From the Editor

You’ll find two excellent articles about online education in this edition. In Jamie Thomas’ “Virtual Talk: Strategies for Using the Discussion Board in Online English Classes,” beginning on page 2, you’ll find a wealth of ideas on how to make the discussion board come alive for your students. Then on page 5, Eric Warner tells us of how instructors of SPAN 101 will be flipping their classrooms beginning fall 2015. The flipped class has a lot of potential for improving student learning, so they are understandably excited about their innovation.

Across the page you’ll see that some changes have been made recently related in online here at Ferris. Note particularly that the Associate Provost position will not be filled. We also learned from Interim Provost Paul Blake in a recent department meeting that the issue of raising caps on writing courses will (probably) not be reconsidered until the position has been redefined and then filled.

On page 6, you’ll learn of three faculty groups. The first is concerned with the second phase of the OTLC’s comparison study of online and face-to-face sections of ENGL 321 and 325; I have received a sabbatical for this fall to complete the study. The other two initiatives are related to improving student success in online courses and to creating a “mega course” that can be referenced by anyone teaching the course.

The premise behind faculty groups like these is that no one is better able to help others learn how to teach and to innovate in that course than those who already teach it. Also, too often we online faculty never even see the online courses of others who teach the same course; yet by sharing, we know we can learn much from each other. A fine example of a hard-working faculty group is our Spanish instructors, who have taken the initiative to flip SPAN 101 classrooms. Bravo!

—Elaine

Changes in Online Administration

~From E-MAT Minutes, September 26

Cheryl Cluchey is acting as Interim Dean for Extended and International Operations, Tracy Powers is acting as Interim Associate Dean for Extended and International Operations (GR) and Deb Thalner is acting as Interim Associate Dean for Extended and International Operations (Online).

Status of Associate Provost - Online Position

Paul Blake updated everyone on the status of the Associate Provost - Online position. A candidate was selected but he turned the position down due to personal reasons. This position is not going to be filled until the Provost position is filled and the Provost has had time to review the EIO structure and make decisions on both EIO and what position is needed for online. It is likely that the position will be changed and will be at the Dean’s level and not the Associate Provost level.

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Virtual Talk:
Strategies for Using the Discussion Board in Online English Classes

—Jamie Thomas

As a writer, I value the understanding I’ve gained about my own writing process, an understanding that has shown me that my process affects the way I write, and even the way I understand concepts.

In graduate school workshops, I participated in discussion after discussion about my own work, the work of others, and comparisons of the two, which taught me that my need to put ideas to paper (or computer screen) before too much planning takes place lends itself to creative surprises—and also messy first drafts. I also learned that my need to edit as I draft is a response to the minimal pre-planning I tend to do.

Also during graduate school, while I was teaching some of my first composition classes, I found myself in a class almost of my own—Modern & Contemporary Drama—that for some reason ended up making even though only three of us were in the class with the professor. Because of the extremely low numbers, the class became heavily reliant on long, extended discussions about our texts. There was no hiding if we didn’t feel like reading the Harold Pinter selections for that week, or the Sam Sheppard plays the week after. In the three-and-a-half-hour weekly section, each of us logged well near an hour of “talk time,” or it was obvious if we hadn’t.

At times these discussions might not have been the most efficient way of presenting the concepts of the course: Our talks tended to move tangentially, not along the straightest lines between Points A and Z. But at Point Z we did arrive. As a consequence I learned more in this course than in almost any other I took. The fact that this experience happened as I was teaching my own first courses had a large effect on the value I placed on discussion—both large and small group—in the classroom.

In courses that strive for interpretation, that ask our students to conduct critical thinking about texts as well as concepts relating to various writing situations, that ask them to apply those interpretations and concepts to the writing situations we give them, having students talk through these concepts as they begin to apply them is the most effective way to help them retain that information long term.

