ashton reported that Kardish's requirements for participation, enforced through policies, were in her opinion crucial to creating a successful community in the course, because she believed students would not have engaged with each other to the degree they did if they had not been held accountable for doing so.

Finally, Ashton's experience with the community of the course differed—at least in degree—with Kardish's implied ideals in one key area: interaction and participation in the community did not result in significant changes to Ashton's writing. As a result of her conversations with and feedback from other members of the community, Ashton made only superficial changes to her writing, a fact she reported and which is supported by analysis of her writing and the discussion board conversations that she participated in with others about her writing. This was a phenomenon I cannot report as typical of her classmates' experiences. Because Ashton was a strong writer, there was both less room for improvement in her writing than in that of many of her classmates, and it is quite possible that she was simply less able to benefit from her classmates' ideas and comments because they were less able to improve on writing of the quality she tended to produce. This is not to say there was not room for improvement in Ashton's writing—a fact she pointed out on more than one occasion—but rather an acknowledgement that at this particular level of writing course Ashton's work was near the top of her class. Still, it is safe to assume that Kardish would wish for even the stronger writers

in his classes to consider more global changes in their work, based on what they might learn from fellow community members.

Based on my observations of all the public aspects of this course and on extensive interviews with two key informants, I drew several conclusions about the community in this online writing course. First, as far as successfully achieving some of the key goals of social constructivist writing pedagogy, Kardish's course was the best designed and best delivered writing course I have witnessed, either online or face-to-face. This course did in fact result in the formation of a truly interactive and mutually dependent community of student writers. The students themselves were the most important, most active members of the community, with the instructor playing the role of facilitator rather than central figure. Group discussion and peer review of writing were the primary teaching methods or tools of the course, and a common, shared course content gave the community members a central focus for discussion and mutual experience. Based on gleanings from the course discussion boards and from Ashton's comments, I believe the vast majority of the students in the course—perhaps even all of them—would say they had a positive community experience in the course and that that experience helped them to improve their writing to some degree. However, I also believe that the creation of such an experience of community was not accidental but was the result of course design, grading policy, and enforced student accountability, a combination of elements that would emerge as a major finding of this study (discussed in detail in the next chapter). These students successfully formed an online community of writers because they were required to do so and then given clear guidelines as to how that would be achieved. Interestingly, no technology other than the standard discussion board found in Blackboard was used or was needed to facilitate the successful formation of this community; communication was supplemented by course

announcements and occasional individual emails from the instructor, but the discussion board was by far the most important forum. The significance of the discussion board in this course is consistent with the findings of Vonderwell, Liang, and Alderman (2007) that the discussion board was the “essential component” (p. 309) of interaction and communication in the online writing courses they studied.

Regarding areas for improvement in the community of this course I have little to suggest. Ashton noted that she and her classmates had become better at peer review later in the course, but even in his first interview Kardish cautioned that the abbreviated summer session (eight weeks) of the course would be a factor that affected the formation of the course community. This is a logistical concern that probably cannot be overcome, but it is a caution against instructors attempting such a course in any shorter amount of time. I have also noted the relatively minor changes Ashton made in her writing, but this was a result, I believe, not of the quality of the course community and more likely to be due to two other factors: first, Ashton was already a relatively strong writer; second, the penchant for making surface changes rather than global changes is more likely a feature of student revision practices in general rather than anything having to do with community, whether online or not. It should be noted, too, that Kardish routinely warned his students away from focusing only on grammar and punctuation in either their critiques of others’ work or in their own revisions. As one contrasting example from Ashton’s minor changes, another of Kardish’s students, a non-native speaker of English who eventually dropped the course, clearly used peer feedback (most notably Ashton’s) to make very significant changes to her writing. Whether or not students avail themselves of the opportunities afforded by the community of a course is dependent largely on the characteristics of the

individual student; it is the instructor's job simply, in Kardish's words, "to create the possibility" of community, something he achieved with remarkable effect.

Chapter Summary

The five courses and instructor/student paired case studies presented in this chapter were observed and analyzed with an eye toward answering my primary research questions:

1. What are instructors' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
2. What are students' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
3. Based on those perceptions and experiences, along with observations of the community aspects of the courses studied, what conclusions can be drawn about community in online writing courses?

Certain trends and conclusions will have already become obvious to the reader, but it is difficult to hold in one's mind simultaneously the various characteristics, circumstances, and perspectives of five online writing courses and ten people respectively, to say nothing of my commentary throughout the case studies. In order to bring all that material together, I garnered what I believed were the most significant findings into a number of key themes I felt had emerged through my research, those points that I believed were the most salient ideas from the study, as well as those I thought were supported by at least a majority of—if not all—the five case studies. Those findings are presented in the next and final chapter, my Conclusions.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study, I focused on answering three primary research questions:

1. What are instructors' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
2. What are students' perceptions of and experiences with "community" in the online writing classroom?
3. Based on those perceptions and experiences, along with observations of the community aspects of the courses studied, what conclusions can be drawn about community in online writing courses?

These questions were prompted by my own ambiguous experiences with community in the online writing course, an ambiguity I saw reflected in the literature of the field, which paradox I noted in the first chapter. On the one hand, there is the widely held belief that the technology which makes the online writing classroom possible serves to make possible the relationships and interactions that allow the collaboration and sense of community that are at the heart of social constructivist pedagogy, when those relationships would otherwise have been impossible due to the "distance" element of "distance education" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 3); on the other hand is the equally prevalent view that technology itself creates distance between those using it, serving as a buffer to isolate individuals from each other, thus preventing the relationships necessary for knowledge- and relationship-building (Romi, 2000, p. 43). In addition to the split view of community in online writing classes, there are equally ambivalent findings regarding the effects of the online environment on student writing. Some researchers have found the online forum results in "stronger, better realized writing" (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, p. 2), while others

report negative student perceptions and experiences with online writing courses which include high rates of student attrition (Ross, Morrison, Smith, and Cleveland as cited in Wheeler, 2006, p. 175); a voiced sense of isolation (Young, Johnson, and Hess, 2006, pp. 1-3) and frustration with various aspects of the courses, such as waiting for responses from others and “practices of normalization, a flattening of perspectives and approach” in discussions and interactions (Anderson, 2006, p. 117); trivialized writing and no sense of affiliation among classmates (Fleckenstein, 2005, p. 150); and feeling there is a general lack of substantive communication (Hara and Kling, 2005, p. 559) in these courses.

My exploration into these issues consisted of extensive interviews with instructors and students, course-long observations of five courses, and analyses of student writing as it was influenced by the course communities in which that writing was produced. After sorting through the data, I gleaned what I thought were the most salient themes I could detect, and in the end this study led me to five key conclusions about community in online writing courses. Some of these findings are simply descriptive, offering a better understanding of the state of social constructivist pedagogy in online writing, while other findings are prescriptive and suggest how the community experience can be improved in online writing. Those five major findings are:

- The prevalence of social constructivist theory and pedagogy in online writing courses
- The necessity of policy and accountability in successfully building community
- The theoretical versus practical value of community in the online writing course
- The limited role of community when influencing students’ writing
- The disparities between instructors’ intentions and students’ experiences of community

These findings may prove significant in allowing instructors and students to better understand the role of community in online writing classes, how best to foster community, what influences to expect community to have on student writing, and how to best allocate time, energy, and resources regarding the community aspects of such classes. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss each of the above findings from both instructors' and students' perspectives, also drawing on my own observations and analyses, and within each discussion I touch on the implications of these findings for teaching. At the end of the chapter I discuss considerations for further research.

Major Conclusion 1: The Prevalence of Social Constructivist

Pedagogy in Online Writing Courses

This study found strong support for Hewett and Ehmann's (2004) claim that, "Philosophically, OWI [online writing instruction] and its attendant instructional methods are a natural outgrowth of, and commitment, to, the social-constructivist epistemology" (p. 41) and that the social constructivist view was the main pedagogical theory driving online writing courses (p. 38). As I discussed in the first chapter, in their guide to the teaching of writing online, *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*, Hewett and Ehmann (2004) traced the widespread practice of embracing social-constructivist theory from traditional or face-to-face writing courses to the adaptation of that theory to online writing courses. They stated, "Many contemporary writing instructors extrapolate their [social-constructivist] practice from Vygotsky's ideas and encourage social encounters in the forms of collaborative writing, peer workshops, and peer-response groups" (pp. 34-35).

