

THE STATE OF THE ART OF ONLINE WRITING INSTRUCTION FOLLOW-UP SURVEY REPORT

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Following the 2021 State of the Art of Online Writing Instruction (SoA OWI) Survey (henceforth, 2021 Survey), in 2022, we contacted 81 participants who completed the 2021 Survey and indicated interest in a follow-up survey or interview. We shared an IRB-approved survey (“Expedited” as an extension of the 2021 Survey) and asked participants to answer three questions first asked in the 2021 Survey before asking additional, related, semantic questions. Of those participants, 20 completed the follow-up survey to help us better understand responses from the 2021 Survey and hone our survey instrument for future research.

In the 2021 SoA OWI Report’s “Future Research,” we said we would “investigate how respondents understood some of the survey questions in an effort to discover if what we thought we were asking was in fact what respondents interpreted us to be asking” (p. 47). When designing the follow-up survey, we wanted participants to clarify and expound upon three specific questions to better understand how they interpreted them semantically. To do this, we first asked participants to re-answer three of the 2021 Survey questions, responding how they felt “today, rather than recalling how [they] responded in 2021.” After responding, we asked additional questions related to their semantic interpretation of each respective question.

Participant Demographics

Twenty (20) participants responded to the SoA OWI Follow-Up Survey. Ten (10) respondents had been teaching online writing course for seven or more years, six (6) had been teaching for 4-6 years, two (2) had 2-3 years of online writing instruction experience, and two (2) had not taught online prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nineteen (19) of the respondents, however, had 7 or more years of experience teaching online and one (1) respondent had 1-3 years of online teaching experience.

Six (6) participants were full-time, non-tenure track instructors/professors, five (5) were tenured professors, three (3) were adjunct instructors/professors, three (3) held administrative roles, two (2) were tenure-track professors, and one (1) was a writing center assistant director.

The majority of these participants taught at a 4-year university (n=13), a non-profit institution (n=8), a 2- or 4-year graduate school (n=7), and/or a 2-year community college (n=6) and tended to teach first-year writing (n=12), professional/technical writing (n=11), and/or advanced academic writing (n=5).

Interpretation of “Advanced Web Design Skills”

The first question we investigated was Q38 on the 2021 Survey, which asked participants to: “Rate what you perceive to be the importance of qualities below for an online writing instructor at your institution.” What we found interesting in the 2021 Survey Results was that “the least important instructor capability as identified by survey respondents was ‘advanced web design skills,’” and that only 15% of participants identified it as “very important” or “important” and that 75% identified it as “unimportant” and “very unimportant” (p. 47). We speculated that “while instructors may not perceive themselves as advanced web designers (or they at least do not rank that skill as very important to their teaching), there is clearly an element of design that is important for effective OWI” (p. 47). We also wondered whether respondents were interpreting “advanced web design skills” to mean “coding” or if removing the qualifier “advanced” would change responses.

Our follow-up survey results suggests that participants were, in fact, interpreting “advanced web design skills” to mean the ability to write code like HTML. Of the 20 responses, 18 indicated that “advanced web design skills” were “unimportant” (n=14) or “very unimportant” (n=4). Only two (2) participants indicated this competency as “important.”

Seventeen (17) of the participants who indicated that advanced web design skills were not important interpreted this to mean “coding” and “the ability to build a course from scratch.” These respondents explained that “the ability to code in HTML/CSS or develop websites and their underlying information architecture/interaction design” is separate from creating and formatting content in an LMS. One respondent articulated this point clearly, writing,

With LMSes, advanced web design skills are not as necessary as other qualities—you can create a functional and usable online writing course without being much of a web designer because so much of the structure, usability, and accessibility are built right into the tools. I would say that advanced web design skills implies an ability to compose with a wide variety of multimodal tools, markup languages, web publishing, and media, as well as more than passing familiarity with usability and principles of design.

The two (2) respondents who indicated that advanced web design skills were “important” defined this competency as “[c]reating complex digital platforms i.e. websites to help students learn outside the course learning management systems” and “[t]he ability to use HTML or really technical skills like that,” which suggests that a minority of these instructors believe that “advanced web design skills” also means the ability to code *and* that the ability is important. One of the participants who responded that “advanced web design skills” was “not important” understood the question to be related to “the design of the Blackboard page,” but we are unsure whether “design” related to how the LMS is coded.

Moving forward, we recommend that the SoA OWI Survey ask more directly about the importance of composing with markup/coding languages and whether that type of skill is necessary for effective online writing instruction.

Web Designers or Instructional Designers?

To better understand how respondents were interpreting the phrase “advanced web design,” we asked whether participants consider online instructors to be web designers. Ten (10) indicated “no,” nine (9) indicated that it depends, and one (1) indicated “yes.” Those who responded “no” explained that setting up a course in an LMS is not web design. Those who responded “yes and no” or “it depends” explained that some instructors might have the skillset to be web designers but that it is not a requirement or a necessity for successful online writing instruction. One participant elaborated that for those with web design skills, some instructors may create their own websites outside of or in addition to an LMS. Another participant shared that some institutions allow access to Cidi Labs DesignPlus tools to do more within an LMS like Canvas. The one respondent who answered “yes” indicated that instructors “must create the content in a way that is user friendly and easy to navigate.” This respondent also rated “advanced design skills” as “important.”

