



Teaching with Instructional Assistants: Enhancing Student Learning in Online Classes

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Abstract

This article details a pilot project incorporating instructional assistants (IAs), or upper-level undergraduate writing tutors, embedded in the courses of an online writing program at a large land-grant university. The curriculum, called the Writers' Studio, focused on heavy process and portfolio assessment. Students were asked to create multimodal projects for public audiences in an effort to prepare them to participate as literate citizens beyond higher education. As a result of the multimodal emphasis and process-centered curriculum, the students needed additional instructional support to successfully demonstrate understanding of the learning outcomes for the course. Recognizing that digital writing environments can increase workload, the instructional team had to reconsider ways to manage the instructors' and students' needs. The answer was the incorporation of undergraduate teaching assistants, or instructional assistants. In online classes where students write several drafts for each project, instructor feedback on multiple drafts was simply not possible with the number of students assigned to the teacher, no matter how she managed her time. The use of IAs provided what instructors could not: a chance for students to receive feedback on their writing throughout the actual process of writing. Although students still maintained interaction with the instructors, the IAs gave them additional individualized attention. In this article, we provide an in-depth look at the pilot project, including a detailed description of our IA training practices, as well as comments from students about the benefit of the instructional assistants.

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Because of state-wide budget cuts, the provost of Arizona State University asked faculty to think of innovative approaches to redesign curriculum so that courses reduced costs while retaining or improving student learning and maintaining or decreasing faculty workloads. The assistant vice provost brought together a team of writing faculty to investigate approaches to redesigning first-year composition course sequences, ENG 101 and ENG 102, and the advanced one-semester course, ENG 105, to accommodate an increased student-to-teacher ratio while maintaining quality of instruction and managing teacher workload. As proponents of small, intimate environments that foster learner-centered opportunities and facilitate the writing process, we were concerned about losing one-on-one personal contact with students. We were faced with questions about how to offer pedagogically sound courses that would provide opportunities to engage in critical thinking and enhance writing skills with a substantially increased number of students. As a result, we developed a series of online first-year composition courses called the Writers' Studio for the School of

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Letters and Sciences that focused on process-heavy, learner-centered pedagogy. In the first-year composition courses, we incorporated an instructional team that included peer mentors, called instructional assistants (IAs), to enhance students' experiences and reduce instructors' workload. In this article, we offer an explanation for how adding IAs can benefit instruction in numerous ways. We begin the article by providing the context at our university to add instructional support. We then provide details on the educational support given to prepare the instructional assistants to work as leaders within the first-year composition courses. Finally, we illustrate sample comments from students about the help they received from instructional assistants.

1. First-year composition course redesign

During our pilot semester, our goal was to locate a more cost-efficient way to offer writing classes that were pedagogically sound. While we developed this curriculum prior to the publication of the [Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee](#) for Best Practices in Online Writing Instruction's March 2013 *Position Statement*, our goals were in line with the principles detailed therein. In particular, principles 3 and 4 were especially applicable: "Appropriate composition teaching/learning strategies should be developed for the unique features of the online instructional environment" and "Appropriate onsite composition theories, pedagogies, and strategies should be migrated and adapted to the online instructional environment." We recognized the importance of using existing pedagogical strategies for the classes, but we also felt we needed to develop a new strategy for the unique features of our online environment.

Nearly half of the first-year composition classes within the School of Letters and Sciences were moved online to accommodate the space needed to grow sections beyond the physical classroom spaces. Because writing courses at our institution typically held 24 students per section, one way to conserve funding was to avoid offering sections that contained less than 24 students. For example, one teacher who teaches four sections might have one or two full sections of 24 students and then a section or two with 17 or 12 students; however, the Writers' Studio maximized the teaching potential of each faculty member by offering larger sections, then adding teachers once the enrollment had met the need, rather than offering sections that relied on student enrollments. These courses were called "mega-sections" because they could house more students and were sometimes taught with more than one instructor. Three mega-sections were moved online with approximately 200 total students enrolled in all three courses, including one section of ENG 101, one section of ENG 102, and one section of ENG 105, in which all students enrolled in a course were taught within the same shell. We allocated one teacher for every 96 students because teachers at our institution are assigned four sections of 24. Once a class exceeded 96 students, we brought on another teacher to team-teach the course. An example of the largest course in our pilot project was ENG 102, which housed approximately 120 students. Two instructors worked in the same shell together, one teaching his full load and another teaching the equivalent of one section. As an organizing mechanism and to maintain a small classroom feel, those 120 students were divided into cohorts of about 15 students. The other courses, English 101 and 105, were organized similarly; even though these courses had fewer students, we divided the class into cohorts of 15 to maintain an intimate classroom community.

The increased student-to-instructor ratio within the Writers' Studio had the potential to amplify instructor workload, as did the online format of the course. Instructors teaching online for the first time often think that the online format will save time due to the removal of face-to-face time spent in an actual classroom. Perhaps even more prevailing is the notion that students work less in an online classroom; however, the reality is that online courses can, in fact, create more work for both parties. David [Reinheimer \(2005\)](#) indicated that teaching online composition is a grueling process because of the interactive nature of one-to-one instruction:

In addition to group activities such as bulletin board discussions, teaching the writing process requires teaching activities—providing feedback, conferencing, and so on—that are one-on-one events. Thus, in an online student-centered paradigm, a teacher's workload is more likely defined by the individual student rather than the class as a whole. (p. 460)

