Book Review

Scott Warnock. *Teaching Writing Online: How & Why.* Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2009. 235 pp., $35.95 (paper).

R.J. Lambert, The University of Texas at El Paso

The 2010 Sloan Consortium report on online education presents persuasive statistics on the direction of higher education in the U.S. According to the report, over 4.6 million students registered for at least one online course in Fall 2008, a 17% growth rate that far exceeds the 1.2% overall growth rate of higher education that year. This increase amounts to more than a quarter of all college and university students taking at least one online course (Allen and Seaman 1). In the introduction to *Teaching Writing Online: How & Why*, Scott Warnock addresses this visible trend towards online coursework as part of the *why* behind deciding to teach writing online. Throughout the book, however, Warnock compellingly argues that a fitting reason to teach writing online is that the subject of writing is, itself, particularly well-suited for online learning, as almost all online communication and interaction takes written form. From this exigence, he attempts to help writing instructors overcome their hesitation to teach online through an accessible collection of practical advice and guidelines.

One of book's strengths is that it can be referenced and reviewed as a guide, rather than read straight through from start to finish. Depending on one's familiarity and experience with online course development or teaching, certain chapters may be more useful than others. The content is organized into eighteen brief chapters, followed by an afterword and four appendices

of teaching materials (a syllabus, weekly plan, message board conversation, and blog

assignment, respectively). The chapters progress logically from introductory considerations

(chapters one and two), course planning and setup (chapters three through six), and course

content options (chapters seven through nine), to several type of online interactions (chapters ten

through fourteen) and pedagogical concerns and resources (chapters fifteen through eighteen).

While nearly every chapter could be relevant to online instructors across disciplines and with

varying levels of online teaching experience, Warnock specifically addresses an imagined

readership of writing instructions who have considered teaching online, but who are uncertain

where to start. His guide therefore offers practical suggestions about how to prepare for,

manage, and reflect upon online writing courses. Each chapter concludes with pre-term

questions to help instructors prepare for a course, and the main points of each chapter are also

helpfully distilled into 41 guidelines that are reprinted inside the book covers.

Responding to an apprehension of the online medium that greets many writing

instructors, Warnock's central premise is that writing instructors can effectively *migrate* their

teaching styles and personae to the online medium. This process involves a concerted effort to

respond to the dynamics and demands of online instruction, but writing instructors should

nonetheless remain confident in drawing on their traditional teaching strengths for online

instruction.

Chapter one begins where every online instructor must begin: by developing and framing

a teaching persona. In a medium where most interactions with students are viewable by other

students and fixed for the duration of the course, the online instructor very much constructs an

identity through discourse. Warnock addresses everything from the introductory message and

the instructor's title to the voice and tone of interaction with students as part of one's online

persona. He also discusses viewing the instructor as audience of students' writing and then

reviews several possible roles that an instructor can inhabit, encouraging us to prevent negative

roles from dominating course communication with students.

For instructors who are apprehensive about transitioning to online instruction, chapters

two and three suggest ways to more comfortably migrate from onsite to online writing

instruction. Chapter two ("Online or Hybrid?") takes up the differences between hybrid and

fully online courses, treating hybrid teaching as a good place to begin. While Warnock cites

evidence from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other sources that students appear to learn

equally well in hybrid, online, and f2f (face-to-face) courses, he argues that hybrid courses may

be preferable for instructors as they transition into online teaching because a certain amount of

f2f contact helps the instructor balance the new demands of the online medium with the onsite

teaching that is already familiar. Similarly, chapter three ("Tech Tools & Strategies") suggests

that new online instructors should use only the most necessary technologies for their specific

teaching needs, rather than attempting to utilize all of the available options in their first online

course. The number and availability of technological options will depend on the course

management system (CMS) that an instructor or institution has access to, including such

common systems as Blackboard, Desire2Learn, eCollege, WebCT, and even course Wikis and

blogs—each with a variety of tools for instruction. However, Warnock maintains that most

pedagogical needs (communication, conversations, group work, course lessons, assignment

submissions, and feedback) can be facilitated through a combination of e-mail, message boards

or forums, online dropboxes, and word processing or presentation software. Writing instructors

should therefore feel comfortable using these familiar technologies to manage their first course, and then consider adopting more complex Web 2.0 and audiovisual technologies with each successive term.