Of the five participating instructors, at the start of the study clearly three of them had fairly accurate working definitions of social constructivism, showing an ongoing awareness of the theory. In the cases of two instructors this was very interesting, since both were veteran teachers who had not—so far as I could determine—been in any classes dealing with writing theory in years. For the third, with her recent degree and its focus on composition, it was not surprising that she could explain the theory accurately. The remaining two instructors, however, were only guessing at the theory from the context of our initial discussions of my study; however, this did not demonstrate unfamiliarity with social constructivism—as shown by their assertion that they had covered it but just did not remember it—just not an ongoing conscious attention to the theory. However, after a short discussion of social constructivism, both said they were familiar with the theory and understood it.

In this study all the key themes of social constructivism emerged with these instructors. Some instructors' responses almost epitomized Bruffee's (1997, p. 400) classic definitions of social constructivism in writing (see Chapter Two) and/or mirrored Diken's (2003) "creating a space where students and teachers can experience being among others and interacting in its true sense" (p. 263). Participating instructors cited many of the hallmark practices of social constructivism—collaboration, peer review, group work and discussions—reflecting Rebecca Moore Howard's (2001) list of the practical manifestations of this theory in the writing classroom (pp. 58-62). In fact, all the instructors who participated in the study normally employed those practices to some degree.

The overall familiarity of the group with social constructivism would seem to offer strong support for Hewett and Ehmann's claim about the prevalence of social constructivism as an influence on writing instruction. Given that three of the five instructors had graduate school

experience in areas other than a focus on composition theory, and that three of the five had been out of school for a significant amount of time, yet all five readily recognized and understood the concept of social constructivism, it seems safe to say the theory was ubiquitous enough in their experience (whether through direct instruction, practice learned from colleagues, studying of research in the field of writing instruction, their own writing experiences, or some other means) to have become a key part of their professional awareness.

Not only were all the instructors who participated in the study familiar with the concept of social constructivism in writing, but they also did adhere to its tenets to at least some degree in their online writing instruction. Instructors variously described themselves as “heavily influenced” by social constructivism “not just in composition but across the board,” or asserted that community was “very significant” to them in their writing courses, and some gave a textbook list of community activities in writing. Clearly, each instructor did value the idea of community in writing, again lending credence to Hewett and Ehmann’s (2004) belief that online writing pedagogy seems to be committed to the social-constructivist epistemology (p. 41).

On the students’ part, as a corollary to this awareness and practice of social constructivism by the instructors, the students too seemed to value the ideals and practices of community in their online writing classes. Although they were not aware of the theoretical underpinnings of this pedagogy, they expressed belief in the value of communication, participation, and interaction. Those views and beliefs emerged over time in my interviews with the students.

Without the framework of social constructivism that I could refer to with the instructors, it was clear that the students’ concepts of community were both much less sophisticated and much more limited than those of the instructors, as might be expected; however it is significant

to note that these students were not asked to define community at the beginning of their courses but several weeks in, after all of them had been actively participating in courses where their instructors were doing much to foster community. This seems to support Brown's (2003) finding that "community" might not be the most effective metaphor for online writing students to understand the social constructivist principles we are trying to get them to follow (p. 154).

Interestingly, these students' ideas about community varied widely. Some gave limited responses and simply thought of community as a group of people in a shared space (virtual or real)—the most obvious and simple notion of community. Others talked about community in terms of actions, like communication and group activities, or they listed the people who might make up an academic community—defined by their roles—and the demographics of the students. Most students felt community meant people coming together but added the ideas of familiarity and being comfortable with the members of the community, suggesting community meant more to them than just proximity. Frankly, I was somewhat surprised by the students' initial responses, because they showed a more simplistic and traditional understanding of community than I would have guessed, but later in the interviews their ideas about community became more nuanced and well-developed, reflecting more of what I expected of Brown's (2006) assertion that the growing phenomenon of online interaction in our society meant "traditional conceptions of how people meet, speak, and interact are being rethought" (p. 2).

These five students all agreed that community in their writing courses was important; their valuing of its role ranged from "very" or "absolutely" important to at least a moderate endorsement of the importance of community. To keep this in perspective, though, it must be remembered that these students had been selected based in part on their own successful participation in the communities of their courses (as determined by their respective instructors),

so it is reasonable to assume they would be particularly likely to value community. Even keeping that in mind, though, it is significant to note that these students were again describing—and endorsing—many of the premises and manifestations of social constructivism. Among the five of them they listed the following as valuable aspects of their online writing courses: their own active participation in the course, communication between themselves and both the instructor and their classmates, peer review of writing, sharing and comparing of ideas via discussion, encouraging one another, having an audience of readers (and being a reader for others), and being exposed to different ideas and perspectives. In short, when discussing the role of community in their writing courses, these students were once again discussing the list of practical manifestations of social constructivist features Howard described (2001, pp. 58-62). However, as will be seen, these students' stated beliefs about the value of community often proved to be at odds with the students' actual practices when it came to actually participating in community and applying its potential benefits to their work.

The reported effects of community these students saw were even more remarkable. Several students talked about building understanding and knowledge through consensus, through the discussion of different subjective points of view—knowledge as the product of *collaboration* (Lunsford, 1991, p. 4; Gere, 1997, p. 72), which is the touchstone of social constructivism. Their responses indicated they would agree, in theory, with Caverly and MacDonald's (2002) assertion that an emphasis on such activities would lead to encouragement of group orientation, mutual support, and positive interpersonal relationships among students (p. 36). Most students also stated, at least initially, that participation in the community of their classes made their own writing better as well, which is consistent with the research that reports the benefits of community on student writing (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, p. 2).

In summary, this study found that social constructivist pedagogy was universally practiced by the instructors who took part and that all students who took part at least said they valued the community elements of their online writing courses. The finding about the instructors is significant because it offers of real-world manifestations of this particular pedagogy among some teachers in online writing courses and helps those of us who are interested in online writing to understand the teaching landscape in which we might operate; it also lends support to other online teachers employing social constructivist pedagogy. The latter finding—that of the students’ views—is important because it shows that at least some of our students say they share our social constructivist values and therefore, presumably, might be willing to work with us in seeing those values realized in the courses they share with us, even though that stated support was not always evident in the actions of these students in these courses, a theme developed later in this chapter.

*Major Conclusion 2: The Necessity of Policy and Accountability
in Successfully Building Community*

A very significant finding of this study was that the successful formation of community in an online writing class was not accidental but would only come about through deliberate intention and follow-through on the part of the instructor. By the end of the study, these participating instructors universally agreed that a successful community in an online writing course could not be left to chance, hope, or good intentions. A strong, recurring theme in the discussions with instructors was that the role of the teacher was to set up—through policies and practices—the *necessity* for students to participate regularly and substantively in the community aspects of the course and for the teacher to enforce his or her policies and practices. These

instructors all stated that if students were not made accountable for participating in the community, many would not do so and the community of the course would fail, and the data strongly bear out that view.

All five instructors built community elements into their classes and grading policies, but they did not experience equal success in forming communities. In looking over the Course Descriptions in Chapter Four, in some cases the correlation between a syllabus and an instructor's actual policies and practices was quite accurate; in others there was very little relationship between what was stated in the syllabus and the actual nature of how the instructor fostered the community of the course.

Michael factored participation and peer review into his evaluation of students, to the tune of fifteen percent of their course grades, and beyond the graded activities he used a number of innovative practices to encourage his class to come together as a community, including blogs and a Facebook page for the course; however, true to his carrot-rather-than-stick approach to teaching, those options were voluntary for the students and thus did not show up in the policy portion of his syllabus, however the data showed students generally not taking advantage of the voluntary community activities. Paul consistently enforced his policies; the discussion aspect of his class was worth a full thirty percent of their grades, and in addition to simply posting their own thoughts, students had to respond substantively to the ideas of their classmates, each week devoting at least twenty percent of their discussion board writing to responding to others; this system generally yielded high student participation. Liz, too, required of her students peer interaction and review of each other's work. While she never stated outright that a student could not pass her course without being heavily involved in the community of the class, it was clear from the syllabus that students could not choose to skip participation or peer review of their work

and have much chance of passing; although (apparently) she did make some exceptions for Bonnie (due to extenuating personal circumstances) Liz was consistent throughout the course in her insistence that students meet their community responsibilities. Stan did not mention the community requirements of his course on the syllabus but instead introduced those activities in other documents, as the course went along; as mentioned previously, I think he would agree in retrospect that not including mention of those activities on the syllabus not only caused some confusion for some students but also failed to establish the importance of the course's community aspects in the minds of his students. Finally, Kardish's emphasis on community and collaborative learning in his syllabus was overwhelming; students who were unwilling to engage substantively with each other in his online writing courses simply could not pass those courses, as intense interaction with one another and with each other's writing was an integral component of the courses.