Recognizing Reinheimer's claims, when redesigning our new first-year composition courses, we had to think about ways to manage the workload of online instruction. The answer was the incorporation of teaching assistants, or what we call instructional assistants (IAs). Adding IAs to the online classroom allowed teachers to have access to upper-level writing majors and education honors students who, once trained for the course curriculum, could help enhance student learning and support teachers to manage their workloads. To ensure that our first-year students would receive the

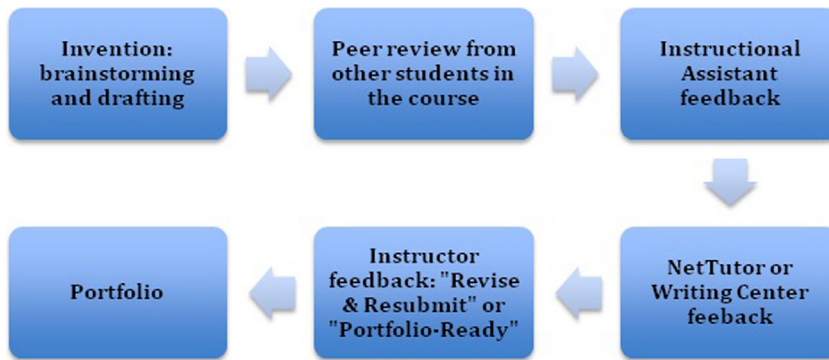


Fig. 1. Flowchart of student feedback cycle.

individual attention they needed, within our pilot project, an IA was assigned to a cohort of 15 students. Because there were approximately 200 students in our pilot, we worked with a total of 14 IAs in one semester with one IA assigned to each cohort.

Another reason for assigning an IA to each cohort was because the overall curricular structure of the course also posed a potential workload increase. The redesigned curriculum incorporated more opportunities for students to receive feedback by increasing the required number of drafts that a student would produce for each project. In the previous, traditional model of one teacher to 24 students in a face-to-face or online course, most of the teachers had asked students to develop rough, revised, and final drafts; whereas, in the redesigned course, we separated the revised draft from an edited, or copyediting, draft so that students could focus on surface feature issues beyond the step of revision. In the Writers' Studio, students generated a minimum of four drafts for each project: rough draft, revised draft, editing draft, and a "portfolio-ready" copy that often moved back through the revision and editing cycles. To promote a learner-centered environment, we had students produce metacognitive reflections for each project as a way for them to assess their own learning of the project outcomes, building up to the course outcomes: the Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement (WPA OS) (CWPA, 2014) and Habits of Mind from the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (CWPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011).

In addition to multiple drafts and self-assessment reflections, another contributing factor of instructional support needed per student was the requirement of multimodal composition. According to Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe (2007), multimodal assignments are "texts that exceed the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music and sound" (p. 1). For all major projects, students developed multimodal texts, including print, sound, and electronic projects, choosing their genre and medium based on their choice of audience, purpose, and rhetorical situation. As a capstone project, each student demonstrated understanding of the course outcomes in an electronic portfolio. With an increase in draft production combined with the multimodal element, perhaps the most challenging aspect was to establish equitable workload for faculty and still provide students with timely feedback.

Because instructors could not feasibly review multiple drafts of each project for every student, the drafts received feedback from a variety of sources. To offset instructor workload and facilitate student learning, we turned to both local and global sources to support feedback on the multiple drafts of each project. On the first draft, students received feedback from peers within the course; on the revised draft, the instructional assistants offered feedback. Students would seek support on editing issues from either the university's writing center or NetTutor, a tutoring service free to students with the purchase of their textbook. The fourth draft received feedback from the instructor(s) of the course. This draft provided students with a status of "revise and resubmit" or "portfolio-ready." See Fig. 1 for clarification on the feedback cycle:

The final draft appeared in the course portfolio with the multiple drafts as evidence of process; at the end of the semester, the instructor graded the portfolio, which accounted for 40% of the students' course grades. Again, the use of IAs was central to the timely facilitation of feedback, especially when students had to move back through the "revise and resubmit" process, which improved instruction through more opportunities to practice writing.

Timely feedback is important in any writing course, whether online or face-to-face; therefore, the IAs provided a valuable benefit to students and instructors. Students agreed that timely feedback was imperative to their success, as was suggested by Patricia Webb Boyd (2008). Boyd claimed that students are often dissatisfied with the frequency and type of instructor feedback they receive (2008, p. 229). Students want feedback on drafts before they turn in their

final projects; however, in online classes where students write multiple drafts for each project, instructor feedback on every draft is simply not possible with the number of students assigned to any teacher, no matter how she manages her time. In the Writers' Studio, the IAs provided what instructors could not: a chance for students to receive an extra round of feedback during the actual process of writing. The demand for quality and timely feedback indicated that we would need IAs who were knowledgeable and successful in time management; thus, we needed to locate and prepare IAs prior to their work with students within the course.

2. Locating, screening, and preparing instructional assistants

To first locate potential IAs, we advertised for an internship position by providing the university's internship coordinators and targeted program heads with detailed descriptions of IA responsibilities. Some students self-selected the internship from the university's website, while other interns were recommended or encouraged by advisors, coordinators, or faculty members. All applicants were required to submit a writing sample, transcripts, and a letter of intent with a résumé. If the student was an English or education major with a 3.5 or higher cumulative GPA, the student was interviewed for the position. The interview was a two-part process in that the student was not only interviewed, but also asked to provide comments on a sample student writing project. The commenting exercise offered insight into the IAs' prior knowledge of written feedback; their responses also provided a basis for further instruction for the IAs. Once hired, the IAs received a series of orientation sessions in multiple stages, starting with an overview of the Writers' Studio course and workshops on giving student feedback. While working in the newly redesigned courses, IAs attended instructional meetings with teachers of first-year courses and participated in an internship course that mirrored the curriculum of a teaching practicum. The internship was a three credit-hour course; students could enroll for a total of six credits over two semesters if they were successful in the first term as an IA.