So while discussion, whether full-class or small-group, can tend toward inefficiency—non sequiturs happen, tangents are jogged down, awkward silences followed by nervous chatter at times result—in a face-to-face environment those inefficiencies are easily seen to be a part of collaborative discourse, the way we critically arrive at and test new ideas. The process we work through to come to an understanding about the texts our students read, or the writing concepts we teach them is truly an arrival.

I started teaching online classes for the same reason many of us do: The demand for online classes from students must be equalized by a supply of professors who teach them. Essentially I was asked.

Since I don’t think I will stop teaching online courses anytime soon, and yet I believe that class discussion is integral to my students’ learning, the question I always seem to come back to is how to come close to capturing the feel of face-to-face class discussions in my online courses.

The Discussion Board feature on Blackboard can help create this feel, if used effectively. But it can also feel tedious and disconnected from the rest of the course if the instructor is not careful. I want to use it effectively, and so I am always thinking of how I can tweak my students’ discussion experience.

Here are some strategies I’ve used or intend to use to lend a face-to-face feel to the virtual discussions in my writing classes.

1. Create Open-Ended Discussion Prompts

In the classroom, when it comes to discussions and prompting students, I feel like part teacher, part tour guide. It is easy enough to say that our discussion prompts need to be focused and have a purpose—that we must consider what it is that we want our students to get from their inquiries. Achieving that is the challenge.
I try to write my discussion prompts as open-ended as possible. If I’ve prompted my students well, I’m looking less for an answer and more for their arrival at an answer, for how they are each personally engaged by the material. Those various perspectives are what prompt reactions, debate, agreement, the need for clarification; and that is how the back and forth of discussion begins. To me, facilitating discussion online is about highlighting these different perspectives and creating organic discussion. A natural back and forth yields more inquiry than any number of “required” visits to the Discussion Board.

In my face-to-face classes it is important to me to help create an atmosphere that encourages quality discussion. I want my students to take chances, to not be afraid to be “wrong.” Open-ended prompts help to do this. Online, another way to help encourage this atmosphere is to ask that students craft their responses to discussion prompts before reading other students’ responses. That may seem simple, but if their response is the “first” they have considered, the anxiety of “everything has been said” dissipates, as does the fear that their ideas somehow inferior to those of other students.

2. Use the Discussion Board for Topic Generation

As writing teachers we talk about topic generation as being perhaps the most important step to producing effective essays. We ask our students to brainstorm multiple topics, consider possible audiences, think about the scope of assignments—about how our topics respond to each given writing situation. I find it important that students see how their peers generate topics, how they respond to the assignments I’ve given them. I’ll often pair them up or put them in small groups to compare/discuss their processes for topic generation. A lot of times it’s about students in the same field of study seeing what topics their peers find important and intriguing; other times it’s simply about “talking” through ideas.

3. Use the Discussion Board for Workshopping

Using the Discussion Board to workshop is not a new concept, nor is the struggle to find ways to effectively peer-workshop students’ papers. Whether face-to-face or online, students are often skeptical about the value of workshop for various reasons. Students are often apprehensive about being put in a position of writing expert, doling out advice about how to “fix” their peers’ papers. They worry about a lack of effort by their peers. They fear both writing and receiving overly positive, empty critiques and harsh criticism alike. Online these same worries exist, with the added challenge that they communicate only virtually.

When conducting a workshop, I find it effective to put my students in the position of being a reader, instead of having to be an expert in the writing process. Peter Elbow’s reader-based critique is perfect for this. It generates written critiques that are more reaction, pointing writers to hot spots in the paper that they can then go back to triage for themselves. Elbow described the process as “Movies of the Reader’s Mind.” Basically the instructor asks students to write holistic descriptions of their experience of being the reader, documenting the points where they became confused, distracted, adversarial, where they were in agreement or felt persuaded. Essentially any reaction is documented. Creating a back-and-forth dialogue is the goal, so my small group workshops are conducted virtually over the course of the week. Each writer submits a series of specific questions with the rough draft for the group to consider. The questions from the writer and the reader-based critiques help create that back and forth where new revision possibilities may surface.

