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Complementary Learning: Piloting a Blended Format for Canadian Composition Courses

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Complementary Learning: Piloting a Blended Format for Canadian Composition Courses

Abstract
This paper describes a pilot blended learning format for a first-year genre-based Canadian composition course. It measures responses to the online learning materials and hybrid class schedule by comparing student writing skill perception questionnaires, teaching evaluation questionnaires, and written assignments for control and experimental groups. Findings suggest that a blended approach can offer flexibility for a wider range of learners, address larger class size concerns, and provide additional learning materials, all of which add options for composition delivery in the as-yet sparsely researched Canadian context.

Cet article traite d'un format pilote d'apprentissage hybride pour un cours canadien de composition de première année basé sur le genre. Il mesure les réponses à des outils pédagogiques en ligne et à l'emploi du temps des classes hybrides en comparant des questionnaires sur la perception des étudiants en ce qui concerne leurs compétences en rédaction, des questionnaires sur l'évaluation de l'enseignement et des travaux écrits pour les groupes de contrôle et les groupes expérimentaux. Les résultats suggèrent que l'approche hybride peut présenter une certaine flexibilité pour une vaste gamme d'apprenants, qu'elle peut répondre aux problèmes posés par les très grandes classes et offrir des outils pédagogiques supplémentaires. Tout ceci ajoute des options pour l'enseignement de la composition dans le contexte canadien qui fait encore peu l'objet de recherches.

Keywords
blended or hybrid learning, composition, genre theory, Canadian higher education

Cover Page Footnote
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Technological developments over the past decade and a half have led to the increasing use of blended learning resources in a range of higher educational contexts. Blended or hybrid learning is defined as the "integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches" (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008, p. 148). Blended approaches have been widely recognized as offering potential for increasing the relevance and accessibility of course content to students (Kürthen & Smith, 2006). Moreover, blended learning practitioners and educational theorists note the value of these approaches in combining the benefits of face-to-face (F2F) interaction with the time and space for reflection provided by online modes. As Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison (2013) explain, "integrating face-to-face synchronous communication and text-based online asynchronous communication is powerfully complementary for higher educational purposes" (p. 9). While blended learning has been applied in a variety of educational contexts, including language learning and L2 writing situations, research on its use in Canadian first-year composition courses remains sparse.

This lack of information seems worth redressing in that, in composition courses, blended learning offers possibilities to address both increasing student enrollments and pedagogical best practices. Research shows students learn to write best in more intimate, workshop-based environments, yet Canadian post-secondary classes often double (or more) the ideal size of 18-20 students identified by the Association of Departments of English (ADE) (1992) for composition learning. The ADE's rationale for this recommendation focuses on the

> complex interaction between writer and reader. Students write; teachers respond. But a teacher's response must be more than 'correcting' and more than perfunctory grading. Evaluations must involve a detailed reaction, often in conference with the student, to each piece of writing. (para. 5)

Such detailed and individualized reactions take time, requiring smaller classes with frequent writing opportunities. Yet, nation-wide, Canadian composition classes range in size from 20-140 students with an average of 41 (UBC English program, unpublished survey, 2012). For most Canadian post-secondary institutions, class sizes of twenty are fiscally impossible, so that research on more effective formats for larger composition classes is required. Simultaneously, demand for successful and relevant composition instruction is increasing within Canadian universities. My own search of 64 public Anglophone and bilingual 2017-18 Canadian university calendars found 53 institutions offered courses specifically in composition, many identifying a focus on academic writing. As noted in previous research (Brooks, 2002; Graves, 1993), these courses appear in diverse institutional contexts, but they do exist in significant numbers and are often identified as first-year requirements.[1] In delivering these courses, as a number of writing program administrators and composition instructors have noted, "a delicate balance exists between the student's need for a satisfactory and effective learning experience, and the institution's need for efficiency" (Waddoups, Hatch, & Butterworth, 2003, p. 271). Blended learning, which can offer opportunities to re-structure class time for more hands-on, individualized feedback and offer online opportunities for writing practice, is a viable model to address the current class sizes while still providing effective instruction. Moreover, writing in the disciplines is a second area of concern for many Canadian curriculum committees and writing programmes. Often, existing writing classes

[1] The forms of writing instruction at Canadian institutions can, and have been, a study in itself (see Graves, 1993). I excluded any courses from my count that were not described as primarily about writing instruction (e.g., courses in literature with a writing component).

take a humanities-based approach to style and rhetoric, likely due to instructors' humanities backgrounds, so that students in the sciences and social sciences may be underprepared for discipline-specific writing tasks (Smith, 2006). Blended learning offers exciting possibilities for creating a dialogue between disciplines, allowing instructors from other areas of the university to record reflections or insights on writing in their disciplines, which students could access as relevant. Teaching discipline-specific writing skills outside the classroom, or flipping the delivery of those topics, allows students to cover the discipline(s) relevant to them. This is an aspect of composition teaching that can be difficult to do within a F2F format, since most first-year writing courses are not streamed by discipline and include students from across the university.