2.1. Preparing instructional assistants: Part I—"The orientation"

Before enrolling in the internship course, which is similar to a teaching assistant practicum with a service component of first-year composition classroom work experience, IAs were required to attend a programmatic orientation. The orientation was roughly eight hours of training offered in segments. There were several informational tasks covered to provide a foundational knowledge of the course and IA responsibilities. These included an introduction to the first-year composition Writers' Studio model; a tour of the course shell where the IAs would be working; an in-depth understanding of the WPA OS; textbook distribution and technology demonstration of the electronic textbook component; and an overview of the expectations of the internship practicum. Because the IAs would be viewing student records, a discussion of FERPA was held prior to the IAs signing contracts about understanding and honoring student privacy. The IAs met with the teacher to whom they were assigned to become familiar with the writing projects for the semester. The remainder of the orientation was spent working in small groups to develop an understanding of the different types of feedback, with emphasis on how to provide feedback to writers of multimodal documents. In the initial pilot semester, instructional assistants were mostly encouraged to give written feedback to students; however, the Writers' Studio program has since asked IAs to vary their approaches to feedback, including the use of Jing to create interactive suggestions through video.

Specifically, the faculty wanted to familiarize IAs with giving feedback regarding students' rhetorical choices when drafting their projects. With the WPA OS as the first-year composition course goals at our institution, there was specific attention to engaging students in making rhetorical decisions. One critical aspect of rhetorical decisions in every project was that students had to determine an appropriate format, or genre, to develop in response to the writing assignment. A central concept of rhetorical knowledge is to engage students in the fundamentals of rhetoric. Lester Faigley (2003) asked teachers to

think about rhetoric in much broader terms. We have no justification aside from disciplinary baggage to restrict our conception of rhetoric to words alone. More important, this expansion is necessary if we are to make good on our claims of preparing students to engage in public discourse. (p. 187)

Faigley encouraged teachers to think about the purpose of teaching students to compose beyond their immediate needs at the university. The purposes extended beyond the academy, so the types of documents students developed in the Writers' Studio exceeded text-based projects, such as the exclusive production of essays.

To narrow the gap between what students come to college knowing, what they will need to know throughout college, and what will serve them for life beyond college, “compositionists should conceive of multimodal composition assignments as having wide-ranging and forward-thinking parameters, in order to invite the greatest possible range of student responses” (Bickmore & Christiansen, 2010, p. 230). The writing projects assigned in the Writers’ Studio presented students with ways to engage their critical thinking skills in determining how best to respond to the rhetorical situation as presented in the writing assignment. First-year writers could develop a blog, website, news article, or sound portrait (to name a few).

While multimodal composition may be new to first-year composition students and require them to step outside of their comfort zone, multimodal composition also can be new to instructors, and teachers may feel nervous about their responses to such projects. In fact, Elizabeth Murray, Hailey Sheets, & Nicole Williams (2010) indicated that many teachers are uncomfortable with assessing multimodal projects. As Murray, Sheets, and Williams argued, developing a detailed rubric that entails the main goals or outcomes of the project can guide teachers when offering feedback regardless of the genre or medium used. Because the instructional assistants may have been unfamiliar with production of multimodal documents and responding to multimodal writing assignments, the IA orientation focused heavily on methods for responding to multimodal documents through using rubrics that corresponded to each writing project as a guide.

During the orientation, the instructional assistants were given first-year composition assignment overviews, including the corresponding rubrics, and sample student projects that responded to the assignments. Examples were provided in each of the three mediums (print, electronic, and sound). The IAs were divided into teams and assigned a project with an example. A faculty member worked with each team in order to assist the IAs in providing a combination of directive and facilitative feedback on the project. The orientation invited IAs to work collaboratively in small groups to provide collective feedback on the project assigned to the team. Many of the IAs who were upper division students had only previously received directive feedback, so they typically began this exercise by pointing out ways to change or improve the text. They were often unfamiliar with facilitative feedback, which prompts an author to make decisions and gives the writer freedom to make choices. While directive feedback can be helpful, facilitative feedback is also critical for students to make the decisions for themselves and have the ability to critically reflect on the rhetorical aspects of a project’s production.

In support of illustrating learner-centered pedagogy, the IAs discussed suggestions of improvement for the student sample, and then an assigned faculty member assisted IAs with methods for offering facilitative feedback. Once the team determined strengths of the example project, along with opportunities to improve through questions that would prompt the author to make decisions, the team presented their findings to the larger group. Throughout and after the presentations, the internship director and the faculty members hosted a discussion regarding the “best practices” for responding to first-year composition multimodal projects. The orientation was held prior to the start of the semester, and instruction for working within the first-year composition courses continued throughout the semester in the form of a portfolio workshop and bi-weekly meetings with the Writers’ Studio teachers.

2.2. Preparing instructional assistants: Part II—“Portfolio workshop”

Once the IAs had a strong understanding of the course goals and projects, along with methods for offering feedback, we hosted a workshop on the first-year composition portfolio. The capstone project in first-year composition was an electronic course portfolio, or eportfolio, which accounted for the majority of the first-year writers’ course grades. Since the portfolio was a substantial portion of the grade, first-year students were asked to work on the portfolio throughout the semester and submit drafts of the portfolio. Both instructors and IAs provided feedback on the early drafts of the portfolio. To prepare IAs with the skills to respond to student portfolios, the internship director offered a workshop within the first few weeks of classes, prior to the first portfolio draft deadline. IAs were provided with a descriptive explanation of the learning outcomes and samples of successful portfolios from previous students. The IAs were asked to look closely at how the portfolio was successfully making a claim in response to the learning outcomes and offering evidence to support the claim.