4. Have Students “Lead” Discussion

As normal as it may seem to have students lead discussion in the face-to-face classroom, I am now trying to incorporate something similar in my online discussions as well. I open the discussion with an in class writing or small group assignment to allow them to formulate ideas, and then have them informally present those ideas to the class as a jumping off point for a larger discussion. Simply put, it becomes

(Cont. on p. 4)
another assignment they have added to their overall workload. If I have twelve weeks of Discussion Board “conversations” (subtracting the weeks that I use the Discussion Board to workshop their larger paper drafts) built into my online course, then depending upon the numbers, I’ll have a student (or two) assigned to each week, and when it is their week I’ll have them do the readings beforehand and devise discussion prompts for that week. I still include prompts of my own, so that I retain some control over the focus and plan of each week’s discussion. However, I think that when the students know that they will be a part of conceiving of the nature of the discussion each week, many of them will work harder—not only during the week they are responsible for, but also in support of their peers’ efforts to facilitate our “talks.”

5. Be a Supportive Presence on the Discussion Board

My job in the classroom is to facilitate discussion, to help it retain its shape while also letting it naturally divert—the art to this is knowing when to step in and when to stay out of the way, when to ask a leading question and when to let a couple of seconds of silence draw out more conversation. This is much more difficult to achieve online, but I have some general rules I try to follow to allow the board to be a place of organic discussion. Starting with prompts that are open-ended, that don’t narrow to a single answer (like I mentioned in my discussion of my first strategy) is a good start. Asking students to write their responses directly onto the Discussion Board and to respond to the prompts in the flow of their thoughts—and then making sure to grade completely on process of thought and depth of inquiry, ignoring mechanics and style—helps to achieve that feeling of informality; giving them permission to be imperfect, or even wrong, lessens the pressure, which in turn creates an atmosphere of discovery. I try also to keep a low profile—first to the board, last to the board. I’m always checking in, and if I have to enter during the week to help get the discussion back on track I will. But for the most part I am “first to the board” with my initial prompt(s), and then “last to the board,” thanking them for their hard work and adding anything further I want them to consider. ~
Spanish classes at Ferris have gone a bit more tech recently and will continue to do so as we mainstream the “flipped classroom” concept into our SPAN101 courses. Starting fall 2015, students will have two options for Beginning Spanish 1 courses: The flipped classroom or the fully online course. Both delivery methods utilize online technology, but whereas the fully online student is often caught in the “sink-or-swim” dynamic since the learning, albeit guided, is more independent than in face-to-face classes, students in the flipped classroom have the added benefit of interacting with other students and their professor even though their conceptual learning is essentially done wherever they are connected to the course online. The flipped classroom allows students to use time they would normally use in class to work independently, thus maximizing the reduced in-class time for a more interactive experience.

With the help of our textbook’s online system, students can watch video tutorials and complete online assignments related to low-level tasks, on which they receive immediate feedback, before tackling higher-level communicative activities in class. Likewise, they can review more difficult concepts as many times as needed to aid in their mastery of the language through a series of online video tutorials for grammar, audio activities, speaking/recorded activities, cultural readings and videos, flashcards, and several other resources needed for an optimal language learning experience.

We at Ferris are by no means newbies in the area of online education and the technologically-enhanced classroom—most universities are jumping on board, too. Like other faculty groups on campus, we who teach world languages have been monitoring closely the results of our students to make sure that at the end of the course, whether delivered fully online or traditionally, our students are prepared to advance to the next level. So far, our assessment with online learning for Beginning Spanish has shown that the vast majority of students who finish the course make remarkable progress throughout the course and achieve more than satisfactory results, and are therefore prepared for continued success in the language path. With the new delivery method, we will now be able to compare our students’ progress and success not only in fully online and traditional courses, but also in flipped classrooms.