In discussing their policies and practices regarding community, the participating instructors agreed that *accountability* was crucial in successfully getting students to interact with each other. Michael stated that the importance of community in the online writing class was, for him, a "50/50" proposition. He personally valued the social aspect of the course and how it related to students' writing, but after all his considerable efforts to make his online courses fun, interactive, and social, he suspected his students simply did not value the community of the course to the extent he did; Michael's advice to other instructors regarding community was to clearly "define the parameters" of what the instructor's goals were regarding peer interaction and review and to communicate clearly to the students their responsibilities in meeting those goals, something he planned to do a better job of in future classes. Conversely, Paul simply accepted as a given that community did not form in online writing courses like it did in on-campus classes,

and he was not overly concerned about that; however, he still factored participation into a student's grade at a thirty percent value. Liz agreed that instructors must enforce policies to create social interaction among students, but she qualified that it should not be community for community's sake. Specifically, she felt attention should be paid to group dynamics so that stronger students were not simply carrying weaker—or lazier—students. While coming to the same conclusion about the importance of community, Stan had had the opposite experience with peer review in his class, stating openly that it had “failed miserably,” due to in large part to his failure to enforce his stated policies. He concluded that it was the instructor's job to use the tools available to build community effectively and that student-accountability was necessary for a successful community to take place, hopefully with the positive impact on student writing he expected such community interactions to generate. Finally, Kardish's class was focused centrally on the concept and practice of peer review, and students could not avoid being accountable for their participation; as he stated, the very structure of the course built that concept in as an inescapable component, arguably the key component of the course.

The most successful communities I saw form in this study (in Kardish's and Liz's classes) were those where either (in Kardish's case) community was “built in,” unavoidable, and paramount in determining a student's grade or (in Liz's case) where the relationship between participation and policy (i.e. grading) was, generally, rigorously enforced. As a side note, Paul also rigorously enforced his policy but that did not (for his student Kathleen) result in the formation of a successful community. The other two classes where community most obviously failed were Michael's and Stan's, and I do not believe it was a coincidence that they were the two most lenient instructors when it came to forgiving students' lack of adherence to the community participation that was—theoretically—required of them.

The agreement of these instructors on the necessity of enforcing student accountability is significant because it seems to contradict the less authoritarian role of the teacher that is so valued by social constructivist pedagogy (Williams, 2006, p. 149). Though I do not believe the instructors would necessarily use this language, they were in fact arguing for the necessity of the teacher taking on the roles of director and enforcer when it came to getting students to play their necessary roles in the formation of the course community.

Very interestingly, the participating students also universally agreed that a successful community in online writing courses was largely a matter of students being *required* to participate. A strongly recurring theme in the discussions with students was that the teacher must have clear, detailed policies requiring students to participate regularly and substantively in the community aspects of the course and that those policies must be enforced with consequences. Even these successful students stated that if students (themselves included) were not made accountable for participating in the community, many would not do so and the community of the course would fail. Surprisingly, these students suggested that community in online writing courses be emphasized to the point that it was required by policy and enforced; additionally, these students claimed they were willing to take on participatory projects with their peers that would require more time and effort of them as students, in spite of the fact that many of them (as will be discussed later) said the efforts they had put into the community aspects of the courses had yielded limited or no benefits to them and their writing.

These students not only mentioned their classmates' reluctance (and sometimes refusal) to take their community roles seriously, but also were quite candid about their own habits of simply doing what was required of them, regarding participation, and nothing more. Frequently I was reminded of Guglielmo's (2005/2006) statement, "What I had not expected when

designing the [online] course was the lack of participation in collaborative activities even among those students that had proven themselves ‘A writers’ or ‘good students’” (p. 105). With the exception of Ashton (in Kardish’s class), even the high-achieving students in this study (who, it will be remembered, had been recommended for the study by their teachers partly based on their success as community members in their respective courses) regularly stated that they took part only in those community activities that were required (and some were not doing even that much), some of them saying outright that they would not have done even those activities had there not been grading ramifications. To be sure, the *quality* of their participation was generally high, as would be expected of strong writers, but the frequency of that participation was usually the minimum amount the student could get away with.

Either tacitly or explicitly, the participating students echoed the instructors’ thoughts about the strong role the teacher should play when it came to making the community of the online writing course a success. Every single student valued the opinions and feedback of the instructor over that of peers, and several of the students sought further communication with the instructors, beyond the public communication and interaction in the courses. Alexander stated explicitly that he wished Michael to instruct more directly, and Stan said he felt his students wanted more such direct instruction from him. As I have noted before, Diken (2003) concluded that it was the students she studied, not the teacher, who had difficulty stepping outside traditional, passive roles and taking a more active part in the community of the class (p. 270). In addition to wanting instructors to be more direct, it is also noteworthy that these students wished for greater enforcement regarding the community elements of their courses. Some students complained about peers not doing what was required or putting forth only token efforts, and both Alexander and Natalia said they sensed their classmates felt there were no consequences for not

meeting instructor expectations regarding participation, something that frustrated both of them. Ironically, both of those students had received good grades for their courses, despite participating to the minimal degree they could get away with. This complaint about classmates not participating was supported by the case of Bonnie, who in Liz's class received an A despite participating noticeably less than even a typical student. Even Ashton, arguably the most participatory student in the study, acknowledged she would not have interacted as much as she did (nor would she have benefited as greatly from that interaction) if Kardish had not—more or less—“forced” his students to participate.

In summary, this major conclusion from my study—the necessity of policy and enforcement to ensure community—has serious ramifications for social constructivist teachers of online writing, ramifications both practical and philosophical. On the practical side, if community is a priority for an instructor then my findings indicate he or she must very deliberately build community elements into his or her course design and then enforce student participation through some means of coercion, most specifically, probably, through grading policy. As for philosophical concerns, based on this study, social constructivist teachers of online writing may be forced to consider whether or not the achievement of one of their ideals (community) is compatible with another underlying tenet of their pedagogy, the decentralized role of the teacher (Williams, 2006, p. 149), necessitating, perhaps, a partial return to a more instructor-driven classroom (Rickly, 2004, p. 46).

*Major Conclusion 3: Theoretical versus Practical Value
Of Community in the Online Writing Course*

When discussing community in the abstract at the beginning of the study, the participating instructors tended to view community and its value in online writing courses more favorably than they did when interviewed at the middle and end of the courses. Initially, all instructors stated community was very important in the online writing class and very influential on their students' writing. By the end of the study, only two instructors still described community as very significant in importance, all instructors cited numerous characteristics other than a student's participation in the community of the course as being equally or more important to student success in the online writing course, and the instructors had modified their views of the influence of community on student writing (which is dealt with separately in the next section of this chapter).

In the first interview, the answers from all five instructors regarding immediately seemed to endorse social constructivist pedagogy and the importance of community as a positive influence on students and their writing.

Michael initially discussed the effects of the online community on his students' writing in technological, rather than social, terms. He saw the *medium*, the technology—for writing and for the class—as being a primary influence on his online students' writing: having different forums like blogs and websites and incorporating visual media into text-based writing (and the creativity and enthusiasm those things would engender) was what would lead to improvements in students' writing. One social aspect of online community that Michael also cited as an influence on his students' writing—as many other instructors mentioned—was the public nature of writing for the online course, not as a concern students would have about the quality of their work being

evaluated publicly but as a “sense of freedom” granted by the anonymity of the online community.

Interestingly, Paul too cited this forthcoming-ness as the first effect he thought of when considering the influence the online community had on his students’ writing: writing that was generally “more personal,” although, in contrast, Paul agreed with Liz that the community of his typical online class was more professional and writing-focused. He went on to elaborate that students’ sense of audience as writers was also different online, being careful, however, to note that individual classes—online or traditional—senses of audience awareness could vary greatly as well.

Liz asserted that community was “very significant” to her in her writing courses and expressed her ambition to improve her teaching in that area. Liz agreed that at least some of her online students were stronger writers than her students in traditional courses “because of the collaborative environment” that she saw, specifically, online. Even the quality of ideas she encountered in her online classes were often “far superior, intelligent, and nuanced, than the responses that you get in the in-class setting.” She also cited the public nature of writing for the online class, along with the safety that the online environment created when critiquing another’s work, as contributing to “radical” and “more meaningful revisions and changes” in students’ writing, as opposed to the lack of substantive peer feedback she generally saw in her face-to-face classes, wherein there was almost “a consensus” among students to be kind and give each other very moderate and generic feedback on their writing.