Despite some intriguing studies on the potential of blended learning for online writing (e.g., McCarthy, 2010; Nückles, Schwonke, Berthold, & Renkl, 2004), L2 learning (e.g., McCarthy, 2010; Shih, 2011), and U.S. composition courses (e.g., Cavanaugh, 2011; Gouge, 2009; Reardon, 2016; Waddoups et al., 2003; Warnock, 2009), blended learning as an integrated approach in Canadian university composition classes remains under-researched. This article reports on a blended learning experience within a multi-disciplinary first year composition course at the University of British Columbia. This exploratory pilot study began from the supposition that putting some course content online (grammar instruction, rhetorical models, disciplinary information, and opportunities for writing) would allow class time to be spent more productively on discussion, workshop, and formative feedback exercises. Students would be able to access the content as needed while completing writing assignments and be able to more meaningfully engage with discipline-specific writing using a larger range of learning tools. The hypothesis is that these elements will result in more flexible learning opportunities, improved application of the course material, and hence better writing skills.

Literature Review

Existing research suggests that the relevance of the content and the flexibility offered in blended learning environments lead to greater student success and retention (Cavanaugh, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education's (2010) wide-ranging meta-analysis of online learning studies, for instance, has shown both that "students in online conditions performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same materials through traditional face-to-face instruction" (p. xiv) and that "instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage relative to purely face-to-face instruction than did purely online instruction" (p. xv). A recent Canadian report similarly found that F2F interactions were necessary within online academic literacy courses to "effectively offer feedback to students and provide reassurance" (Scott, Ribiero, Burns, Danyluk, & Bodnaresko, 2017, p. 6). In other words, blended learning can combine the best of both worlds, allowing the technology to complement F2F instruction. It appears to overcome the isolation and lack of motivation encountered by some learners in online environments, while allowing more in-depth and self-directed learning than the traditional F2F environment. Blended courses must, however, be designed thoughtfully, as a range of literature on best practices in hybrid contexts has shown. Vaughn et al.'s (2013) seminal Canadian-based work, for example, advocates a community of inquiry approach built around principles of social interaction and collaboration. They stress that thoughtful integration of F2F and computer-mediated approaches must be reached, so that technology is used for pedagogical reasons and class interactions can be meaningful. Patricia Webb Boyd (2008) reiterates this point in the context of U.S. composition courses, observing that instructors must transition carefully toward technology-

enhanced pedagogy. Other research has focused on the interactive potential of blended learning, particularly the use of tools such as learning diaries, discussion groups, blogs, and social media platforms to encourage student engagement (Holley & Dobson, 2008; Nückles et al., 2004; Pryiomka, 2017; Stagg Jacobs, 2014). These collaborative tools can not only improve student writing, but, in requiring students to write in a variety of new media forms, encourage digital literacy (Stagg Jacobs, 2014).

Alongside advocates for the interactive benefits of hybrid formats, some researchers have voiced concerns and offered further recommendations for the effective implementation of blended learning. In a controversial article, Catherine Gouge (2009) has noted that, in addition to its "active learning" advantages, hybrid learning can raise questions concerning pedagogical integrity and administrative accommodation. She cautions that a more comprehensive discussion of failures and successes in blended teaching must be conducted. Similarly, Daniel Reardon's (2016) comparison of blended, online, and F2F versions of U.S. first year composition classes concludes that, while blended and online courses may offer some advantages, for many students these formats hinder the academic socialization that is an important component of first year writing. Others have pointed out that blended learning requires technological training on the part of instructors and may better address the needs of some learners than others (Waddoups et al., 2003). Recommendations for successful hybrid teaching include moving beyond transmission learning, implementing technology-based professional development, and addressing in greater depth the changes to social construction of knowledge (Gabriel et al., 2012). Kürthen and Smith (2006) likewise identify the integration and timing of online components within the course design as significantly impacting the success of blended formats. Overall, it appears that, as with any educational approach, blended learning must be implemented thoughtfully, in line with clear learning objectives, in order to maximize its potential benefits for students, instructors, and institutions.

Blended learning has also received a great deal of interest, despite the cautions noted above, due to the range of learners and needs it can potentially address. Much of the existing research focuses on L2 and first generation learners and the ways in which blended learning can promote their success. As Shih (2011) notes, blended approaches can encourage valuable forms of peer assessment among L2 learners, while McCarthy (2010) identifies the interaction between local and international students as a key benefit of the blended format. Yang (2014) focuses on summary writing as a foundational skill for L2 learners, finding that a hybrid approach, while requiring instructor training, enhanced students' abilities and final writing outcomes. First generation and underprepared college students similarly benefit from the flexible forms of interaction that blended learning provides. Lorie Stagg Jacobs (2014) notes that not only do online exchanges build a diverse classroom community, but that blended learning can help bridge the dual demands of school and life often experienced by first generation learners (see also Pryiomka, 2017). Bandi-Rao and Devers (2015) note similar advantages for underprepared college students. There is even some evidence that specialized writers can benefit from blended approaches which allow them to learn online, but review difficult concepts in class (Moore & Jones, 2015). As both Young (2002) and Smith (2014) have noted in major higher education forums, blended learning is attractive to students, instructors, and institutions in its flexibility, higher-level learning, increased engagement, and efficiency. However, whether this results in appreciable savings for colleges and universities, or simply a shift in resource distribution to increased technological training and instructor feedback, is debatable (Gouge, 2009; Stagg Jacobs, 2014; Young, 2002).