For the portfolio format, we adopted a variation of the portfolio pedagogy that Edward White (2005) described in “The Scoring of Portfolios: Phase 2,” wherein he argued for students incorporating in-depth written responses to the course goals. Such cover letters are both reflective and rhetorical, and they give students agency in their own education

and assessment. As White stated, “[S]tudents should be involved with reflection about and assessment of their own work” (2005, p. 583). In our first-year composition courses, students constructed course portfolios based on the WPA OS. In their portfolios, students made the following case: “In light of the learning outcomes for this course, here is what I have learned. Further, I offer the following evidence to document that I have learned what I claim to have learned.” The WPA OS included five areas of learning: 1) Rhetorical Knowledge; 2) Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; 3) Processes; 4) Knowledge of Conventions; and 5) Composing in Electronic Environments. Additionally, students were asked to account for the eight Habits of Mind within the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. White recommended the use of a scoring guide, or rubric, to provide feedback; as part of the preparation for working as an IA in the Writers’ Studio, the IAs were provided four to five example portfolios with the portfolio rubric, combined with instruction on how to provide feedback to the first-year writers.

We devoted an entire workshop to the evaluation of eportfolios because of the differences in assessment practices between print portfolios and electronic hypertext formats. Pamela Takayoshi (1996) suggested that students may be unfamiliar with the processes of creating electronic texts and may need prompting to consider the “unconscious and unrecognized features” (p. 248) associated with hypertext writing. As such, IA feedback can help students consider their visual rhetorical choices, providing a new lens for students when viewing and revising their eportfolios. In addition, Takayoshi noted that hypertext has changed the very notion of writing, as the reader of such texts now becomes the writer as well, “creating the shape of the text through the choices he or she makes” (1996, p. 251). Because the reader of electronic documents is the reader *and* the writer, the IAs’ feedback was especially influential in the process of drafting the eportfolios. The IA feedback would mean that students received feedback from a real audience on the process of their electronic text, an aspect that Takayoshi claimed was often missing in the development of eportfolios due to the fluid nature of electronic publishing. Feedback throughout the creation process would ensure that the IAs were helping students consider unfamiliar visual rhetorical choices.

2.3. *Preparing instructional assistants: Part III—“Bi-weekly meetings with teachers”*

At the orientation, the IAs were paired with a first-year composition classroom teacher with whom they would work throughout the semester. The teachers met with those assigned to their classes not only at the orientation to provide an overview of their specific course writing assignments, but also throughout the semester, usually face-to-face but sometimes via telephone or Skype conferences. The purpose of the meetings was to troubleshoot any general concerns, address pedagogical strategies for the particular project at hand, offer mentoring, and norm project feedback. For example, teachers would give IAs sample student projects before the meetings and ask the IAs to give feedback. At the meetings, the teachers would discuss the feedback with the IAs and collaboratively determine what suggestions would most benefit the first-year student. The meetings were intended to foster relationships not only with the first-year composition teacher, but also among the IA team. Teachers also coached individual IAs between the meetings if necessary.

Just like any other teaching assistant, the instructional assistants within the Writers’ Studio were managing full course loads and sometimes full-time jobs while determining post-graduate options, so support inside the first-year composition classroom, in the internship course, and at additional meetings and contacts was critical to the IAs’ success. The intention of a touch point for the IAs with the classroom teachers was to keep consistency within the instructional team and provide a level of comfort for the IA. These meetings also allowed the instructor to provide feedback, based on the questions of the IAs, to the internship director on what additional theory may be useful in the semester-long practicum in which the IAs were concurrently enrolled.

3. **The instructional assistant practicum**

Beyond the program orientations and training workshops, the IAs were required to enroll in an internship course comparable to a teaching practicum. This course was taught by one of the instructors of the pilot program, and the practicum was included in her normal teaching load. This course offered semester-long training to the instructional assistants with the internship director. The internship course was offered fully online as were the first-year composition courses. As Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann Powers (2005) stated, teaching online requires immersion. Hewett and Powers added that teachers have a need “to share experiences and have contact with their colleagues. Teamwork,

mentoring relationships, and supportive encouragement can be especially vital to online instructors as they develop successful practices and navigate technological challenges” (Association section, para. 1). Therefore, IAs were provided not only collective training, but also individual support and opportunities for application much like students in a graduate-level teaching practicum.

Throughout the practicum, the IAs earned internship credit while gaining experience in the field of teaching. In the same semester that the IA took the practicum, she would be working with an assigned teacher in a first-year course, providing students with feedback on drafts, facilitating discussions, helping the instructor with tracking student progress, and notifying students of upcoming or missed deadlines. The practicum course informed the instructional assistants’ work in the first-year courses in the study of rhetorical, composition, and peer tutoring theory to ensure that the first-year composition students were receiving facilitative feedback that would help them improve their writing. Although the training in the practicum course was similar for all students, the bi-weekly meetings with individual teachers ensured that they were receiving individual mentorship specific to each course (ENG 101, 102, and 105).

