

DEGREE OF HYBRIDITY: PEER REVIEW IN THE BLENDED COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

By

REBECCA HELMINEN MIDDLEBROOK

Writing (Communication) Coach/ Instructor, Michigan Technological University, Department of Cognitive and Learning Sciences, Houghton.

ABSTRACT

As the move to increase availability of composition courses in the online environment continues, it is important to understand the ways in which composition instructors take on the challenges associated with moving their teaching online and how they modify, or re-mediate, their pedagogy for this new teaching and learning environment. By investigating the views composition instructors hold regarding technology use in their teaching practices, factors that may influence the degree of re-mediation of pedagogical practices seen in hybrid, or blended, first-year composition courses were identified. One factor in particular that had a great effect on the degree of pedagogical re-mediation in this study was identified and defined as degree of hybridity.

Keywords: Hybrid Courses, Blended Learning, Peer Review, Composition, Pedagogy, Curricula Development, Degree of Hybridity.

INTRODUCTION

To better understand how instructors re-mediate their pedagogy for the online environment, a case study of five instructors who taught peer review in blended first-year composition courses at a large metropolitan university was conducted. The term blended was used to describe these courses because they included a blend of both face-to-face and online instruction. Such courses provide an opportunity to observe the same teacher and the same students engaging in the same practice in two different modalities. Peer review was used as a specific point of interest and observation because the practice is an integral element in composition curricula and is commonly facilitated in first-year composition courses. As such, peer review provides a specific and identifiable pedagogical practice that was common across all five blended first-year composition courses in this study. Results from this study suggest that what is termed degree of hybridity, or, the proportion of the course that was determined by the university to take place online, has a powerful effect on the degree to which instructors alter their pedagogy when they facilitate peer review activities in blended composition classroom.

Charles Moran (2001) points out that it is important for instructors to make "informed decisions" about technology

use in our classrooms (p. 205). It is true that computers have definitely changed the teaching and learning landscape in primary, secondary, and university educational settings. It is even common today to find warnings in introductory teacher-training textbooks that caution future teachers to turn a critical eye towards technology use in their teaching practices (Roblyer & Doering, 2010). In order to make the informed decisions called for by Moran (2001, p. 205), and to avoid the trappings of technological utopianism Hawisher and Selfe (1991, p. 56) have warned us of in their College Composition and Communication article entitled "The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class," a better understanding of what influences instructors to alter their pedagogy and just how much instructors really are altering their pedagogy in new teaching environments must be developed.

Peer review has long been a staple in the process-oriented composition curricula found in many English departments across the country. Murray (2003) reminds us that even though as English instructors we are tasked with evaluating the "product" of student writing, "when we teach composition we are not teaching a product, we are teaching a process" (p. 3). Peer review, as part of that process, is described by Bruffee (1984) as an educational activity in which "students learn to describe the

organizational structure of a peer's paper, paraphrase it, and suggest what the author might do improve the work" (p. 637). In closely examining and responding to the work of a peer, students can gain insight into their own writing and can work collaboratively to form new knowledge through their writing.

DiPardo and Freedman (1988) suggest that when thinking of what many call peer review, we think about the activity in terms of "peer response"—when students are not only thinking and writing about the work of their peers or engaging in editing, but when they are truly "responding to writing" of their peers (p. 120). Although "peer review" can also be found in use under the various terms peer revision, peer criticism, or peer evaluation (it seems that scholars can't agree on one name for the activity), scholars do seem to agree that the activity entails "responding to one another's writing for the purpose of improving writing" (Breuch, 2004, p. 10).