Vaughan et al.'s work, as well as a selection of non-writing related studies (see Gabriel et al., 2012; Owston, York, & Murta, 2013; Sacher, Sacher, & Vaughan, 2014; Smith, 2014; Snow,

2016), have effectively addressed the concept of blended learning in Canadian contexts. However, specific explorations of how a blended approach can work within a first-year Canadian composition course have yet to be conducted. This is a significant knowledge deficit, since Canadian writing instruction tends to differ from the U.S. "freshman comp" format in two key ways. First, Canadian writing instruction occurs in a wider range of settings, and, second, there is a greater focus in Canada on academic and technical over popular forms of writing (Graves, 1993; Smith, 2006). As Kevin Brooks (2002) notes, "the nature of the first-year English curriculum in Canada is significantly different than the typical composition requirement in American colleges and universities" (p. 673). For much of the twentieth century, Brooks explains, writing and literature were closely linked in Canadian universities and understood as imparting cultural knowledge and values rather than, as in the U.S., a set of communicative skills. Composition theory, moreover, was perceived as American and the result was a reluctance in Canada to train PhDs in composition or support composition courses beyond first year (Brooks, 2002). Kearns and Turner (2008) and Johnson (2006) concur with Brooks, noting that the *belles lettres* and Arnoldian educational traditions resulted in an aesthetics-based, literary approach to Canadian writing instruction very different from the U.S. model. This approach is perhaps best summed up by University of Toronto Head of English A.S.P. Woodhouse's 1952 statement that the purpose of English was not to teach writing, but to "cultivate a taste for reading as a form of intelligent recreation" (as cited in Hubert & Garrett-Petts, 2006, p. 62). This situation has located writing instruction in a wide range of alternative, decentralized settings, unlike the large, unified U.S. composition programs (Smith, 2006). Such historical conditions have impacted Canadian courses' status, funding, and instructional formats.

However, as Smith (2006) and Kearns and Turner (2008) also find, the Canadian landscape is changing, with notable examples of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary writing initiatives becoming increasingly common (e.g., Simon Fraser University, University of Alberta, University of Toronto, University of Winnipeg). Moreover, in conjunction with this institutional context, Canadian approaches to genre theory (Strachan, 2008) have produced a second distinction from U.S. writing instruction, which is a clear focus on academic and technical forms of writing. Without the large-scale requirement for a general "freshman comp" course, Canadian writing instruction has productively, and quite successfully, focused on writing in the research genres (Giltrow, 2016). As Wendy Strachan (2008) explains, "New Genre Theory draws attention to the regularities of situations and the regularities in structure, purpose, and wordings of texts associated with those situations…. It examines the ways in which genres represent cultural and social values," values that, in academia, are discipline-related (p. 26). In genre-based writing classes, the purpose is not to prescribe unitary principles of good writing, but begin the process of familiarizing students with the expectations and norms held by writers in a range of research disciplines. While Russ Hunt (2006) has noted that the translation of genre practices into the classroom has not always been straightforward, "learning in actual contexts of use," as genre theory promotes, has "found more fertile ground in Canada's anti-specialized context" (p. 379). As both Graves (1993) and Smith (2006) note, the decentralization and research genres focus are by no means failings in the Canadian approach to writing instruction, but simply distinctions between U.S. and Canadian contexts. Since the Canadian context for teaching and learning about writing is thus unique, it is important not to simply transfer U.S. research to Canadian institutions. A blended format for composition will necessarily differ in a Canadian context, and therefore it is important to research its uses and best practices in that context.

Method

The preliminary pilot study described here sought to compare traditional F2F course delivery with a blended learning environment for first year composition classes. It compared two sections of the course taught fully F2F (the control group) with three sections taught in a blended format (the experimental group). While both control and experimental formats covered the same core material and were based on the genre theory approach to writing instruction described above, the blended format used short recorded lectures, electronic readings, and frequent opportunities for online writing and feedback alongside weekly student-instructor interaction time. The blended version also included recorded discussions of discipline-specific writing practices and examples of writing styles from a variety of arts and science research areas. Students were then encouraged to make discipline-informed decisions about their research strategies and writing styles for the final research paper. Although clearly disciplinary distinctions extend beyond these issues, the goal was to provide a first year introduction to these notions within a course populated by students from all areas of the university. Similar learning outcomes, assignments, and readings (as detailed below) were used in control and experimental sections, so that changes or trends in learning were more likely to be due to the blended as opposed to F2F delivery, rather than other variables. Following Vaughn et al.'s (2013) recommendations regarding the thoughtful integration of technology, my design of the experimental course described here required a careful review of all course materials, asking which content would be best covered online versus F2F, and which exercises would be most meaningful in which context. From an instructor's perspective, this was highly significant in redesigning the course. The study's primary research questions were: (a) Will students make use of a greater range of learning opportunities if these are made available? and (b) Will a blended format successfully promote learning, particularly the perceived development of students' genre-based writing skills? This research received ethics clearance from the University of British Columbia's research ethics review board in March 2013.