Kristin Oplinger, Spanish Instructor at Ferris, has already begun experimenting with the flipped classroom idea and comments that “this generation is used to having instant feedback […] students were very frustrated with the slow paced traditional classroom because they felt as if they had not yet mastered the concepts before moving on to the next thing. After I began flipping the classroom, I saw an immediate change in not only the students’ approach to the material, but in their attitude toward the subject matter in general.”

Furthermore, she notices “significant increases in students’ abilities to communicate in all ways in the language compared to the traditional classroom.”

When SPAN 101 courses are flipped as of fall 2015, additional benefits are that they will be virtually paperless and they will save students money because no traditional textbook is required: The program package is completely online.

For further information and resources on flipped classrooms, visit http://flippedlearning.org/.
Progress of L & L Online Faculty Group

ENGL 321 and ENGL 325 faculty continue the comparison study begun by the OTLC in spring 2013 of over 8200 student completions of the two courses, from the beginning of the summer semester of 2009 through the spring semester of 2013. In Phase 1, we found no significant difference between the final grades earned by students in the online and face-to-face sections of ENGL 321 and ENGL 325, which are respectively the highest and the fifth highest enrolled online courses at Ferris.

However, the average number of F’s in English 321 over the four years was 7.8% higher in online sections than in face-to-face sections and in ENGL 325 was 8% higher in online sections than in face-to-face sections. Also, in ENGL 321, the average number of W’s was 7.8% higher in online sections than in face-to-face sections. Therefore, we decided that Phase 2 of the study would involve exploring and then trying to address the reasons for these higher F’s and W’s in the online sections.

In our first meeting, on September 24, we decided to first look at the demographics of the students in our online sections of the courses to see if a correlation exists between a particular cohort of students and their lack of success. We secured the demographic information for the past three semesters for all students receiving grades in the two courses and Elaine McCullough is now analyzing it. A second meeting is scheduled for November 5, when we will review Elaine’s analysis and determine what our next step should be.

Ideas for Your Own Online Faculty Group

Improve Student Success and Retention

Online sections of courses in Ferris State University have consistently higher W and WF rates than their counterpart face-to-face sections, and many have high F and D rates as well.

To help address this problem, a faculty initiative that originated in E-MAT will pilot three faculty groups in spring, 2015. Because the following colleges provide by far the most online courses and programs, one group each will be in the College of Health Professions, College of Business, and College of Arts and Sciences. The groups will be composed of faculty who teach the same multiple-unit online course that has demonstrated an overall student success or retention problem.

These groups would share their ideas about the course; help each other with course design and tool use, requesting outside expertise when needed; mentor new hires who teach the course; and determine, implement, and then evaluate ways to help their students succeed in the course.

Efforts are underway to secure PDI funds for participants, and the courses will be featured in the Online Courses Gallery, which debuts in spring, 2015.

Contact Spence Tower, SpenceTower@ferris.edu; Cathy Archer, CatherineArcher@ferris.edu; or Elaine McCullough, mcculloe@ferris.edu; for further details.

Create a Mega Course

Share and learn exciting new ways to approach your course!

Organize a band of faculty and adjuncts who teach the same course online and contribute your best ideas and assignments to a Mega Course for your group’s own enrichment and for faculty who have not yet taught the course.

You will develop course units, to which everyone will contribute ideas and assignments that later users may sort through, showing only the ones they want in their particular course and hiding the rest.

Course designers will be available to help you organize and design the course and to help you embed Quality Matters© features into it so you will be assured that your course meets the highest standards of course design.

For participating in the Mega Course sessions, you will receive PDI funds, and your course will be featured in the Online Courses Gallery, which debuts in spring, 2015.

Contact Cathy Archer CatherineArcher@ferris.edu or Mary HolmesMaryHolmes@ferris.edu for details on how to start your own group.