While onsite courses sometimes function with a certain degree of flexibility in assignments and structure, online course content must usually be prepared and outlined before the first day of the term so that students know exactly what is expected of them. With this in mind, chapters four through six discuss the preparation and organization that help online courses run smoothly for both instructors and students. Warnock begins chapter four ("Course Lessons and Content") by noting that writing courses are unique for the amount of original content produced by students. As such, instructors must consider how to utilize a combination of written lectures, discussion questions and prompts, interactive conversations, group work, peer-review workshops, and independent assignments to elicit a variety of original student writing. Given the importance of written guidance in an online course, chapter five ("The Writing Course Syllabus") discusses the elements of a thorough syllabus that contains the usual course and contact information in addition to detailed course policies and expectations that guide students through their online course. Chapter six ("Organization") considers options for meeting the organizational challenges inherent in the online environment. A well-organized course presents course materials to students in a logical and coherent manner while also helping the instructor track and respond to e-mail, discussion messages, and assignment submissions throughout the term. Central to Warnock's discussion of organization is the notion that repeating important information is essential to ensuring that students understand course policies and expectations as the course progresses: "*Redundancy* and *repetition* will help students stay on track so we can

focus on the more challenging and complex task of helping them improve their writing" (56). If important information is not clearly communicated or repeated for emphasis, students will begin asking similar questions about how to locate basic information about course content and expectations.

In order to organize the content, however, an instructor must first determine what types of content to include. In the next three chapters, Warnock discusses specific strategies for integrating and encouraging student reading (chapter seven), developing and communicating within asynchronous discussion forums (chapter eight), and assigning a variety of informal and formal writing assignments (chapter nine). Subsequent chapters further flesh out the use of online peer review (chapter ten), methods and strategies for responding to (chapter eleven) and grading (chapter twelve) student writing, anchoring student participation in predictable and regular assignment deadlines (chapter thirteen), and fostering collaborative learning through team and group work (chapter fourteen). Finally, the book concludes with chapters on intellectual property and plagiarism in online writing courses (chapter fifteen), teacher collaboration in online course development and pedagogy (chapter sixteen), self-reflection and course assessment (chapter seventeen), and an overview of the many resources for online writing instructors (chapter eighteen).

Across these brief and accessible chapters, Warnock succeeds at providing a useful guide to encourage writing instructors to migrate their teaching styles and personas to the online writing environment. Although his is not an overtly theoretical endeavor, theoretical questions certainly inhabit and inform his practical guidelines. Abstracted from their online context, some of Warnock's suggestions seem difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish in an onsite classroom,

despite serving writing course objectives and student needs in deeply meaningful ways. For instance, Warnock suggests a range of writing activities from informal reflections to discussion responses and formal papers. Each of these may be assessed differently, but every student is required to become engaged in an online course, and students earn credit for each written text they produce "as a means of generating an ongoing conversation with students about their progress" (137). Similarly, Warnock proposes various feedback technologies that are facilitated by online writing instruction, such as inserting spoken comments or even using audiovisual programs such as Camtasia Studio to record typed and spoken comments within each student's paper. This provides individualized audiovisual feedback that in many ways exceeds the feedback provided in traditional classrooms: "Essentially, you are talking through the student's essay in a kind of virtual conference, commenting and annotating as you proceed" (131).

Upon reading about these and other expanded opportunities for student writing and individualized feedback, one can't help but wonder whether writing may most effectively be taught online. Regardless of the answer to this question, the potential for self-discovery and creativity in online writing instruction is undeniable. In addition, our reality, as writing instructors, is that increasing numbers of students are enrolling in online courses, and we will do both the students and ourselves a disservice by not preparing adequately for the additional demands and opportunities of online writing instruction. For instructors who are teaching online courses for the first time, and even for instructors who have taught online but are interested in strategies for increased effectiveness, *Teaching Writing Online: How & Why* offers an accessible introduction to online writing instruction that may cause even the most experienced instructors to consider new ways to teach students to write effectively.

Works Cited

Allen, I. Elaine, and Jeff Seaman. *Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States,*

　　2009. The Sloan Consortium, Jan. 2010. Web. 24 June 2010.