Data consisted of university-administered teaching evaluation questionnaires (TEQs), research writing samples, and student-completed study questionnaires. Instructor notes were kept to track overall impressions of the course. The study questionnaires were designed following previous models for this type of research, such as those found in Strachan (2008) and Waddoups et al. (2003). Questions were adapted to the course-based learning outcomes (see Appendix A) and local learning context, as recommended by Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, and Ashwin (2006). The survey consisted of questions on writing experiences and perceived skills, study habits, and the learning materials students used (see Appendix B for the relevant sections of the questionnaire, and note that questions pertaining to another study on student technology use have been omitted here). Designed to produce quantitative and multiple-choice responses, the questionnaire explored student perceptions of changes in overall writing competence, academic research writing abilities, disciplinary understanding, and study habits. The research writing samples' grading commentary were manually analyzed using four predetermined criteria: writing style, research and documentation, organization, and content. These style, research, organization, and content components were identified in the assignment parameters and aligned with learning outcomes for the course (see Appendix A). Both instructors participating in the study graded and commented using these core criteria for a more consistent assessment of student writing abilities. The numerical TEQ responses for overall satisfaction with the instructor ("I would rate this instructor as very good") have been assessed here, as being the question the university considers

most relevant to students' perceptions of their learning experiences. Student TEQ comments are referred to as offering reasoning for that overall assessment.

The study itself took place over 42 months. Two 35-student sections of English 112, a first-year composition course, taught in January to April of 2013 by the same instructor functioned as the control group. Since the study was being conducted within a first year course, spring sections were deliberately selected to avoid the adjustment process typically experienced by new university students during the fall semester. For students in the control group, content was presented fully F2F using class lectures, the textbook, content received in the classroom (e.g., handouts), class notes put online, small group discussions, an online assignment dropbox, and in-class writing exercises. While it would have been unethical to exclude these students from the learning management system (LMS), online materials were minimal and consisted of class notes and links to the university library and Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL), three online readings linked to a summary assignment, and access to an online dropbox for submitting writing exercises. All sections of the first-year composition course (control and experimental) followed similar scaffolding toward research writing-based learning outcomes. These outcomes were as follows: deploy the essay-writing process through reading strategies, summary, analysis, persuasion, research methods, revision and documentation; develop a scholarly writing style; use academic reasoning and rhetorical practices; and make students aware of scholarly conventions so that they can function successfully as apprentices within the larger academic community. Learning activities and assessments were aligned with these outcomes, so that students first read and summarized peer-reviewed articles in preparation for their own research writing. Students then covered principles of research organization and rhetorical analysis. The final weeks of the course focused on developing a research paper and encouraged students to incorporate elements of their summary and analysis work into that final project. The research project involved workshopping and peer review activities, as well as scaffolded submission of topics, paragraphs, and sources prior to the larger assignment being due. Grammar and style were taught within a context of research writing, so that students analyzed and discussed the sentence-level expectations, as well as epistemological assumptions, of scholarly writing as a recurring theme throughout the course. As the culmination of the course's discussion of scholarly research processes and norms, the research paper is thus the best assessment of students' genre-based learning and this is why that assignment's feedback is analyzed here.

Two 35-student sections of English 112 taught January to April of 2014 and one 30-student section taught May to June of 2016 functioned as the experimental group. The 2016 group was included to provide a greater range of responses. For the experimental group, content was presented in a blended format, with a significant portion of the content and writing opportunities done online through the LMS, while class time was focused on personal feedback, editing, and discussion. Students were required to attend two thirds of the course F2F, while one third of the course was done online. For classes meeting twice a week, as in the 2014 sections, this meant that all students attended once a week and then the second class rotated, with half the class attending one week and half the class attending the next week. For the May to June section, which met three times a week, all students attended the first class of the week, and then half the students attended the second class and half attended the remaining class each week. The LMS tracked student use of online materials. Two instructors taught the experimental group, but coordinated content, assignments, and rubrics prior to the study (see Appendix A), so although there were some variations in timing and delivery styles, students received similar learning experiences. In addition to the above-described content, activity, and assessment approaches used in all sections, the