The idea of a teaching practicum is not new, as many institutions around the country implement a course for graduate students to receive professional development in the field of rhetoric and composition. As these courses have been a long-standing practice at institutions, so too is the debate regarding theory versus pedagogy in the practicum. For instance, in *The Allyn and Bacon Teaching Assistant’s Handbook*, Steven Wilhoit (2002) claimed that while most early practica focused on pedagogy, today’s practicum places emphasis on the theory that informs the practice of teaching (p. 17). The debate is further illustrated in Sidney Dobrin’s (2005) introductory book, *Don’t Call It That*, as he traced the history of the debate and the arguments within, ultimately challenging his readers to reconsider “what is and what can be done in specific practica” (p. 30). Considering Dobrin’s challenge, our practicum for the Writers’ Studio blended theory and practice and offered an element that other courses in professional development might not—the theory and practice of teaching *online*.

Barb Blakely Duffelmeyer (2003) stated that the experience of first-time TAs in many ways mirrors the experience of first-year composition students. “Specifically,” she stated, “both groups of beginners are working within initially uncomfortable but ultimately developmentally positive levels of ambiguity, multiplicity, and open-endedness” (p. 296). Duffelmeyer added that “[f]or the new TA, the new teaching role is both enriched and problematized by the integration of computers in our composition pedagogy” (p. 296). While the situation Duffelmeyer described in her article is different, these same principles apply: We were working with first-time assistants and needed to educate them not only to be able to provide assistance, but also to do so in the “problematized” world of an online class. As Hewett and Powers (2007) pointed out, “professionals cannot rely solely on methods deemed successful in conventional, brick-and-mortar situations; they need instructional approaches that address distinctive qualities of teaching and learning online.” The authors added, “[O]nline educators need training for the practical and theoretical transfer of pedagogical principles to online environments” (p. 1). Likewise, while our IAs would not be online tutors in the traditional sense, we had the same concerns as Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch and Sam Racine (2000) when they pointed out that “online writing tutors need training specific to online writing spaces” (p. 246, emphasis removed); however, we also recognized, as they did, that “although online tutoring and face-to-face tutoring occupy different spaces, the same pedagogical goals—namely, student-centered, process-based pedagogy—can be facilitated equally well in both mediums” (p. 246). Therefore, we were striving to offer a practicum that helped the IAs not only understand composition and peer-tutoring theory, but also how to apply the theories in an online learning environment.

3.1. Goals of the practicum

The practicum was designed to provide students with basic principles and theories of instructional practices associated with providing effective, facilitative feedback to first-year composition students. Course activities included readings, discussion posts, and a portfolio with samples of work, including reflection letters. The goals of the course indicated the instructional assistants would:

- Learn and use composition and peer-tutoring theories
- Aid first-year composition students in improving their writing practices and processes
- Gain experience in teaching writing

- Assess students' learning and evaluate current theory regarding instructional practices
- Apply strategies for promoting participation and enhancing student learning

Our intention was that instructional assistants would reduce teacher workload within the Writers' Studio and gain experience teaching online that would serve them well in either graduate school or their careers beyond academia. As online education continues to grow, it becomes imperative that we prepare our future teachers with the skills they need to succeed, and working as instructional assistants within the course was an early introduction to not only teaching, but also online teaching in a non-threatening way. For any upper-division students interested in a career in teaching or in studying English at the graduate level, the internships provided training that was scarcely available to undergraduates, and in some cases even to master's degree students. The work is comparable to what graduate TAs do, and the internships provided an educational first step for students on the journey to become teachers, tutors, or English scholars.

Practica often teach the history of composition as well as classical and modern rhetoric, building on the foundations of our field to inform the TAs' practice. As these were undergraduate students in varying disciplines who had little experience teaching, we started the course with a discussion of instructor feedback, evaluating differences in the examples found in Richard Straub's *A Sourcebook for Responding to Writing* (1999). From this text, students learned how to ask questions of students' texts rather than providing directive feedback. From texts such as C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon's "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts" (1982), the IAs learned how to let students have their own voice in the writing process and to not impose their own "Ideal Text" on the students. In addition, students also read Beth Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference* (2010), a text that outlined online teaching pedagogy, complete with the theory that informs online education, as well as student-instructor examples of online interaction in discussion posts and online conferences.

The professional development offered in the Writers' Studio internship was tailored to the tasks the IAs were being asked to perform, so the emphasis of theory and discussion focused on feedback and multimodal composition; however, since IAs developed their own course portfolios reflecting on their learning in the role of facilitators, the curriculum was expanded to include handling student conflict in the classroom, developing presence and authority in the classroom, and grading, or norming, sessions. While the heavy lifting of teacher responsibility remained on the shoulders of the classroom teachers, the IAs were provided a bird's eye view of teacher roles and viewpoints.

3.2. Analyzing and critiquing the first-year composition curriculum

Toward the end of the practicum, IAs were asked to provide feedback regarding the curriculum of the first-year composition courses. Because they worked closely with students and saw firsthand what students struggled with the most, their feedback was helpful in assessing the pilot courses and implementing changes. Many of the IAs indicated that students struggled with the concept of peer review and suggested that instructors offer them models or clear instructions on how to provide adequate, constructive feedback for their peers. Additionally, IAs indicated how a student sometimes felt overwhelmed with the semester's work being accessible all at once, so before the second semester of the pilot year, the curriculum development team implemented checkpoints that locked content. The checkpoints required a first-year student to demonstrate understanding of assignment details and textbook content prior to having access to discussion and draft spaces. This proved beneficial for the first-year students. The IAs offered faculty members invaluable feedback that ultimately enhanced the Writers' Studio curriculum.