Despite the fact that peer review is an activity that has been discussed since process pedagogy came on the composition scene in the early 1970s and 1980s, how the teaching of peer review activities in the online environment differs from the teaching of peer review activities in the face-to-face classroom is a subject that has not yet been extensively discussed. One exception includes Tuzi (2004) who studied the effects of "e-feedback" in second-language English courses that met face-to-face only, but in which the students had access to email in the classroom. In his *Computer and Composition* article titled "The Impact of E-feedback on the Revisions of L2 Writers in an Academic Writing Course," Tuzi describes how e-feedback students received about their writing seemed to have a greater impact on subsequent revisions than the face-to-face feedback they received. Although this study suggests that somehow the "e-environment" facilitated peer responses that were used to revise student writing, it does not address how the activity may have been altered by the medium of communication or how the instructors may have modified, or re-mediated, how they taught peer review activities in the online environment (p. 217-235).

In the book *Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning about Writing in Online Environments*, Kastman Breuch

(2004) goes a step farther than Tuzi and suggests that the activity of peer review itself occurs differently in the virtual environment—in courses taught partially or entirely online. Breuch states that, "Virtual peer review thus shares the same task as peer review, although it is practiced differently using computer technology" (p. 11). In Breuch we see the notion that the practice of the activity of peer review occurs differently in online courses—she even refers to these differences in practice by saying "virtual peer review is a remediation of face-to-face peer review..." (8). Breuch calls this difference in practice remediation—borrowing Bolter and Grusin's (2000) term as they use it when discussing various forms of new media and applying it to composition instruction.

It is clear from Breuch's discussion of the term remediation that the field of composition is not in the habit of using the term in the manner in which it is applied to pedagogical practices as examined in this research. Much research about the teaching of writing using computers has been conducted and published, but there is a lack of research examining the degree to which instructors actually engage in a remediation of their pedagogy when they teach peer review activities online or in blended courses. As newer and newer technologies are used to teach, it is imperative that composition instructors become even more cognizant of the strategies they use to teach their students. While the technologies may, and will, change, the importance of reflective thought about pedagogical practices used to teach becomes even more important. Prominent composition scholar James Berlin (1982) voices his concern that writing instructors who aren't aware of the weight of their choices about pedagogical strategies they employ can lead to confused students. Berlin carries this notion a step further, saying the instructors who aren't aware of the "full significance of their pedagogical strategies" can lead to "disastrous consequences" (p. 767). It is with this notion in mind that we must examine how we are modifying the pedagogies we use to teach blended composition courses.

The phrases "blended learning" and "hybrid learning" are relatively new to the field of education, let alone composition studies. Before the year 2000 these terms

were relatively unheard of in the corresponding literature. However, the practice of mixing technology and technology-enhanced course activities with those activities that would normally take place in a traditional face-to-face classroom has been occurring for years as computer-assisted courses were developed (Draper, Brown, Henderson, & McAteer, 1996). Since 2000 there has been substantial research and discussion about blended learning and the experiences and impressions this learning environment has had on students in fields ranging from biology to nursing (Erdosne Toth, Morrow, & Ludvico, 2009; Ginns & Ellis, 2009; Hwang & Arbaugh, 2009; Ireland, Martindale, Johnson, Adams, Eboh, & Mowatt, 2009). Researchers such as Motteram (2006), in his 2006 study, and Khine & Lourdasamy (2003), in their 2003 study, examined student experience and student perception of learning experience and course content in blended pre-service teacher education courses. These two studies, and many others, serve as examples of the number of researchers who have examined blended learning in terms of student perceptions and experience across a wide-ranging variety of fields. While these researchers conducted studies that dealt with blended courses that were designed for pre service teachers and were instructing future teachers in how they could use technology in their courses, both focused on the future teachers as students. Student learning should indeed be the goal of every instructor and every course an instructor teaches, regardless of the format of delivery. However, something these studies have overlooked, for the most part, is the instructor and what they actually do, and how they think about what they do, when they teach courses in the blended format. A gap exists in research that focuses on blended/hybrid education in terms of the instructors who teach in this modality.

Skill and Young (2002) tout the blended learning model as "one of the most effective new education strategies" (p. 23). As such, it is important that research examines how instructors are modifying their pedagogical practices when they teach in this blended educational environment. This research project explored these issues to provide information that will assist administrators and instructors who teach and design blended composition courses and

curricula in the future.