blended version of the course included short, online video lectures on core topics such as summary in research writing, citing a peer-reviewed article, academic tone, evidence, and revising. Additional electronic readings were provided on rhetoric, and additional examples of peer-reviewed articles and editing exercises were made available to students in the experimental sections via the LMS. For every session in which students were not physically present, they were required to view or read material online, relate that to the textbook coverage of the concept, and then complete an online writing exercise for a nominal (2%) mark. In addition, the experimental group was given access to examples of scholarly writing across a range of disciplines, and interviews with scholars discussing writing in their disciplines. As one of the online writing exercises, students were required to view the interview with the scholar in their intended discipline and write a short reflection on that interview. While researching the final assignment, students were asked to identify the broad discipline in which their topic and approach to that topic fit, and use that both to further their research and inform their writing style within the final paper. This allowed more in-depth coverage of disciplinary difference than the F2F sections, which looked at examples of writing from several disciplines and discussed some of the differences in tone and style, but did not include further discipline-related materials. As noted previously, given the range of students' intended majors in a typical first-year writing class, discipline-specific material can be difficult to cover in a way that students perceive as relevant.

In the final two weeks of the control and experimental semesters, a research assistant visited the classes to explain the study and offer student participants the opportunity to complete the study questionnaire on their experiences. Student participant volunteers completed a consent form, which they could return to the research assistant either on a return visit to the class or during office hours. The instructors were absent during these visits for ethical reasons and the primary investigator only received the list of student participant volunteers once the course was completed and all grades were finalized. Volunteers were given information on the purpose and process of the study in accordance with ethical practices. They were informed that, in addition to the questionnaire information, commentary on the research assignments and overall grades would be compared between control and experimental groups, as would TEQ results. The multiple choice and numerical data from the questionnaires and TEQs were compiled in accordance with ethics regulations. Assignment comments for the research papers were manually coded based on the above-noted themes of writing style, research and documentation, scholarly organization, and content. The two instructors had kept notes on their experiences teaching the blended format, which they compared at the end of the semester.

Results

The 2013 control group consisted of 15 students from two sections who voluntarily completed the consent form and survey questionnaire. Since the responses were purely voluntary, this 21% response rate was to be expected and provides a starting point for further studies. The respondents were generally A and B level students, with an average final grade in the course among respondents of 78%. Overall, class averages for the two sections (i.e., including non-respondents) were 67% and 70%, meaning that study respondents tended to be higher-achieving students. In the questionnaire responses, all students noted progression in their writing skills after taking the course. By the end of the course, students perceived their skills to be predominantly intermediate (57%), followed by advanced (38%), and basic (5%). Question 10 assessing genre knowledge showed three students in the control group rated their skills as advanced by the end of the course.

For eight of the fifteen students, this was their first university-level writing course. The remaining seven students had completed one previous university-level writing course. According to course titles included in the questionnaires, some of these were specifically composition courses, but others were creative writing or writing about literature courses. Clearly, students do not always distinguish between genres or approaches to writing. Online materials were most often accessed through laptops rather than smart phones, tablets, or desktop computers. With only one exception, respondents recorded high comfort levels using computers, internet, the course LMS, and mobile technology. Most effective learning tools were listed in the questionnaire responses (in order of most to least popular response) as content received in the classroom, online writing exercises (by which these students meant the assignment dropbox), lectures, in-class writing exercises, small group discussions, textbook, and class notes put online. Least effective learning tools were listed (in order of most to least popular response) as: textbook, class notes put online, supplemental online materials (meaning the readings and two internet links), lectures, small group discussions, online writing exercises (meaning the assignment dropbox), in-class writing exercises. Clearly, students perceived the most effective learning tools in this traditional classroom format to be class content, the online writing dropbox, lectures, and in-class writing. They perceived the textbook, class notes put online, and supplemental online materials to be less effective. Since the online material was minimal, most aspects of this result were to be expected (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Control Group Responses Regarding Learning Tools

	Most effective learning tool	Least effective learning tool
Lectures	7	2
Textbook	1	9
Content received in the classroom	8	-
Class notes put online	1	7
Supplemental online materials	-	6
Small group discussions	5	1
Online writing dropbox	8	1
In-class writing exercises	7	1

A review of research paper comments addressing content, organization, research, and writing style revealed that ten of the fifteen research papers written by the control group received suggestions to strengthen their essay organization. Six of the fifteen papers received comments to improve their use of research, while only minor editing and formatting notations were made. As noted above, overall grades were high for student participants. TEQ scores were above the program average (course scores were both 4.6/ 5 while the program average for that semester was 4.4/ 5).