3.3. Enhancing the first-year composition curriculum

To offer IAs experience with designing curriculum and to provide first-year composition students advice from experienced, upper-division writers, we asked the IAs to identify gaps needed to enhance the curriculum. Specifically, we asked the IAs to write "how-to" guides that would teach students about peer review in online spaces. The IAs designed a multitude of genres from traditional, print-based texts to audio-narrated PowerPoints. Additionally, the IAs had the opportunity to further engage students in course content through the multimodal delivery of instruction, as they participated in video production. Lastly, IAs developed instructional content to more clearly explain the importance of a semester-long capstone project, the course portfolio.

3.4. Reflections on the IA practicum

The practicum was structured around [Mary Huba and Jann Freed's \(2000\)](#) idea of a learner-centered classroom, where students assess their own learning. Following this principle, IAs were required to build an electronic portfolio that illustrated their learning of the practicum outcomes. At the end of the semester, the IAs chose five samples of student responses they felt best represented their capabilities with providing feedback to the first-year composition students. Instructional assistants were asked to write metacognitive reflections for each sample and discuss how the samples indicated their learning of the course outcomes.

The electronic portfolio in the internship course provided an opportunity for IAs to assess their learning and gave them insight into what was expected of our first-year composition students for the eportfolio assignment. Rosemary (Gates) [Winslow \(2005\)](#) claimed that using a portfolio in a practicum course allows the graduate assistants to learn how writing happens, how to receive feedback, and how to shape and keep shaping their writing according to the feedback provided. She suggested that in her own practicum, after drafting their portfolios, the graduate students knew how to better guide their students' writing and revising. The portfolio, as a large document that showcases learning and writing skills, can sometimes be daunting, and to Winslow's students, experiencing this fear made them more in tune to the fears first-year composition students often face. In this sense, the electronic portfolio was an essential component to our practicum. The electronic portfolio provided instructional assistants with greater skills in responding to students, as well as a sense of empathy toward first-year students, as they learned to work with students to reduce their fear of writing and build their confidence.

4. Instructional assistants in the composition classroom

The use of instructional assistants was critical in being able to not only increase the student-to-teacher ratio, but also manage the tasks required from teachers, which impacted workloads. Teachers in online courses often have more demands than face-to-face teachers for a multitude of reasons, including varying times of student access, the use of technology, and students' needs. As Linda [Boynton \(2002\)](#) indicated, a wider spectrum of students is attracted to online education, and the students' needs and academic background are diverse. It was also the presence of IAs that helped us to be proactive in identifying underperforming or non-participatory students.

As the service component of the internship course, the IAs were assigned to work with first-year composition teachers. The IAs were assigned to the courses based on enrollment in ENG 101, 102, and 105, ranging from two IAs in one course to eight in another, or one IA for every 15 first-year writers. For each group, the IA assisted the instructor in facilitating discussion in the online forums, overseeing peer review, and—perhaps most importantly—providing feedback on students' revised drafts. First-year students were able to receive additional feedback on more drafts of each project due to the presence of IAs because unlike peer reviewers, IAs, like writing center tutors, had experience as writers and a grasp of rhetorical concepts. Instructional assistants were comparable, in some ways, to traditional teaching assistants in a large lecture course who oversee discussion groups, provide feedback to students on individual projects, and offer a peer mentoring relationship to students. On a day-to-day basis, IAs actively facilitated the students' online discussion forums, answered general questions about the course, responded to students' reading responses, and helped the instructor maintain the grade book for all of this work. IAs often communicated via email and discussion boards with students, providing important mentorship. They also had their fingers on the pulse of who was falling behind and could help the instructor reach out to students who needed extra help in an effort to increase retention. In the next section, we describe how first-year students responded to the presence of the IAs in the composition courses.

4.1. Facilitating discussion groups

Laurie [Olson-Horswill \(2002\)](#) argued that “teaching and learning in [an online] setting can be even more interactive and personal than a traditional classroom” (p. 188). By incorporating instructional assistants, we sought to maximize the effectiveness of the groups, which allowed students to have a knowledgeable peer mentor providing help in addition to the instructor. As Olson-Horswill stated, “For any writing group to be effective, students need to feel safe to express themselves” (2002, p. 189). Involving IAs in our groups created a comfortable online environment where students could feel safe in participating.

For each of the major projects, first-year composition students were asked to participate in two discussion threads. The instructors provided prompts and detailed instructions for each discussion, explaining how they were relevant to the course material. Each student was expected to write an initial post for each thread and respond to a peer's posting. While this was the minimum requirement, the IAs were able to keep the students asking questions and posting material, so the forum resembled a true discussion space and not a place where students would simply make the requisite deposit and log out. In her end-of-the-semester reflection, one student¹ noted, "The discussion boards were also helpful in the writing process because peers were able to write about their ideas which helped me think of ideas to write about and things to add in my writings to improve my pieces." The IAs were integral in facilitating the types of helpful discussions this student refers to.

4.2. *Responding to revised drafts*

While maintaining student progress on participation and facilitating discussion were valuable contributions that the IAs made, their greatest impact on student learning came from responding to drafts of the students' writing projects. As mentioned earlier, IAs studied composition and peer-tutoring theory and were influenced by [Knoblauch and Brannon \(1982\)](#), as well as [Straub \(1999\)](#), to provide facilitative comments that would allow students to maintain ownership of their ideas. In other words, the IAs tried to assist the students to achieve their ambitions for the projects, not impose an "Ideal Text" upon the students' papers.