Like Michael, Stan saw the online forum as a chance to foster community through alternative technologies and personal communication. He felt the online forum would result in a connected, egalitarian community (“like a coffee house where people discuss interesting ideas”),

and he believed the non-traditional forum would help him step out of the traditional teaching role and help to break down some of the typical lack of motivation about writing that he regularly saw among his face-to-face students. The ease with which the technology would foster connections among students would also result in significant interaction, feedback, and change regarding their writing, as well.

Kardish stated unequivocally that his online students were better writers, and he directly attributed that at least in part to the sense of community formed online, although he did not claim to know exactly why or how that happened. Perhaps the public nature of writing in his online course (wherein students posted all their writing and were required to comment extensively on each other's work) resulted in the phenomenon he described: "I think that there is something going on with that community aspect that is 'rising-tide-lifts-all-boats,'" he stated.

The initially rather optimistic views about community did start to change as the courses went on and the instructors had further opportunity to observe and reflect on the communities of their courses.

Michael, seemed upon reflection to struggle with putting the importance of community activities into perspective, and he was not sure how to advise students. He personally felt social interaction was important but had not really seen how that interaction manifested itself in improved student writing. Like Kardish, he noted that he had strong writers in his online classes who participated very little in the interactive portions of the class (suggesting, perhaps, that their teaching goals for strong writers should be adjusted). Michael ranked community as "somewhere in the middle" in importance, and he noted that he could imagine (but had not yet really seen) students using classmates' writing as models for their own work and collaboratively figuring out "what works and what doesn't." Yet he seemed to hedge on the importance of community when

he said that students should see it as important only if the individual instructor saw it as important or set up a course with community involvement as a priority.

Paul, too, stated that he felt there was a correlation between students who participated frequently in the course and who also did well in the writing aspect, but Paul joined his colleagues in noting that there were exceptions to the rule: students who were strong writers but were seemingly minimally involved in the course (I would note here that in my observation of all five courses those students were minimally involved most often because they were permitted to be). Paul was the first instructor to state explicitly that the benefits of the social aspects of the online writing course might be relative to the individual. He felt that the online environment was inherently more suitable for some writing students than others, and “success” therefore would largely be a matter of the student picking which forum would be best for him or her. Those needing more community support, he believed, would be better off in an on-campus writing course.

Liz thought course participation was about equal in value to a major paper in the course: a three on a scale of one to ten. She thought students should pay more attention to the community aspects of the course than she had required her students to do and admitted she was still seeing community in light of its positive potential rather than according to the actual results she had seen in her course. If the instructor structured the course community well, and if the students were motivated to take that aspect of the course seriously, then community could have positive, even “brilliant” effects; otherwise, it was likely to fall flat and in reality did so as often as not.

Like Michael, Stan would advise students to rank community participation in the online writing class right in the middle when it came to having success in the course: a five on a scale of

one to ten. And, like Liz, Stan saw the importance of community participation for students' success as coming equally from the instructor's and students' roles in the course. As long as the instructor did in fact create opportunities for real engagement, the burden then fell on the student, who, Stan said, would get as much out of the course as he or she put into it.

Later in the study, Kardish reiterated his finding that students who tended to participate more frequently tended to have more success in the course. However, he noted that some excellent writers participated minimally, although this was rare. He also drew important distinctions. First, he noted, a student's participation could be very perfunctory. Very interestingly, in spite of Kardish's stated—and demonstrated—belief in social constructivist pedagogy, he ranked social interaction below importance when compared to a student's writing ability and intelligence; a “brilliant” student, he noted, could have success in the course with relatively little community participation. (In fact, all the instructors in the study ultimately indicated similar views: that a strong writer could in fact succeed in a course in spite of a less-than-stellar performance in the community—which is exactly what the students in the study proved to be the case.)

By the end of the study, when specifically asked about the role of community in students' success, only Kardish and Stan described that role as being very significant, and even these two instructors spoke of other traits being equally or more important for students' success. This suggested that for almost every instructor—with the possible exception of Stan—the role of community, upon reflection, had diminished in importance as these instructors considered their own courses and their experiences with community. This is not to say they felt community to be unimportant, just that its importance was not as central in their evaluation of student success in their online courses as they had first indicated.

As for the participating students, when discussing community in the abstract, at both the middle and end of the study, they also tended to view community and its value more favorably than they did when discussing it in concrete terms of influencing their actual writing. While the students all felt there was great potential for positive benefits in the online communities of their classes, their descriptions of the actual results of achieving those benefits were mixed, at best. Two students reported generally positive experiences when it came to feeling part of a group that was beneficial to them as community members, while the other three gave neutral or negative reports when it came to feeling part of a truly interactive and beneficial community.

At first these five students all agreed that community in their writing courses was important; their valuing of its role ranged from “very” or “absolutely” important to a moderate endorsement of its importance. Regarding the effects of community, at least initially, students talked about building understanding and knowledge through consensus, through the discussion of different subjective points of view—knowledge as the product of collaboration (Lunsford, 1991, p. 4; Gere, 1997, p. 72), which is the underlying foundation of social constructivism. Most students at first also stated that participation in the community of their classes made their own writing better as well, which is consistent with the research that reports the benefits of community on student writing (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, p. 2). The initial inquiries into the students’ views on and experiences of community yielded quite positive responses.

At the end of the study, some of the disparities between students’ comments on community and its effects on their writing were frustrating to interpret. Initially, in the first interviews, when the students were asked about the importance of community in such classes, all of them expressed a belief that it was in fact an important consideration and influence. However, like the instructors, when questioned about the actual manifestations of how participation in the

online community of the course impacted their writing, as a group they stated it had little or no substantive influence on their writing (as will be discussed in the next section). Then when asked again at the end of the study—asked again about community in a generic sense—all these students, even those who had expressed dissatisfaction with the community aspects of the courses or who said those aspects had resulted in no changes in their writing, once again said community was “very important” and that online writing teachers should in fact emphasize participation and interaction in their courses; however, the students’ words did not match their actions in the courses. The advice the students offered to instructors was telling, and my overall interpretation was that they were still—in spite of some recent experiences to the contrary—seeing community in light of its positive potential rather than its actual limited success. This is pure speculation on my part, but that insistence on seeing community as valuable versus actually participating in that supposedly valuable community as fully possible may simply speak to our social nature; or it could arguably be a testament to the degree to which social constructivist values and philosophy have penetrated education; or it could simply be a case of the students giving the answers they thought they should give.

In summary, this theme of participants’ views of the value of community was particularly hard to categorize. Both instructors and students initially expressed a strong belief in the value of community in online writing when it was discussed as an abstract theory. As the study progressed and both sets of participants were asked about that value in terms of the actual work for the course, for the most part all participants then qualified—either slightly or greatly—the value of community. Then when asked a third time—at the end of the study—about the value of community, views ran the gamut. Some participants remained consistent in their views or even seemed to solidify their views. Interestingly, it was the students, who unlike the instructors did

not have a theoretical knowledge of community or social constructivism, who mostly clung to their abstract belief in community, despite the fact that none of them could cite any substantive community influence on their writing. The instructors, who might be thought of as being more invested in the theory, were more likely to have changed their views in the face of what many felt was evidence that community did not in fact have the effects they believed it should. Regardless, it became apparent to me that there was in fact a disparity between the ideal of community in the abstract and the concrete effects (or lack thereof) in reality.

The implications of this finding for teaching online writing are significant for both instructors and students. First, it raises the issue of seeing community as a practical and important source of support and influence for students versus simply having an abstract goal to create community for community's sake. If the abstract ideals of achieving community in online writing courses do not produce the practical results that are assumed or at least desired, then instructors may need to consider how better to bridge the gap between potential and reality (or even if doing so is possible and worthwhile), or they may wish to concentrate their time and energy in areas other than community-building. Students may also have to reconsider how they can best use the abstract notion of community to improve their writing, if possible, or they may wish to focus more on other aspects of the course that are more likely to help them achieve success. It must be acknowledged that the courses in this study generally did not produce strong, effective communities, so stronger communities—achieved through more effective teacher focus on and creation of community—could yield better results. The implications for reconsidering such a strong focus on community are discussed further in the next section.