The 2014 and 2016 experimental group consisted of 18 respondents from three sections who volunteered to complete the consent forms and questionnaire. As noted above, the voluntary nature of the study made the 18% response rate expected. Again, the respondents tended to be higher-achieving students with an average final grade among respondents of 77. Overall class averages for the sections were 70%, 69%, and 69%. Eight of the respondents had taken no previous university-level writing courses, five had taken one course, four had taken two courses, and one had taken six previous courses. Again, students seemed to be loosely defining writing to cover a range of creative, literary, and composition courses. All except two students perceived progression

in their writing skills (the two who did not already rated most of their skills as advanced). By the end of the course, students who did note progression in their writing identified their skills to be predominantly intermediate (51%), followed by advanced (43%), and basic (6%). (The two students who felt their skills were advanced at the beginning of the course were not included in these percentages to gain a more accurate assessment of perceived progress.) Question 10 assessing genre knowledge showed six students in the control group rated their skills as advanced by the end of the course. As with the control group, experimental respondents accessed online materials most often through laptops rather than smart phones, tablets, or desktop computers. With only two exceptions, respondents recorded high comfort levels using computers, internet, the course LMS, and mobile technology. TEQ results again averaged above the department norm, suggesting that student satisfaction remained high within the blended format.

Experimental group students were given learning opportunities through class lectures, the textbook, content received in the classroom (e.g., handouts), online content, supplemental online materials, small group discussions, online writing exercises, and in-class writing exercises. In this case, as noted above, online materials were extensive, including additional discipline-specific online readings and videos, grammar/editing practice, supplementary examples and models of writing concepts, online videos of core concepts, and both online-specific writing practice as well as the ability to submit writing assignments online. They also had access to an online discussion group, although did not make use of it. Most effective perceived learning tools were listed (in order of most to least popular response) as content received in the classroom, online writing exercises, lectures, in-class writing exercises, textbook, online content, small group discussions, and supplemental online materials. Least effective learning tools, according to students' perceptions, were listed (in order of most to least popular response) as small group discussions, textbook, supplemental online materials, online content, in-class writing exercises, lectures, content received in the classroom, and online writing exercises. Clearly, students felt class content and online writing exercises were most effective, and, by a small margin, class discussions least effective. However, there is a wider range of responses and less consensus on the least effective learning tool than in the control group, suggesting students in the experimental sections used and perceived a wider range of materials and formats as helpful (see Table 2).

Table 2
Experimental Group Responses Regarding Learning Tools

	Most effective learning tool	Least effective learning tool
Lectures	8	2
Textbook	5	7
Content received in the classroom	13	1
Online content	4	6
Supplemental materials placed online	2	7
Small group discussions	4	8
Online writing exercises	10	1
In-class writing exercises	8	3

Experimental group research essays were comparable overall in quality to those of the control group. However, analysis of the instructor comments based on writing style, research skills,

organization, and content showed some variation. The experimental group's essays received few comments (three out of eighteen) on organization, but content development was more problematic for this group, with eight participants receiving suggestions to better incorporate research-based evidence and analysis of that evidence. This was observable in both instructors' remarks. Documentation and editing comments were consistent with those received by the control group.

Discussion

Since the intent of the study was not to replace in-class materials with online materials, but to test whether students would make use of a greater range of learning opportunities, clearly the experimental group's responses indicate that students would. Their diverse responses regarding effective learning tools indicate that the flexibility of the blended learning opportunities did appeal to students. Indeed, TEQ comments revealed that students found the blended format to have certain advantages. In 2014, for instance, several students commented on how the smaller groups were beneficial. One student wrote, "The layout of the course was good. I enjoyed the blended learning aspect of it! [Redacted to protect anonymity] is a heavy course load all in its own so it was nice to have the freedom to balance my time better." Another student similarly commented that, "The blended schedule was a good learning tool, it allowed for individual work just like it will be like after the class is over" and a third noted that the "'half-sized' small group classes … made one-on-one work with the prof. more effective." In 2016, students again highlighted the smaller workshops enabled by the blended format as beneficial, with one writing that the split class meant, "I got to talk with my professor more because of the divide. There was more time for one on one." Further, as evidenced by student comments, the blended format addressed class size by allowing the one-on-one time and small workshop activities that tend to be lost with classes over 20 students. Student TEQ respondents also noted the value of peer editing during the smaller class sessions and felt that the classes had a good "atmosphere," supporting research on the value of interactive elements in blended learning (e.g., Vaughan et al., 2013). This said, given the additional online assignments in the blended sections, both instructors reported that the approach does not reduce, and may even add to, instructor workload. This concurs with Scott et al. (2017) who similarly note that, within flexible formats, writing instruction remains a time-intensive task. Blended composition teaching is not intended to enable ever-larger class sizes, but rather offers an approach that makes existing class sizes more effective.

The second research question concerned whether the blended format promoted effective student learning within a genre based writing class. Drawing on TEQ, research paper commentary, and questionnaire responses to answer this, the perception-based TEQ responses for course quality were comparable across experimental and control groups. Interestingly, control group respondents asked for more practice and more online materials to help their learning, issues that the blended format appeared to address. Student research paper writing was also comparable in overall quality across control and experimental groups. As noted above, however, there was some variation in the feedback comments regarding content and organization, with the control group receiving more requests for clarification on organization and the experimental group receiving more advice on content development. Although content and organization are of course related, the instructors distinguished content as the provision and analysis of evidence, while organization referred to essay and paragraph structures. Sample instructor comments from the control group included: "While the content, research and writing are well done, I have made some suggestions to help organize the ideas"; "On pp. 3-4 your paragraph organization is not as clear as it could be. Use a