To begin such an investigation the term blended learning (education) must be defined. A search of literature reveals varying definitions and understandings of this term. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) define blended learning as any set of "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with on-line experiences," (p. 96). A similar definition is offered by Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis (2007) in their Internet and Higher Education article entitled, "Research Focus and Methodological Choices in Studies into Students' Experiences of Blended Learning in Higher Education." They describe blended learning as "learning activities that involve a systematic combination of co-present (face-to-face) interaction and technologically-mediated interactions between students, teachers, and learning resources" (p. 234). Both of these definitions emphasize a combination or integration of traditional face-to-face activities and those that involve technology that is carried out systematically or thoughtfully—implying that such blended educational experiences involve a great deal of planning and forethought in their design and delivery.

Graham (2006) presents us with yet another, but somewhat similar definition of blended/hybrid learning. He states that we can think of blended learning as "the combination of the instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed learning systems" (p. 5). In this definition we can see the lingering fragments of a once prominent belief that face-to-face and distributed (online) education were two entirely separate forms of teaching and learning. Although some in the field undoubtedly still retain traces of this segregated view of face-to-face and online teaching and education, many more have begun to take on the challenge of teaching in the blended/hybrid environment.

At the same time, it's not difficult to understand why some instructors shy away from teaching blended courses. According to Tabor (2007), the blended teaching environment presents challenges for instructors that push them outside of their comfort zone, such as increasing the sense of being remote from students and altering the social

dynamic of the course because of the shifted center of authority in the class (p. 56). However, Tabor believes that the challenges are worth facing head-on, as the blended model of education provides a valuable option for educating students, even if it's not best suited for every teaching situation, "The hybrid (blended) model is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but another valid option in the modern learning environment that must continually evolve to meet learning needs" (p. 56).

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) echo Tabor's assertion that blended learning can sometimes muddy the waters between instructors and students because of the complexity involved with its thoughtful implementation. However, they argue that the complexity of teaching in this modality is well worth the effort because of the possibilities offered by this innovative teaching model "At the same time there is considerable complexity in its [blended learning's] implementation with the challenges of virtually limitless design possibilities and applicability to so many contexts" (p. 96).

The various definitions of blended learning presented here are relatively similar. All describe blended learning as some unspecified combination of face-to-face and technologically-enhanced activities. Despite the consensus that hybrid education involves both face-to-face and online activities, there seems to be no apparent discussion about what is termed in this study "degree of hybridity." The phrase "degree of hybridity," as used in this study, relates to the overall percentage of course activities that occur in each modality—online and face-to-face. For example, a blended course may meet face-to-face twice per week and the remaining sessions/activities may take place online, creating a $\frac{2}{3}$ -face-to-face and $\frac{1}{3}$ -online course. Another blended course may meet face-to-face once per week and carry out the remaining half of the week's activities online, resulting in a $\frac{1}{2}$ -face-to-face and $\frac{1}{2}$ -online course. Both the courses mentioned above could be considered hybrid, or blended, because some combination of online and face-to-face activities take place, but they would have differing degrees of hybridity because they have varying proportions of online and face-to-face activities.

The university at which this study took place also views blended courses as some non-specified combination of online and face-to-face activities. On the website for the center that administers the university's distributed learning courses, hybrid, or "ReduceSeatTime/Mixed Mode," are defined as "courses [that] include both required classroom attendance and online instruction. All "M" classes have substantial activity conducted over the Web, which will substitute for some classroom meetings" (Course Delivery Modalities, 2009). Again we see that there is agreement with the definitions presented by Bluic, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007; Graham, 2006; Tabor, 2007; and Garrison & Kanuka, 2004 that blended learning is some combination or integration of both online and face-to-face activities. What is still missing is discussion about the differing degrees of hybridity that may occur in courses all considered blended.