This additional step in the drafting process was particularly helpful for first-year composition students as well as the instructor. The extra round of review helped first-year students to continue revising and re-envisioning what they had written before turning in the instructor draft. If students were having trouble deciding what medium they wanted to use to produce their compositions, the IAs would discuss audience and purpose with them, leading them to make decisions based on their choices. Additionally, if students had completed drafts of their multimodal texts, the IAs would help them figure out ways to ensure that the modes worked better together in their multimodal documents. Finally, if students had completely misunderstood the parameters of the assignment, the IA would have conversations to get them back on track. To this end, the extra round the IAs provided was invaluable as it gave students additional exposure to writing feedback from knowledgeable peer mentors. While the university's writing center (in face-to-face and online formats) was available to students as an option, as was a publisher-provided online tutoring program, receiving feedback from an IA was required. The benefit of IAs opposed to the writing center was that IAs possessed specialized training on responding to the projects of the course, and the IAs were clear on the faculty expectations, which isn't always the case with outside responders.

In their reflection letters at the end of the semester, several first-year composition students expressed thankfulness that the IAs had been so helpful. For example, one student stated:

As writing and English classes have never come easy for me, I am quite aware that in order to have completed a successful text, multiple drafts are necessary. However, I have never taken part in an English class like this one; where there are so many opportunities to have your work reviewed.

The student added that she "enjoyed receiving input from [her] classmates"; however, she stated, "This is my first class which has had instructional assistants. I thought it was extremely helpful to receive constructive criticism from another knowledgeable source to really fine tune the project before turning in the final draft to the professor." She noted that the most difficult project for her was the first, a writing-to-convince essay that went through five major draft changes, made possible by the multiple rounds of feedback—both optional and required—that were available to the students. "If we were not given the opportunities to receive the feedback that we did," she stated, "I can honestly say that my projects would not be what they are now. I would have felt a lot more anxious turning in the final drafts had I not received multiple opinions on what needed revision."

Peer review can be valuable, but as any composition instructor knows, it can also be unproductive and sometimes not as helpful as it should be. Novice writers taking their first or second college-level writing classes can offer suggestions and observations; however, a more skilled writer who has experience and specialization in the discipline can give more depth of critical analysis. During peer review, a student who fails to comprehend the assignment or who has not met

¹ All student comments used in this article were obtained with IRB approval.

all the goals for the project can still slip through. Most teachers have experienced the head-scratching phenomenon of students who turn final drafts in that are not what the assignment asked for, even though several peers in the course responded to the papers. IAs are more likely to catch such cases. In fact, in the rare instances where our Writers' Studio teachers received drafts that did not fulfill the goals of the assignment, the IAs had brought this to the students' attention, but the students had chosen—for whatever reason—to ignore the comments. More frequently, however, the IAs pointed out the ways students deviated from their task, and the students were thankful for the guidance.

For example, one student in the advanced course, ENG 105, had participated in peer review for a visual analysis assignment without addressing a major goal of the assignment: explaining the use of ethos, pathos, and logos in the image being analyzed. The instructional assistant pointed out that “the focus of [her] paper needs to be on the three styles of rhetoric (ethos, pathos, logos) and how these styles are evident in the advertisement and how they effectively or insufficiently appeal to the audience” (her parentheses, our brackets). The student admitted in her reflection that she was surprised by the news. “I had a slight freak-out moment as I frantically searched my brain for the meaning of these terms from the text book readings,” she stated, adding that the IA gave her an example to help her understand how she should be explaining and exploring the use of the appeals. She added:

During the drafting portion of my project, I had a hard time trying to use these words in my sentences. I was at that point where I was already satisfied with my draft (grr dumb pride!) and couldn't find happiness with the additions to my paper. I, again, referred to [the instructional assistant's] words of wisdom and made it over the drafting hump. I was thankful he gave me the. . . example. (student's parentheses, our brackets)

Therefore, the use of IAs in our first-year composition classes provided students with substantive feedback on their drafts even if the peer-review round was insufficient and, at the same time, relieved the burden from the lead instructor to have to provide that round of feedback.

One of the main goals of the course (established in one of the five sections of the WPA Outcomes Statement) was to help students understand writing as a process and see the value in revision, multiple drafts, and crafting their work through rewriting. Several students emphasized that the multiple drafts, and particularly the assistance from IAs, helped them come to this conclusion. For example, one student stated:

My first draft was viewed by my peers with the intention of following a peer review with a set of questions about the proposed paper; the second was revised by the instructional assistants for clarity and to make sure all questions and prompts were answered to and everything needed was touched on, and the third by the textbook website to check for grammar and spelling. With each draft came a different review. This helped to see all aspects of the paper and to really construct the best paper. After this class, I know that several drafts are necessary if you want to achieve the best outcome.

Another student stated that she had already recognized the importance of drafts and feedback, but the class reinforced this belief. She stated, “Input from others is so beneficial and it really is part of a process that I have come to value even more than I did before starting this class—and that was a lot!”

Our students' comments suggested that the IA feedback was imperative to their success as writers. These findings closely align with Edward Barrett's results as reported in “*Collaboration in the Electronic Classroom*” (1993). In a study of his own online class, Barrett found that students were more engaged with the material and were prompted to write and revise more when given consistent feedback on drafts. From his students' comments, Barrett argued that increased feedback from peers helps online students develop an intellectual feel for discussion, and the dialogue that occurs during multiple rounds of feedback ultimately improves their writing skills. As evidenced by our first-year students, we suggest that consistent feedback from IAs, whether during discussion boards or on feedback regarding drafts, helped our students learn the value of critique during the learning process and enhanced their overall experience in the online classroom.