clear rationale for your organization of information there"; and "There are some organizational issues. First, be sure to write one, full introductory paragraph (you seem to be splitting it into two) that mentions [X] and [Y] as key comparisons." In contrast, sample instructor comments from the experimental group specified: "Your incorporation of research could use some clarification. Several of your points in the essay seem unsupported"; "The focus on [X] is not retained throughout the paper, which detracts from the unity and coherence of the argument"; and "To improve content, make the claims in topic sentences more argumentative. Balance the expository style paragraphs with analytic ones so that the paper does not become a report rather than an analysis of the research material." In other words, the experimental group, like the control group, had included adequate research, but was not incorporating or analyzing that information as effectively. It may be that a blended format assisted the experimental group in organizational skills, but impacted content-related thinking and analysis. However, this is a very preliminary conclusion and more research on whether this was due to demographic particularities or the hybrid format may be useful, as would more in-depth study on how blended and F2F formats impact specific writing skills (see, for instance, Middlebrook [2013] on the use of peer review in blended and F2F first year composition). Questionnaire responses regarding student perceptions of their learning suggested improvement in both groups. Interestingly, however, the experimental group recorded a slight increase over the control group in the perception that their writing skills were advanced. While not conclusively showing an advantage to the blended format, this does align with extant literature suggesting that hybrid writing classes are equally, if not slightly more, as effective as F2F formats (e.g., Drysdale, Graham, Spring, & Halverson, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Warnock, 2009). It seems the Canadian composition context is no different in this respect.

In terms of disciplinary learning, these very preliminary results suggest the blended experiment can be beneficial. In the experimental group, videos of writers from a variety of disciplines speaking about their writing processes and conventions, as well as samples of disciplinary writing, were incorporated in the form of an online assignment, and as a component of the final research paper. The LMS tracking system confirms that disciplinary materials were selected by students according to their interests and future plans, presumably making the material more relevant and allowing students to consider disciplinary differences in more depth than a typical F2F introductory composition course does. Indeed, the question in the student questionnaire assessing genre knowledge suggested that the experimental group was somewhat more confident in this area by the end of the course than the control group. While both groups felt they were better prepared for task or genre-related formats, one third of the experimental group rated their skills in this area as advanced rather than intermediate. Only one fifth of the control group classified their skills in research genres as advanced by the end of the course. However, a limitation of this study was the lack of clarity in that question assessing students' disciplinary knowledge. Future analyses could benefit from more pointed questions on the research sources, documentation styles, writing and rhetorical conventions, as well as genre based tasks, required in specific academic disciplines. In accessing these online materials, the students' questionnaire responses indicated that laptops are the preferred mode for writing projects. In designing blended courses, this information can be important in making technology choices, as can the level of comfort students reported with a variety of technology forms. As Vaughan et al. (2013) note, in a blended context the design process should, "bring into alignment the goals of education with the properties of the technology" (p. 21).

Although the data described here is suggestive of the ways in which blended learning can be an effective format for Canadian composition classes, this exploratory study had several

limitations. Specifically, much of the assessment is based on student and instructor perceptions of learning, rather than quantitative outcomes. This is one of the enduring difficulties of assessing first year writing classes, as Daniel Reardon (2016) notes, due to factors including the progressive or scaffolded nature of assignments in these courses and the lack of curricular standardization, which is then compounded by the varying ways in which instructors incorporate technology in blended formats. Future studies may need to include a grades-based quantitative assessment or, following Reardon's example, a diagnostic assessment conducted at the beginning and end of the semester. A second limitation was the study size. Ethics protocols required voluntary student responses, which, at the end of a busy academic year, tended to diminish response rates. Given this study's initial findings regarding the potential for blended format first year writing classes, however, a larger follow-up study may be in order. A related limitation involved the kinds of students that responded to the questionnaire. As noted above, these were typically high achieving students, leaving one to wonder whether the approach was equally effective for other students. Indeed, Owston et al. (2013) suggest lower-achieving students may find blended formats less effective. A larger follow-up study could encompass and detail the responses of a more academically diverse group. Additional limitations occur in the assessment of disciplinary learning, as noted above, and the inevitable variations created by having two instructors teach the experimental group. Future studies may wish to adopt a longitudinal approach using one instructor to better address this issue. Despite its limitations, this preliminary pilot study indicates that a genre-based Canadian composition course can benefit from blended learning's integration of online writing and content with interactive F2F instruction. The flexibility, additional resources, and practice offered in a blended composition context can help instructors at all levels better achieve writing-based learning outcomes and address larger-than-ideal class sizes.

In conclusion, this research suggests that blended approaches need not replace F2F composition courses, but can be a valuable addition to many Canadian institutions' offerings. Hybrid online and F2F formats allow students and instructors greater flexibility and more opportunities for self-directed teaching and learning. This study, moreover, begins to address the lack of research on blended formats for Canadian writing courses, an area that seems worth exploring for precisely the advantages noted above. The diversity that scholars have identified in our approaches to writing, and the increasing focus on writing as a knowledge-making activity, are pedagogical strengths. Here, I propose that blended learning can further those strengths and call for further research on how to best measure and implement this approach in a Canadian context.