Major Conclusion 4: The Limited Role of Community

When Influencing Students' Writing

The lack of any substantive changes in student writing that could be directly attributed to community activities in the courses was perhaps the most significant outcome of this study. However, Napierkowski (2001) compared writing students in a face-to-face course to those in an online course taught by the same instructor and found, “A collaborative learning survey that measured students’ post-treatment attitudes revealed no significant differences between groups in regard to sense of belonging to a discourse community” (p. 1), and Neff and Whithaus (2008) stated, “The impact of distance delivery systems on student writing is unclear,” and many studies of student learning (in multiple disciplines) that compare outcomes in traditional courses to those in online courses suggest no significant differences, “yet we do not know how or why that is the case” (p. 53). I believe this study sheds some light on the latter statement, although only for a particular student type in online writing courses: strong writers.

By the end of the study, participating instructors were generally less certain than when they started about the positive influence of the community aspects of their courses on their students’ actual writing. Some instructors still felt that influence on writing was significant but very difficult to prove. All instructors agreed that the positive influence of community on student writing was only potential, not guaranteed, and that students using the community aspect of a course to improve their writing was largely a matter of the individual student’s choice, aptitude, motivation, and application.

As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, instructors generally began the study with positive attitudes about the importance of community in their classes and about the effects that participation in the course community could have on student writing, but as the study

progressed, the instructors generally tended to back away from asserting the importance of community and its influence on student writing.

Initially, regarding the influence of community on student writing in their online courses, instructors held the following positive opinions: the public nature of the online course, in which student writing was made more visible, resulted in better writing than in traditional courses (Rickly, 2004, p. 41; Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000, p. 2); online writers had a better sense of audience than students in face-to-face courses (Napierkowski, 2001, p. 1); the technology-fostered community of the online writing course facilitated group interaction and peer review that were in some cases better than that found in traditional courses (Berry, 2000, pp. iii-iv); and the online community allowed the students, rather than the instructor, to become the driving force behind the course (Williams, 2006, p. 149).

As the study progressed, the participating instructors reflected further on the influence of the course communities on their students' writing and their views changed. It would not be accurate to say all the instructors no longer believed community could influence their students' writing, but all instructors were much less certain about that influence, and all instructors had difficulties stating exactly how or if the course community had effected positive changes in student writing. Two instructors said they still had a generic sense that community was a positive influence on their writing, although they did not claim to understand those influences completely nor were they able to offer concrete examples of a general community consistently influencing writing. One instructor stated outright that he did not see evidence of community influencing his students' writing one way or the other. A single instructor stated emphatically that he did *not* believe the community affected his students' writing. A last instructor said he now believed community did not influence student writing like it should.

The “like it should” phenomenon was a recurring theme in instructors’ final thoughts on community and its influence on writing. Most instructors still believed in the tenets of social constructivism and specifically in the potential for the online community to affect their students’ writing positively. However, at the end of the study, the instructors heavily qualified their endorsement of the community’s effect on writing, noting that many factors beyond the control of the instructor could prevent the successful formation of a course community and the ability of that community to produce changes in students’ writing, although that is not to say instructors could not improve at community-building. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most significant variable in the community-and-writing equation was the students themselves, “the expectations, attitudes, and participation of students” (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 124), but even given that “X factor,” most instructors seemed to feel they did have some control over the building of community in their courses, and all agreed that a successful community and its impact on students was not simply something one could just hope for and expect to achieve.

Very interestingly, the reports of the students regarding the effects of the community on their own writing largely confirmed what the instructors said. When discussing their actual writing, participating students were much less enthusiastic about the benefits of community than when they had discussed it in the abstract. Regarding their writing for the courses, the few commonly reported influences were in the areas of surface-level editing, increasing their awareness of audience, and understanding their writing assignments. Like the instructors, all students agreed that the positive influence of community on student writing was only potential, not guaranteed, and that students using the community aspect of a course to improve their writing was largely a matter of the individual student’s choice, aptitude, motivation, and application.

In this discussion of the students' beliefs about how community influenced their writing, it is important to note that these students represented a very specific (and limited) student demographic, so their experiences cannot necessarily be extrapolated to represent the experiences of all students. The participating students were chosen for the study based on two criteria: success in the writing done for the courses and success in the community aspects of the courses. Dale (1997) found that, in general, younger students "tend to learn the most about writing from each other because their writing processes are not yet clearly formed," and older students are more likely to stick with their own well-established processes (p. 40); this fact definitely applied to most of the participating students, four of whom were non-traditional students, and it might also be argued that, specifically, successful writers—like older students—would be less likely to benefit from community feedback and would have less reason to change their writing based on that feedback. In short, other students might have reported different community experiences and influences on their writing. However, since these five students' reports largely support what the instructors reported (and the instructors were discussing all their students, not just the successful ones), and since in many cases these participating students believed that their experiences were somewhat typical of that of their classmates, then to some degree it is safer to extrapolate their stories as applying to other students.

At the beginning and end of the study, like the instructors, the participating students generally held positive beliefs about the influence community could play on student writing. For example, they suggested peer review was useful for both editing purposes and for gaining a different perspective on one's ideas and writing (although most of these students were not necessarily taught effective peer review to a substantial degree). They also felt students might use each other's work as models of good writing. Lastly, the students said they felt that

discussion was beneficial in shaping ideas for papers. Again, these generic beliefs in the potential influence of community were held at the beginning of the student interviews and were largely restated at the end.

However, when the students discussed the *actual* influences of the community on their writing only two of the above ideas survived, and those influences were significantly diminished in the minds of the participants; peer review for editing of surface errors and the use of discussions to shape some ideas for papers were the only two uses to which the five students had put the community aspects of their courses.

No student reported (and no evidence could be found through the analysis of student writing) making any substantive change in his or her writing due to any community activity (see Berry, 2000, p. 198). Many students specifically stated they did not use any community element from the course to shape any higher-level aspects of their writing: topics, ideas, content, or global revision; if they incorporated feedback from their peers at all, it was for help in catching surface-level errors in grammar and punctuation. All five students described writing processes that were largely independent of any participation in the community elements of their courses, and several of them reported valuing an instructor's input on their writing far more than that of their classmates. This emphasis by three of the students on instructor-feedback is interesting, indicative of more of a traditional pedagogy than the social constructivist view. Diken (2003) concluded that it was the students she studied, not the teacher, who had difficulty stepping outside traditional roles and using the community of the class effectively (p. 270). For these successful writers, even the fact that their writing might be more public in an online forum was not a significant influence, as they stated they would have produced the same work in any forum.

However, some students did use peer review for help with editing, and some did use the discussion boards to formulate ideas for papers. It must also be mentioned that some potential community influences on these students' writing might be termed "invisible." For example, many of the students reported reading over their peers' work (either papers or discussion board posts) very carefully, even if they did not respond to that work, which arguably could be an important aspect of community. Some students also reported using that practice to gauge their own ideas for work and their own understanding of either assignment guidelines or expectations of quality. These practices would not be visible to any observer, and if not for the students reporting those practices they would have gone unnoticed; similarly, it is impossible to know to what degree, if any, such invisible community practices impacted the students' work.

In spite of the lack of reported community influences on their work, these students did return to positive endorsements of the idea of community at the end of the study. Clearly, in spite of having generally less than ideal experiences in the social aspects of their online writing classes, and in spite of apparently not necessarily needing those experiences academically (all the students were getting A's), these students still valued the idea of being a member of, and participating in, a group as part of their online writing experience. This should be encouraging to those of us who teach from a social constructivist perspective. Our students—at least some of them—are in agreement with our basic underlying pedagogical theory and are willing to work with us to see it succeed. Like some of the instructors, the students persisted in seeing community in light of its theoretical potential.

In summary, the implications for this major conclusion are profound. On the one hand, there is apparently a widespread belief among experienced instructors and high-achieving students in the benefits (or at least the potential benefits) of community participation on student

writing. This would seem to confirm and support the basic assumptions of social constructivist pedagogy. Conversely, this study produced little or no evidence of the actual benefits of community regarding student writing, at least for a certain type of student; that lack of evidence could be due to the individual circumstances of this study, or it could be indicative of two other possibilities: first, that while social constructivist pedagogy in online writing is valuable it is sometimes ineffective in achieving its aims, due to varying circumstances; or, secondly, the theory itself is flawed and its practice does not (at least consistently) lead to the goals to which it aspires. Regardless, because this study indicates a lack of support for the idea that community leads to substantive changes in student writing, instructors may wish to reexamine the time, focus, energy, and procedures they devote to the development of community in their online writing courses, as other practices and priorities might have more direct influences on their students' writing. Similarly, students may also wish to reconsider the degree to which they focus on community as necessary to their success in online writing courses and to making improvements in their own writing.