4.3. *Developing supportive relationships with first-year writers*

Each IA facilitated the discussion boards, responded to drafts, and managed the peer feedback within their groups; therefore, they were intimately knowledgeable about the work of each student within their cohort. The instructor then was able to work to oversee the class as a whole. Students often asked questions that the IAs were unable to answer, or problems would arise that only the instructor could solve. On occasion, a student would respond to the IAs in a

disrespectful manner, and the instructor would have to step in and talk to the student about maintaining a respectful atmosphere in an online class, referring them to the rules of “netiquette” established within the online community; however, for the most part, the model allowed the teachers to handle a large number of students without their time being consumed by questions that other members of the instructional team could answer. While a business model isn’t entirely an accurate analogy here, one could think of the instructor as the supervisor and the IAs as sectional leaders, or managers, of their groups. Of course, the supervisor needs to be consulted and to have a hand in what is going on (and, of course, read and comment on the final drafts of the projects), but she doesn’t need to address every concern from each student.

The IAs not only maintained the student progress for their sections, gave feedback on papers, and facilitated discussions, but also developed relationships with the students. One student, for example, stated in her end-of-the-semester portfolio, “This class would not have been the same without the help of the IA instructors.” The student singled out the IA who oversaw her group and stated, “Overall, he was a tremendous resource and I am grateful for his knowledge.” Such responses were common among the reflection letters in the final portfolios; moreover, the instructors felt that the IAs were a tremendous benefit as well. The internship director asked the first-year composition instructors to write brief summaries of the work their IAs completed. Here is one example:

[The IA] was a wonderful addition to the English 102 team. She gave thorough feedback to the students and went the extra mile to help students who were struggling. She was an active participant in our meetings, asking insightful questions and offering advice. I enjoyed getting to know her during the semester, and if she pursues a career as a writing teacher, as she plans, then I know she will be successful. [She] is thoughtful and intelligent, and the Writers’ Studio team will benefit greatly by her return in the spring semester.

These comments serve as a reminder that the internship provided a beneficial service not only to the students enrolled in the class, but also to the instructor teaching it.

5. Implications of working with instructional assistants

As mentioned previously, the Writers’ Studio was originally intended to save the university money and was the impetus for creating a program with mega-sections. Although the model slightly reduced instructional costs, our primary goals in the Writers’ Studio classes were to enhance student learning and maintain or decrease instructor workload. In the end, increasing the number of students in one section did save the university money by simply eliminating courses with fewer students that did not meet capacity; however, the monetary benefit was small. Regardless, the program proved successful and has grown significantly since its pilot semester. We believe that the reason for the growth and support from the administration is largely due to the inclusion of the IAs. By providing a sound pedagogical practice within these online classes, more first-year students continue to enroll, and the program has received attention and awards for its curricular innovation. We suggest that others seeking to improve their practices within their local institutions turn to IAs for pedagogical reasons instead of the potential money-saving benefits.

Other implications for incorporating the IAs into online classes include the potential ethical issue of asking undergraduate students to work as interns without compensation. As Katherine Durack (2013) discussed in a recent *College Composition and Communication* article, there are no clear, agreed upon guidelines for universities utilizing unpaid internships, whether offered by universities, nonprofit organizations, or for-profit companies; however, as she states, internship administrators should strive to ensure that unpaid internships are positive educational experiences for the interns. To this end, we want to reiterate the benefit of the internship for not just the instructor of composition, but also the IA interns themselves. Just as the first-year classes need to be pedagogically sound, so too does the internship practicum that accompanies the IAs’ internship. It is imperative that the internship be designed to train and guide students through a theoretical and practical experience that can benefit them in their future careers. In other words, we must provide a valuable learning experience for the IAs. Many of our IAs continued on to graduate programs where they would become teaching assistants, and this opportunity helped give them invaluable experience for teaching their own classes and responding to written and multimodal projects. We suggest that the instructors who wish to incorporate IAs in their online classes provide mentorship and guidance for these students as they seek knowledge and practical skills that will prepare them for a teaching career beyond their academic experience.

6. Conclusion

While it may seem that training instructional assistants would make teaching an online course even more laborious for the already overworked instructor, for programs searching for ways to improve their online practices across many courses, the incorporation of IAs can be a useful solution. Only one faculty member, the internship director, taught the practicum course and oversaw the daily work of the IAs; however, the IAs worked in several first-year composition courses and assisted multiple instructors at the same time. Therefore, the workload for the instructors in each course wasn't increased. Rather, the IAs provided important assistance when managing the responsibility of responding to student drafts and facilitating discussions. Further, the IAs increased the opportunity for students to receive one-on-one attention that could sometimes be diminished in an online classroom.

We certainly don't intend to suggest that teacher-student interaction is sacrificed or that teacher responsibility is somehow transferred to the IAs. The IAs' participation proved to be an integral part of the Writers' Studio to supplement teacher interaction, and the first-year composition students recognized the value of the IAs as well. In fact, in the course evaluations, while students made suggestions for improving the course navigation and clarity of specific concepts, students praised the use of IAs and did not have any suggestions for improving the quality of instruction from the IAs. With the right skills and training, IAs can assist the online instructor and improve the overall quality of online education.

Our experience using instructional assistants in online first-year composition classes at Arizona State University can provide insight for implementing the use of IAs at other institutions; however, we also encourage teacher-scholars to build upon what we have tried to do and further develop and enhance the practice and theory of using IAs to enhance student learning. In an era of cost-saving measures, it's important we continue to find financially viable ways to maintain and improve the student learning experience. We encourage continued conversations among scholars regarding the use of instructional assistants in college classes. We hope that our redesigned course using IAs is not only the beginning of a new program at our institution, but also an inspiration to other universities to begin similar—or perhaps even better—models and share their experiences.

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