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Appendix A

Course and Research Paper Descriptions
English 112: Strategies for University Writing

Course Description and Learning Outcomes:

English 112 is designed to help students develop reading and writing skills which they will use throughout their university careers. The course is structured to cover the essay-writing process through reading strategies, summary, analysis, persuasion, research methods, revision and documentation. In addition, a short grammar unit will address sentence structure, agreement and punctuation, with special emphasis on developing a scholarly style. Students should expect content and exercises that reinforce the processes of academic reasoning and writing. We will also consider, in relation to the large themes of media influence and consumer culture that run throughout the course, the various rhetorical practices of the university community. As genre theory has revealed, scholarly writing is composed of several distinct analytical, rhetorical and citation practices. While this course is not discipline specific, its aim is to make students aware of scholarly conventions in general and empower them to function successfully as apprentices within the larger academic community.

Evaluation Criteria:

Assignment 1: Summary	15%
In-class grammar/ style quiz	10%
Assignment 2: Analysis	20%
Assignment 3: Research paper	25%
Final Exam (see below re: exams)	20%
Short Exercises/ Attendance	10%

Research Paper Description (Instructor 1)[2]

The research paper should show 1) your ability to analyze information 2) your ability to organize and construct an argument 3) your ability to write clearly and concisely and 4) your ability to locate, evaluate, summarize and document 6 or more key sources. Remember that there are topic suggestions on the LMS (under "readings/ links") and you can use some of the readings we have already considered to help you develop your ideas. Cite in either APA or MLA format (whichever is most appropriate for your topic) and be sure to submit on the LMS. Up to 2000 words.

Research Paper Description (Instructor 2)

Learning Objectives: Through working on an extended, complex research project, students will continue to develop the research and written communication skills they will need for success in their academic careers.

Description: In a well-organized and thoroughly-researched essay, students will show their ability to narrow a topic and present a sustained argument. They will present their findings in a well-written and well-organized MLA-style research essay of approximately 1000 words. Students are required to locate and cite a minimum of four university-level sources, of which at least two must be peer-reviewed, for their essays.

[2] Please note that both core descriptions were followed by topic development and formatting details.

Appendix B

Student Questionnaire[3]

Section I: Writing Experiences

Previous university and college writing courses

Course *List each writing course*	**Institution** *Identify the institution*	**Grade** *State the letter grade*	**Reason for taking the course** *Required or optional*
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			

Writing skills

Describe your ability level before and after taking English 112 in each skill area as **basic, intermediate, advanced, or N/A** if the skill does not apply.

	Before	After
1. Grammar (pronoun usage, verb tenses, punctuation		
2. Sentence Structure		
3. Library Research		
4. Reading skills		
5. Use of Sources (evaluating, integrating, citing)		
6. Critical thinking		
7. Developing a thesis and Argument		
8. Paragraph Structure		

[3] Please note that the original survey included some questions related to technology use which, to avoid confusion, have been omitted here. These are the questions reported on in this study.

9. Essay Structure		
10. Task Specific Formats (eg. critical analyses, summaries, arguments, literature reviews, research papers)		
11. Revision and Editing Skills		
12. Formatting & Document Design		

Section II: Lifestyle and study habits

If using material available online, indicate how often you use the following devices to access study material (*circle the most applicable answer*):

1. Smart phone always most often occasionally never n/a
2. Tablet (iPad, Kindle…) always most often occasionally never n/a
3. Laptop/ netbook always most often occasionally never n/a
4. Desktop computer always most often occasionally never n/a
5. Other always most often occasionally never n/a
   Specify: _____

How often did you attend lectures? (*circle one*)

0-25% 25-50% 50-75% 75-100%

How often did you access the online course materials? (*circle one)*

0-25% 25-50% 50-75% 75-100%

Section III: Learning Styles

Rate your level of comfort with using the following technology (*circle the most applicable answer*):

	Most comfortable				*Least comfortable*
Computer	5	4	3	2	1
Internet	5	4	3	2	1
Course learning platform (Connect/ Blackboard)	5	4	3	2	1
Mobile technology (iPad, Kobo, Kindle, smart phone etc.)	5	4	3	2	1

Rate your satisfaction with the following (*circle the most applicable answer)*:
** Note that some of these may not apply to your course. **

	Most satisfied				*Least satisfied*
Full group lectures and discussions	5	4	3	2	1
Textbook used in the course	5	4	3	2	1
Content received in the classroom	5	4	3	2	1
Course content received online	5	4	3	2	1

Supplemental materials and readings provided online	5	4	3	2	1
Small group labs and discussions	5	4	3	2	1
Writing exercises and feedback online	5	4	3	2	1
Writing exercises and feedback in class	5	4	3	2	1