*Major Conclusion 5: The Disparity between Instructors' Intentions
and Students' Experiences of Community*

Along with a lack of evidence that participation in the course community had any significant influence on student writing, the last major finding of this study concerns the disparity between instructors' intentions regarding community and students' actual experiences in that aspect of their courses. This is not to say that in every class there was a great disparity, because in some cases students did seem to have the kind of community experience instructors

intended, although this was rare, and as discussed previously those community experiences generally did not translate to improvements in students' writing.

To begin, every instructor in this study intended for the students in his or her class to take part in an active course community. The instructors' teaching philosophies and practices were concerned with promoting in their courses communication, interaction, and participation, usually in the forms of discussion, small-group work, and peer review of writing. Every instructor also intended that students would be held accountable for being responsible, contributing members of the course community (Diken, 2003, p. 270), and these intentions manifested themselves in course policies, directions to students, and grading practices.

Additionally, this concern with emphasizing students' roles as community members also translated, in all cases, to the instructor intending to remove himself or herself from the traditional, centralized role of the teacher (Williams, 2006, p. 149) to become more of a facilitator (Dale, 1997, p. 17). To achieve this emphasis on student-driven, versus instructor-driven, courses, the intended approaches of the instructors varied: some instructors so structured their courses that students would be compelled to be active in the course community in order to have any chance of passing, while other instructors tried to "entice" students into the community rather than coerce their participation.

It was also a shared intention among the instructors to make the best possible use of the technological tools available to them to facilitate communication and interaction among their students (Caverly and MacDonald, 2002, p. 36). The most often used (and most successfully used) tool was the discussion board (Vonderwell, Liang, and Alderman, 2007, p. 309), and other tools used included email, outside websites, interactive course websites, blogs, and real-time Wimba conferencing tools.

The ultimate community goal for these instructors was that students would use discussion, interaction, and perhaps peer review to learn, to shape ideas, to engage with each other as readers and writers, and to improve their writing.

The actual experiences of community by the participating students varied widely among the students themselves and sometimes differed greatly from instructor intentions. Only two of the students in the study reported that they felt their courses had produced successful, interactive communities of students, communities in which substantive relationships and connections had formed among students (Blair & Hoy, 2006, p. 40); the other three reported that they did not feel themselves to be members of real communities and that the community-oriented goals of the respective courses had largely failed, with a general absence of the aforementioned relationships among students (Romi, 2000, p. 43). This sixty percent “failure rate,” as it were, was particularly surprising and alarming, given that all five instructors were actively trying to build interactive communities in their courses and that all five students had been chosen in part because they were seen by those instructors as successful participants in their respective communities. And, as discussed at length in the previous section, the disparity was even greater between instructors’ intentions regarding the community effect on student writing and the students’ actual experiences—or, actually, lack of experiences—of that effect, as no student reported making any substantive changes to his or her writing based on any community activity.

In addition to noting the disparity between instructors’ intentions and the students’ experiences regarding community, it is also interesting to look at how these pairs sometimes assessed the same course community experience differently. One instructor/student pair both agreed that their course community had largely been a success. Two pairs agreed that their communities had largely failed. The anomalies were in the remaining two pairs. In one class, the

instructor mostly felt she had not achieved the community goals she had set out to meet, but the student in that course not only felt the community had been a success but also praised the efforts and achievements of the instructor in that area. Conversely, in the remaining class, the instructor felt the community of the course had done exactly what he wished it to do, and, looking at objective criteria like the retention rate, the degree of student participation, and the lack of missed deadlines or work not turned in, he believed the community aspect of the class was a success; however, the student in that class reported that she and her classmates had participated only to the minimally required degree and that no substantive interaction had really taken place among the students.

That there would be differences between instructors' intentions and students' experiences is not surprising, although the degree to which that seemed to be the case in this study might be. Beyond describing those differences, though, what is perhaps more useful to parties interested in online writing instruction would be *why* there were such differences. My analysis and conclusions regarding that question must be qualified by acknowledging that many myriad factors affect something as qualitative as the "community" of a course, and some of those factors are unknowable or at least unattainable by the methods employed in this study. However, having said that, my detailed and ongoing conversations with the key participants, along with my prolonged observations of their courses, have led me to several key conclusions about the general failure of the instructors' community goals in these classes.

First, I believe that every instructor I observed put forth a genuine good-faith effort to build a significant community component into his or her course. In fact, I encountered social constructivist values and practices in this study to a degree that frankly surprised me. Second, I believe that each instructor did at least a reasonably good job of integrating communication,

interaction, and participation into his or her course. Finally, I also believe that in each of the five courses I observed a mature, responsible, and motivated student could have had a successful community experience if he or she followed not just the “letter of the law,” so to speak, regarding the participatory elements of a given class but had also chosen to get into the spirit of the community practices that the instructors were trying to instill in their students. In short, the opportunities were there for the students. This conclusion is supported by the fact that two such students did in fact report such positive experiences, and those positive experiences were due, in part, to the students’ attitudes and actions in the courses.

From the student side of the equation I saw a different story. Four of these five high-achieving students reported participating in the course communities only to the required degree, basically doing the minimum amount of community-related activity they thought they could get by with. All five students also said they felt many of their classmates were not invested in their courses nor were they taking their community duties seriously. In some cases, this lack of participation on the part of others would of course have hindered the participation even of highly motivated and interactive students, so it is possible that a student trying his or her best still might not have had the community experience he or she wanted or deserved. That being the case, it is still my conclusion that the biggest cause of instructors’ community-related goals not being met in these courses was a lack of student engagement; the main “blame” to be put on instructors, if any, would be, in some cases, failing to enforce policies and hold students accountable for participating to the degree the instructors had directed them.

Putting the burden of community failure on the students is not an arbitrary deduction on my part. That conclusion is supported not just by my observations but by the opinions of the instructors and, perhaps more importantly and convincingly, the opinions of the students

themselves. I routinely saw the majority of students in each class participating only at or below the minimum level required. All the students in the study stated they could have done more to participate in and make use of their respective course communities.

Every instructor discussed (but rarely blamed) the failure of the course communities to consistently live up to their potential, to some degree, in terms of students' lack of motivation to participate. Instructors noted that many students regularly failed to participate at all, did not communicate with each other or the instructor, participated only perfunctorily ("checking boxes"), "did not value community to the degree they said they did" (or to the degree the instructor did), did not take advantage of all the community opportunities the instructor created, and at the very least failed to apply the community tools to their writing to the degree they could have.

The participating students confirmed those views, applying them both to themselves in some cases and more frequently to their classmates. Every student in this study—each of whom had been designated an active community member by an instructor—stated that he or she could have done more in the way of participating in the community of his or her class, and they all also expressed a belief that they would have benefited more from the course experience had they done so. As an aside, once again, these particular students were somewhat unlikely to be able to apply all the community elements of their courses to improving their writing, but that is a separate issue—they still felt they could have used the community opportunities they were given more effectively. It was highly significant that the participating students rarely, if ever, blamed any failures of the course communities on their instructors.

It must also be pointed out that this picture of community in the online writing class should not be taken to be overly negative. Based on this study, I would not argue that any of the

five course communities was a complete failure; each in fact had some remarkable successes, and in one or two cases classes seemed to be quite successful in building community. Some students had generally very positive community experiences overall, and all the students cited at least a few specific successes in the communities of their courses. The point here is that students did not experience in full what their instructors intended regarding community and to try to determine why.

Particularly significant to my own study, Nicole Brown (2003) suggested that the almost ever-present concern with community in online writing is only “a starting point in analysis” (p. 156) in our exploration of the experiences we and our students construct online. In summary, the implications for this disparity between instructors’ intentions regarding community and students’ actual experiences are serious. Frustrated online writing teachers need to know they can do everything right to build community into their courses and those community goals can still fail due to factors beyond their control. Online writing students need to know that a significant part of the burden of a successful course community experience falls on them. Instructors coming from a social constructivist perspective must realize that though their underlying pedagogical theory may be sound, and though they may intelligently and responsibly integrate social constructivist values and practices into their online writing courses, those factors are not the only ones determining whether or not a successful course community develops and positively influences students’ writing. Based on this study, I believe those of us for whom community is a priority must pay greater attention to understanding and addressing the student-side of the community equation, particularly in the areas of motivation and accountability.

Recommendations for Further Research

The perspectives and experiences of instructors and students that are recorded here, along with my own observations and analysis of student writing, suggest several areas for future research pertaining to community in online writing courses. Below, I discuss such avenues of future inquiry, according to the five major findings produced by this study.