One publication that takes a step towards addressing the issue of just how much activity takes place online in a blended course is the Sloan Consortium's (2009) "Blending In: The Extent and Promise of Blended Education in the United States." The Sloan Consortium has historically compiled annual reports about the state of online education in the United States. However, in 2007, in a move that highlighted the emergence of hybrid education as a field of study all its own, the consortium completed its first study that focused entirely on blended/ hybrid learning. According to authors Allen, Seaman, & Garrett (2009), for purposes of this three-year study, in "blended/hybrid" courses 30 to 79% of course content was delivered online (p. 5). The study also found that more universities were offering online courses than blended courses, citing that nearly 55% of all institutions surveyed as part of this study offered at least one blended course and 64% of institutions surveyed offered at least one fully online course—courses in which 80% or more of the course was delivered online (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2009, p. 7). Additionally, and perhaps most surprising, the study found that although nationally the number of completely online courses offered had increased—growing from 6.5% in 2003 to 10.6% in 2005—the number of blended courses had decreased over the course of their study, falling from 6.8% in 2003, to 6.6% in 2004 and 5.6% in 2005 (p. 11). This decrease in blended course offerings contradicts Oliver and Trigwell's

(2005) assertion that the popularity of blended learning is indeed increasing (p. 24).

While the literature seems to agree on what constitutes a “blended” or “hybrid” course (a course with some combination of online and face-to-face activities—the Sloan Consortium (2009) defines it as between 30-79% online activities) what is lacking in the literature is discussion about whether or not there are, or should be, any pedagogical differences in courses that have varying amounts of face-to-face and online activities—how the difference in the degree of hybridity may affect the pedagogical practices used to teach the class. What also seems to be missing in the literature is discussion about how the difference in the degree of hybridity seen in blended courses may affect the degree to which instructors actually modify—or re-mediate—their pedagogical strategies when they teach courses in this modality. Here we are reminded of McLuhan's (2005) notion, originally proposed in 1967 – long before the advent of online and hybrid education -- that the medium, or mode (in Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2001) terminology) greatly affects the overall educational experience. One could also argue that the medium through which instructors teach type of classroom and, more importantly, the degree of hybridity of the course—how many times they met online per week, or the mode, affected how instructors engaged in pedagogical re-mediation and how they viewed teaching the course. By examining the degree to which instructors modified, or re-mediated, their pedagogy, or thought about re-mediating their pedagogy, when they facilitated peer review activities in blended courses this research hopes to contribute to this new area of study.

To investigate the degree of re-mediation of pedagogical practices seen in hybrid, first-year composition courses, five instructors were followed over the course of one semester during which they taught courses in this format. The instructors were later asked follow-up questions to clarify observation results and to further examine the degree to which they were either thinking about or engaging in re-mediation of their pedagogical practices when they taught peer review, a staple of composition classroom pedagogy, online. The five instructor participants in this

study were selected from a larger group of instructors who were teaching blended, first-year composition courses during the semester of investigation. All instructors who were teaching blended courses were asked them if they'd like to participate in the study. Of those instructors who replied, five mentioned their interest. Individual meetings with each instructor were then conducted to provide them with more information about the proposed study and answer any questions they may have had. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the five participants once they had agreed to take part in the study. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive elements of the instructors in this study.

Despite the fact that all of the courses included in this study were deemed mediated (a.k.a. blended) by the university, not all of the courses were blended to the same degree—they had differing degrees of hybridity. Four of the courses met one day per week with the remaining work being completed online ($\frac{1}{2}$ face-to-face and $\frac{1}{2}$ online) and one of the courses met two days per week with the remaining work being completed online ($\frac{2}{3}$ face-to-face and $\frac{1}{3}$ online). Although the degree to which the course activities were conducted online greatly affected the overall perceived importance of online work in the course for one of the instructors in particular, the university did not recognize the variance. All blended courses looked the same on paper to the university—there was no distinction between $\frac{1}{2}$ - and $\frac{1}{3}$ -online courses, but the amount and degree of online work occurring in the $\frac{1}{2}$ -online course and the manner in which the $\frac{1}{3}$ -online instructor approached teaching online was quite different than how the other instructors of $\frac{1}{2}$ -online composition courses approached the course(s).