While participants might not have seen themselves as web designers, the next question on the follow-up survey asked whether online instructors are instructional designers, which these respondents resoundingly agreed was a more appropriate classification. Of the 20 respondents, 16 indicated “yes,” explaining, “Absolutely. We literally design every aspect of the instruction... pacing of the content, what the content [is] to include and when, etc.” Another respondent reiterated this same sentiment: “Writing instructors design courses all the time and have expertise to critique course design...While the amount of design responsibility may vary, online writing instructors have expertise that should be valued and tapped rather than capped.”

For some respondents whose universities had instructional designers on staff or whose instructors were given templates or course shells, their answers were less certain. Two (2) respondents indicated “it depends,” with one elaborating, “it depends on what level the instructor has agency in designing the course overall, its structure and organization within an LMS, as well as changes they may or may not make to account for hiccups during any given semester within the LMS.”

Two (2) other respondents indicated “no” or “not really,” explaining that while online writing instructors are not instructional designers, they “should have a good amount of knowledge about design and basic design principles” and “should work with the IDs to fill in those gaps” but that navigating an LMS is not instructional design.

While the majority of these instructors believe that advanced web design skills and being a web designer might be an asset, they also believe that it is not a requirement in order to teach online writing. However, these respondents tend to agree that online writing instructors are instructional designers with a specific expertise in online course design. Moving forward, in addition to asking whether online writing instructors see themselves as instructional designers, the SoA OWI Survey could ask more specific questions about instructional design such as:

1. Does your institution provide access to instructional designers?
2. Are you encouraged to work with instructional designers when creating online or hybrid courses?

Instructor-Student Interaction Expectations

The next question included in the follow-up survey was designed to explicate Q32 asked on the 2021 Survey about online teaching expectations. The follow-up survey asked: “When thinking about departmental expectations of instructors who teach writing courses online, one option in the previous question was ‘Certain kinds of/a certain amount of interaction with students are expected.’ When thinking about that option, how do you interpret or define ‘interaction’?”

When answering this question, all 20 respondents mentioned at least one of five specific types of asynchronous and synchronous interactions: sending emails, providing feedback on essays, responding to discussion forums, holding Zoom meetings, and/or conferencing with students individually. Most of respondents included a combination of all five interactions. One respondent included what might be considered minimal interaction: “For us, this means grading and posting announcements.” Another respondent provided an answer that suggests more robust interaction expectations: “My

institution frames this as 'contact hours,' which constitute direct instruction. They explain this as 'regular and substantive interaction' with students, which must involve two of these five things: direct instruction, assessing or providing feedback, providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency, facilitating a group discussion, or other instructional activities approved by the institution or programs' accrediting agency."

The next question included on the follow-up survey continued to expound semantically upon the previous question, asking, "When thinking about the option 'Certain kinds of/a certain amount of interaction with students are expected,' how do you interpret or define 'expected'?"

The majority (n=11) of respondents interpreted "expected" to mean "required." They explained this in terms of also necessitating being defined somewhere like in a policy or guidelines in a handbook. For these participants, "expected" also suggested that the expectation to interact with students remained constant regardless of modality. One respondent explained, "At my institution, this is framed through the number of credit hours of the course. You are expected to provide 3 contact hours per week in a 3-credit-hour course, with 6 'non-contact' hours per week of work done by the student." Another respondent clarified: "We are required to include a statement on our syllabi stating how interaction will occur. Having said that, however, no one will actually check on this unless a student complains." Also mentioning that a guideline exists without any oversight, another respondent shared, "It is written in the instructor handbook, but no one checks up on this."

Five (5) respondents interpreted "expected" to mean "available" and that the expectations relate more to what students want, which includes instructors being available and responding in a timely manner. Three (3) respondents defined "expected" to mean a "regular component" or something that is built into a class and "not an extra or add-on that is an option." This interpretation is different from "required" because, as one respondent explained, "However, 'expected' is not 'mandatory;' 'mandatory' means 'do this or the administration will have a talk with you.'" One (1) respondent understood "expected" to mean "what others are doing" and explained that they "based my understanding of expectation on what colleagues in my department are doing that students respond well to."

The final question asked on the follow-up survey that related to this same answer option (i.e., "Certain kinds of/a certain amount of interaction with students are expected") and how participants interpreted or defined "a certain amount of."

Eight (8) respondents discussed this as a mandated minimum, which typically included responding to student emails within 24 hours and interacting with students, for example, by posting an announcement once a week. One respondent explained, “We have once a week requirement for posting announcements. That’s it.”