As a reminder, this study found the presence of social constructivist pedagogy to be universal in the five courses observed. The study also concluded that to implement community successfully in online writing courses instructors must build community into those courses through clear policies and hold students accountable for the participatory elements of the course. The study additionally found that overwhelmingly both groups of participants saw notable differences between the theoretical and practical value of community in online writing courses. Related to the theoretical versus practical value of community, this study also found community participation played an extremely limited role in influencing the writing of the participating students. Finally, this study found considerable disparities between the instructors' intentions regarding community in their online writing courses and students' actual experiences of those course communities, and it was my conclusion that these disparities were due mostly to failures on the students' parts. All of these theories would benefit from further research so that more definitive conclusions might be drawn and the issue of community in online writing could be understood better.

All of the above findings raised numerous questions for me, but I would like to suggest three primary avenues of future inquiry that I, or others, might address based on this study:

1. First, do other students—specifically, those who are not necessarily strong writers—also fail to use the course community to influence their writing, to the degree these successful

writers failed to do so? My suspicion now is that I studied writers who were least likely, perhaps least able, to benefit from the influences of the course community upon their writing (because their writing was already quite strong). I would like to conduct (or suggest) a similar study that would concentrate on students who were classified by their instructors as weak writers but good community members. I believe the combination of active participation in the course community with weaker writing skills would suggest those types of writers would be consciously trying to apply the benefits of participation in the community to their writing done for the course.

2. Second, is instructor coercion (that is, enforcement of community related policies and practices through punitive measures) the best way to ensure student participation in the community of the course? On the one hand, such coercion seems incompatible with the more “teacher decentralized” principles of social constructivist pedagogy, but on the other hand this study suggested it was effective. I would like to conduct (or suggest) similar studies that A) specifically studied the effects of a range of online writing instructors’ community policies and practices from “strongly coercive” to “completely non-coercive” and/or B) specifically sought to discover from a broad range of instructors what non-coercive policies and practices they used effectively to get students to participate in their course communities.
3. Third and finally, if community communication, interaction, and participation do not seem to have much influence on students’ actual writing, what factors in the online writing course do in fact result in significant and positive changes in students’ writing? As one possibility, this study suggested students were most interested in direct instructor feedback on their writing as a likely impetus for change; additionally, the study suggested

revision is largely a matter of individual student motivation. Based on my findings, I would like to conduct (or suggest) a study that A) discussed with a broad range of online writing students what revisions they did make and what influenced them to make those changes, B) identified writers who regularly make substantial changes to their writing and explored what factors influenced those writers to make those changes, and C) sought to learn why more students do not make use of those community activities that are specifically intended by instructors to influence the students' writing.

Methods as Findings

The project itself can be a process of discovery about research methods. Regarding any future research into these issues, I would like to say I am convinced that in-depth interviews with individual participants were absolutely the best tools for discovering the findings of this study that were most interesting and useful for understanding community; interviews yielded data that I could have uncovered no other way. Similarly, I believe another real strength of this study was its inclusion of students as equal shareholders in the phenomenon studied, and I would recommend that similar studies in the future might consider focusing exclusively on students' experiences of community. Throughout this project, I also learned how the participants chosen inevitably affect the trajectory of the research and the conclusions reached; for example, had I chosen to work with a different study body (say, students who were active community participants but weaker writers), I might have reached entirely different conclusions about the influence of the online community on students' writing. Having said that, though, I am glad I worked with the students I did; as one of my dissertation committee members said, the most important characteristic of an informant is that he or she is informative, and these successful

students were very insightful and articulate about their experiences. The limited sample size might be an objection to this study, but I believe tools designed to reach a broader sample (surveys, for example) would not yield as great an understanding of how an individual instructor conceives community in his or her course or how an individual students experiences that community. The choice to study five courses and work with ten informants was a good one, because those numbers yielded data that was rich yet reasonably manageable. To obtain more reliable and, perhaps, more transferable results, I also believe repeating the study at additional sites, both those that mirrored the characteristics of my study site and those that were very different, would be very useful.

Final Summary: Furthering the Knowledge of the Field

and What I Learned

This study recorded the perspectives and experiences of five paired case studies of instructors and students regarding community in online writing courses, along with my own observations and analyses of those courses and student writing. The results suggested community and its influences in such courses is a somewhat ambiguous entity. All the instructors implemented social constructivist policies and practices in their courses and valued that pedagogy; similarly, all students said they too valued community and saw it as beneficial, although they often failed to take advantage of the benefits participation in the community could offer. The courses in which community ideals were best achieved were those in which instructors had clear policies requiring student participation and held students accountable for meeting their community roles; those classes where such ideals most obviously failed were those in which instructor expectations were unclear, enforcement of community-related policies was

lax, or both. In spite of endorsing the value of community and its positive effects on student writing, both instructors and students, in general, either found it difficult to point out many actual practical benefits of community participation when it came to student performance or writing improvement, or in a significant number of cases participants said outright they could not see any such actual practical benefits or significant influences. Finally, the study found significant differences between instructors' intentions regarding course communities and students' experiences of those communities; as a group, the instructors did a good job of creating opportunities for participation, communication, and interaction in the courses, and as a group, the students often failed to take full advantage of those opportunities.

Online writing instructors need to know these things. Knowing the manner in which and degree to which students experience the course communities we help create online allows us to make better informed decisions about social constructivist policies and practices. Specifically, I believe this study contributes to our knowledge of the field in four particular ways:

- This study shows those who follow social constructivist pedagogy do so in an atmosphere in which that pedagogy is practiced by many of our colleagues and is thus, more than likely, a familiar pedagogy to our students. As professionals, we should to a greater degree learn from and share with our colleagues those policies and practices that have been found to be effective.
- This study suggests we need to better understand that the goals of social constructivist writing pedagogy are not achieved by chance or by simply telling our students they are expected to be community participants. One of the main contributions of this study is the idea that community is best achieved through clear policies and serious enforcement of student accountability.

- Very significantly, this study suggests we reexamine whether or not social constructivist pedagogy and practice is actually delivering on its theoretical promises in online writing courses. There is strong evidence here that in spite of instructors' efforts, this pedagogy often does not result in notable improvements in students' writing, at least not in the online forum.
- This study also points out that our students often do not experience the communities we try to form in online writing courses in the ways we hope they will. The disparity between instructors' intentions and students' experiences regarding community which this study exposed is an important factor for instructors to be aware of as they design and deliver online writing courses, and they may need to adjust their expectations of themselves, their students, and their courses accordingly.

For me personally, as an instructor, this research project was very eye-opening. I started out wanting to understand better the paradoxical views of the social aspect of the online environment in writing instruction: the views of "online" as relationship-builder or relationship-inhibitor. What I learned was that even when social constructivist writing pedagogy is attempted online by well-intentioned instructors—some of whom made quite admirable attempts—many factors that are beyond the control of the instructor come into play which can undermine our efforts at building community and seeing it positively influence students' writing. That is no doubt the case in all of teaching, but as I mentioned in Chapter One those factors are multiplied and compounded in the online writing course. To some degree, my own online teaching has changed as I have traded in my theory for practicality. While I have not quite abandoned the faith, to be honest, I now put forth less effort into community-building in my online classes than

I did previously, and I worry about it less. I still build communication, interaction, and participation into my courses, and I now hold students even more accountable for abiding by the relevant policies than I did previously. But, as Kardish said, “Ultimately, it’s a writing class”; it is not a “community” class. I am unwilling to make too much of a student’s grade dependent on social activities that have only questionable effects on his or her writing; also, I now put more of my time and effort into intervening more directly and individually in a student’s work. It is what they want, and more than anything else it seems to be what makes the biggest differences in their writing. Having said that, though, I still routinely see students—some more than others—connecting with each other on the discussion boards, helping one another understand assignments and readings, and shaping each other’s ideas and writing; and with some students I still see little or none of that taking place—they are, at best, as Stan said, “checking boxes.” Speaking of boxes, my major conclusion from this research is that the student is the ultimate “black box”: as instructors we can heavily influence what goes in, but the mystery of what goes on inside the box (and what comes out the other side) is frequently beyond our control. As more than one instructor in this study said, what we really do is create opportunities for community for students; and as more than one student said, it is up to them to decide to what degree they will make the most of those opportunities.