Five (5) respondents indicated that “a certain amount of” meant “regular interactions” that were also communicated in the syllabus. Two of those five respondents again mentioned responding to student emails within 24 hours.: “A certain amount means regularly—some types of interaction like posting announcements should be at least weekly, while others like responding to emails should be done within 24 hours.” One respondent quantified “regularly” as “3ish times per week” (e.g., via discussion boards, grading/feedback, and emails). Another respondent explained, “There is no set number, but one a week is too little!” This respondent went on to suggest five interactions per week via feedback on assignments, an announcement, a video, a reminder email about deadlines, etc.

Three (3) respondents indicated that the “amount” depends on a specific course and other variables: “The amount would vary depending on course type, size, individual students, etc.” Another respondent explained this response in terms of different courses: “my 25-person writing course has a completely different level of interaction than a 200-person psychology course.”

Three (3) respondents indicated that interactions are part of their job and should be equivalent to face-to-face courses. One respondent explained, “I see the interactions...as the equivalent of me showing up for class....I make sure to have at least two whole-class interactions per week, and I try to have individual interactions at least once every two weeks (although once per week is ideal for me).” One (1) respondent was unsure and indicated that expectations were not clear.

Overall, these instructors seem to interpret “a certain amount of” to mean regular interaction, which further translates to interacting with students three-to-five times per week, one-to-many (e.g., announcements) and one-to-one (e.g., emails and feedback). These instructors also seem to agree (or their respective institutions mandate) that responding to student emails within 24-hours is appropriate and that, at the very least, weekly full-class interaction and weekly individual interaction should be expected.

In the next iteration of the SoA OWI Survey, we recommend asking about explicit interaction expectations, where they are communicated, and if/how they are enforced. Additionally, better understanding precisely how many

times instructors 1) are expected/mandated to interact with online students as well as 2) how many times they tend to interact with online students might be helpful. Asking for specific institutional policy or programmatic guideline language might also be helpful.

Institutional Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Our final question on the follow-up survey asked, “How has your institution responded to online teaching since the pandemic? For example, does your institution offer more or different online options (e.g., synchronous online classes) or mandate returning to options offered pre-pandemic?”

The majority (n=11) of respondents discussed ways in which their respective institution(s) have reverted to pre-pandemic course offerings, with many adding that instructors and students would like additional online options and are resisting their respective institution’s return to pre-pandemic modalities, if possible. One participant explained: “We have a full range of options from asynchronous to synchronous to hybrid to on-site with a great deal of pressure for faculty to return to their pre-pandemic modalities (though students appear to be actively resisting the return to fully onsite classes).” Another participant explained, “Currently, [our institution] is mandating returning to options offered pre-pandemic, but there are certain sectors of the university pushing back and wanting to offer other/new options online. Students seem to have mixed desires, depending on learning style, outside responsibilities, etc.”

Seven (7) respondents indicated that their institutions are now offering different or additional course modalities, which largely translated to additional online, synchronous offerings. One participant explained, “We offer more sections of online courses in a wider variety of modalities. Before we only offered asynchronous, but now we offer various synchronous and hybrid options. More courses are available online too. For example, our remedial writing course wasn’t offered online before the pandemic, but now it is.” Another participant offered: “Remote courses (which is what we call our synchronous online classes) have continued since our return to campus, and all signs point to students continuing to want them as an option, so I believe they’re here to stay. I’m at a community college, so we try to make attending class as easy as possible for our students, since so many of them have intense work and family obligations.”

Two (2) participants answered this question by explaining that, given emergency remote teaching, untrained instructors believe that they should be able to continue teaching online: “We [are] back to the training for OWI, which makes some people mad because those that taught online [during the

pandemic] with no training feel like they shouldn't have to go through training since they are experienced. For quality control, though, we think the training is necessary. Teaching poorly online for a year or two doesn't develop the expertise we require." And, one (1) participant responded vaguely, "My institution offers a variety of online options," but it was unclear whether these options were new or different from what was offered pre-pandemic.

This small survey of instructors suggests that at least some institutions are offering more hybrid and online synchronous options after returning to campus. Given these responses, we recommend that the next version of the SoA OWI Survey continue inquiring about modality and synchronicity offerings.

Summary

While this follow-up survey includes a limited number of respondents, enough information has been obtained to inform and update the next SoA OWI Survey. To summarize, our recommendations include asking survey respondents:

- about the importance of composing with markup/coding languages and whether that type of skill is necessary for effective online writing instruction.
- whether online writing instructors see themselves as instructional designers, including:
 - Does your institution provide access to instructional designers?
 - Are you encouraged to work with instructional designers when creating online or hybrid courses?
- about explicit expectations when interacting with students in online environments.
- where expectations about interacting with students in online environments are communicated.
- if/how expectations about interacting with students in online environments are enforced.
- how many times instructors 1) are expected/mandated to interact with online students as well as 2) how many times instructors tend to interact with online students.
- for specific institutional policy or programmatic language that could be cut and pasted for comparison.