I believe social constructivism will most likely continue to be the dominant pedagogical theory in online writing instruction for the foreseeable future, and online writing courses will most likely continue to expand in number in most schools’ curricula. This means the issue of community in online writing instruction will be an ongoing concern, and instructors will continue to wrestle with how to best implement community into their courses, while students will continue to see their experiences of online writing learning shaped in large part by the

choices we make. Hopefully, this study sheds some light on how we might make those choices based on a more accurate understanding of the role of community in online writing.

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APPENDIX: INSTRUCTOR AND STUDENT
INTERVIEW MATERIALS

Interview 1: Instructors

Participant:

Pseudonym:

Date:

Location:

Background and Experience:

1. Describe briefly your teaching experience with composition:

2. How about with teaching comp online:

3. If I say “social constructivism” does that mean anything to you, say, from comp theory or your training regarding teaching writing?

[Working definition: The social construction of knowledge, social influences on writing, “collaboration and conversation”.

“We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong.” (Harris 12)]

Beliefs and Practices Regarding Community in Traditional Writing Courses

4. What are your beliefs regarding “community” in the teaching and learning of writing?
How would you define it? What is its role, its importance?
5. How did you form your ideas regarding community in writing?
6. What, if anything, do you do in your classes to encourage community?
7. How are your beliefs about community reflected in your policies and practices?

Community in the Online Writing Course

8. How does community differ in the online writing course?
9. What are the challenges to community in the online writing course? What are strengths and weaknesses of the online writing course regarding community?

10. How have your experiences with community in traditional courses affected your online teaching, and vice versa?
11. How do your practices (and policies?) regarding community differ in the online course than from the traditional course?
12. What is your assessment of the online environment's effect on students' writing?
Specifically, how do you think the social context of the online class impacts writing?
13. What else, if anything, strikes you as important about the role of community specifically in online writing instruction and learning?
14. In this study of community in the online writing course, what are you curious about?
What would you like to learn from online writing students?
15. Finally, what comments, questions, or concerns would you like me to be aware of as I begin this study?

Interview 2: Instructors

Participant:

Pseudonym:

Date:

Location:

For new(er) instructors only:

- A. What is your initial impression of community in the online writing class? What is as you expected, and what has been a surprise?

 - B. As far as teaching writing goes, what are you learning about community online?

 - C. How are the technologies and teaching strategies you planned to use (regarding community) working out?
-

For everyone:

- 1. What is your assessment of the nature and/or level of community in the particular writing class you are currently teaching? You can compare this to your past traditional or online writing classes. Is the current course typical? Is there anything unusual? How is the quality of the community?

- 2. Is or has anything in this particular course influenced the community of the class?

3. Describe some of the community activities your students are currently involved in. What would you say is the most significant community activity of the class.
4. Are there any “extra-curricular” community activities going on that you’re aware of?
5. What influences, if any, do you see any of these community activities having on your students’ current writing projects?
6. How would you describe your own participation in the community of this course? Your level of participation? Your role?
7. What notable relationships have you developed with individual students in this course?
8. What influences do you think you are having on your students’ writing?

9. What, if any, notable “personalities” are developing in this class? Do you notice any particular relationships developing among students?
10. Can you think of specific instances and examples of students influencing each other’s writing in this course?
11. Can you categorize the students in this course, maybe by personality type, participation, or their writing?
12. What would you say characterizes successful students in the online writing course? You can discuss concrete things that you know contribute to student success, and you can speculate about what you think contributes to that success.
13. Is there anything else you would like to discuss at this point?

Interview 3: Instructor

Participant:

Date:

Location:

What pseudonym would you like to use (first name only)?

For purposes of gift certificates, what stores are you most likely to shop at?

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1. Regarding community in online writing, what would your advice be to other instructors? How concerned should they be with building community in the online classroom? How can they best do that? And, what influences can they realistically expect community to have on their students' writing?
 2. How about advice for online writing students? How much should they pay attention to the community aspects of the course? And, how can they best apply those interactive or participatory elements of the course to their writing?
 3. What advice would you give to the school or administrators when you think about community in online writing courses? If you could make policy, what would you do to influence how students experience online writing courses (especially in the area of community)?
 4. Social constructivist composition pedagogy is very concerned with community in writing in general and in writing online specifically. Now that you've spent an entire course thinking about these things, to what degree do you share this concern? To what degree do you think community influences the writing of your online students? Do you see significant differences between the writing of your on-campus students and your online students and/or in their interactions within the courses?
 5. How important do you think the shared course content is in affecting the community of the course? (By content, I mean the focus of the course—e. g. if there is a theme for the course, or if the class is literature-based—the types of assignments, the ideas discussed.)

6. What do you think is the single greatest factor (or the few most important factors) that determines a student's success in your online writing class? Where would you rank a student's participation in the community of the class as determining his or her success?
7. What has teaching online taught you about the role of community in writing and writing instruction? Has teaching online changed you as a writing teacher, and, if so, how?
8. What is your biggest concern about teaching writing online, now or in the future? If possible, talk about your concerns about community, specifically, in the online writing course.
9. What changes or improvements in technology do you think could improve the community aspect of the online writing course? What tools would you like to see developed, and how likely would you be to use them in your online teaching?
10. Where do you see online writing courses going in the future? How will (or should) they change? What will (or should) remain the same? If possible, discuss specifically the future of community in these classes.

Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Interview 1: Students

Name:

Instructor and Course:

Self-designated: Traditional or Non-traditional

Full-time or Part-time

Major:

Occupation (optional):

Pseudonym:

Stores most likely to shop at:

Online course experience:

Traditional college courses:

Previous College Writing Courses:

-
1. If I ask you about the community of a college class, what does “community” mean to you? What activities are involved in being part of a course’s community?
 2. What role do you think interacting with others (your instructors and classmates) has in a writing course? To what degree do you think interacting with others in the course is important?
 3. Describe some of the interactions/activities you have had or taken part in in past writing courses, past online courses, and in this class in particular.

4. How would you describe the community of your current writing course? How frequently do you interact with others in the course? How involved do you feel, how much do you feel a part of a group?
5. How would you describe your instructor? What is his/her personality like? What is your relationship with him/her like?
6. Describe some of your classmates—their personalities, their work. Anyone special? Do you see categories or types of students?
7. Is there anyone outside of the class that you interact with when it comes to your work for the course? Anyone you get help or feedback from? If so, describe that relationship.
8. How do you think your relationships or interactions with your instructor and classmates are similar to and different from traditional classes? Are those relationships and interactions different in a writing course than from courses in other areas?
9. Talk a little bit about your writing for the course. What projects have you done? What were the processes or schedules for those projects? How has the writing experience for the course been so far?
10. Do you think taking this course online has affected or influenced your writing? If so, how? How is it different from writing in a face-to-face course?
11. Do you think any of the community activities we've talked about have influenced your writing? If so, how?
12. What activity or interaction involving another person (in or out of the class) has had the most influence on your writing for the course so far?

Interview 2: Student

Name:

Instructor/Course:

Date:

Location:

Pseudonym (first name only):

1. Since we last talked, and you've had some weeks to think about community in the online writing course, is there anything new or different you've noticed that we didn't discuss last time about community in the online writing course?
2. Talk about your experiences interacting with your instructor and classmates in this class. What were the benefits or strengths of the community in this class? What were the drawbacks or weaknesses?
3. How do you think taking the class online affected your performance in the class? Your writing? The degree to which you were a part of a community?
4. How do you think those interactions affected or influenced your writing? What single interaction with another person had the greatest impact on your writing? What was that impact?
5. Specifically thinking about the community of the course—the participation—what advice would you give teachers who teach writing online? How important is community? How can teachers best implement it? How can it best help you in your writing?
6. How about advice for students thinking about taking writing online? How much should they pay attention to the interactive part of the course? How important is it? How can they best succeed in it? How can they best use it to improve their writing?

7. What characteristics do you think a student needs to be successful in an online writing class? What is the most important ability or trait? Where would you rank participation/interaction in importance when it comes to success?
8. How concerned do you think teachers should be with improving the community aspect of the online writing course? How would you rank your community experience in this course? How could the interactive part of such courses best be improved?
9. Do you prefer interacting with classmates and teachers in person or online? Why?
10. Do you think either the quality or content of your writing is different because you took this class online? Why or why not?
11. How would you compare the quality of the communication and interaction you had with other members of this course to those you've had in other online courses? To those you've had in face-to-face classes?
12. How important do you think the shared course content is in affecting the community of the course? (By content, I mean the focus of the course—e. g. if there is a theme for the course, or if the class is literature-based—the types of assignments, the ideas discussed.)
13. Is there anything else you'd like to say about this course, community in online writing, or the study we're doing?