Of all the instructors in this study, instructor Tan's level of pedagogical-remediation seemed to be influenced the most by the degree of hybridity of her class. All of the other instructors in this study taught blended courses that were 50/50—the work of the course was designed to be divided equally between the face-to-face and the WebCT/out-of-class/online sessions. Instructor Tan was the only one who taught a course that was taught as a $\frac{1}{3}$ -online blended course. Her course met three times per week with one of the 50-minute sessions occurring online. Tan found this situation

	Instructor Finnigan	Instructor Palmer	Instructor Wilson	Instructor Bowman	Instructor Tan
Course taught	ENC1102 First-year composition II.	ENC1101 First-year composition I.	ENC1101 First-year composition I.	ENC1102 First-year composition II.	ENC1101 First-year composition I.
Teaching status	Adjunct (previously taught at the university as GTA).	Full-time, non-tenure-earning instructor (previously taught at the university as GTA).	Full-time, permanent, non-tenure-earning instructor.	Graduate teaching assistant (previously taught at the university as adjunct).	Graduate teaching assistant.
Teaching experience	15 years at college level/ 5 years at the university/ first time teaching mediated composition Spring 2007.	10 years at college level. Had been teaching mediated composition for four years.	8 years at college level. Had been teaching mediated composition for four years.	5 years at college level. Had been teaching mediated composition for two years.	One semester at college level. First time teaching mediated composition.
Teaching media	Taught face-to-face, through email and blogs.	Taught face-to-face and through WebCT.	Taught face-to-face and through WebCT.	Taught face-to-face and through WebCT.	Taught face-to-face and through WebCT.
Technological familiarity	Self-described as advanced. Had been involved with beta testing WebCT at the university.	Self-described as advanced. Had been teaching with WebCT at the university as long as it had been available and created all his own	Self-described as having medium-level computer skills. Feels her WebCT skills are upper- to mid- level.	Self-described as mid-level technology skills. Feels her WebCT skills are high-level.	Self-described as high-level technology skills. Feels her WebCT skills are high-level.
Points of interest	Instructor helped create WebCT training that the university instructors receive. Those who successfully complete training are considered course designers. Ironically, when UCF required him to complete the training course he had helped create, Finnigan failed the course.	He was the only instructor in this study who taught in a collaborative classroom.	This instructor's position as one of the Coordinators of Composition for the English department allowed for additional insight into the number of mediated first-year composition course offerings and enrollment.	This instructor had previously worked as a technical writer for a number of years. Upon arriving at the university, instructor Bowman had been allowed to teach technical writing courses with no additional training. This instructor later experienced many of the same WebCT training sessions as the researcher, as both were in the same doctoral cohort.	This instructor was the least experienced in terms of teaching, but perhaps the most skilled in web and graphic design.

Table 1. Participant Descriptors

a bit frustrating as it was difficult to determine just how much of the course should/could occur in WebCT, the course management system used by the university. She expressed concern about creating online activities that demanded too much of her students based on the percentage of the course that was online, "I have to be careful to not put too much exercise or requirements on there because it's only 1/3 of the class." This became an issue because she felt limited in terms of the exercises she felt students could, and would be willing to, complete online. Because of this it is suspected that it would be much easier for both instructors and students in the 1/3-online courses to see the online WebCT portion of the course as less important, as merely auxiliary. This arrangement could make the WebCT portion of the class a convenient dumping ground for course materials instead of a functioning medium of education.

Instructor Tan, the least experienced instructor in this study, differentiated her pedagogical re-mediation based on the level of computer use that was required by the course.

When asked about what she felt the role of technology played in her composition pedagogy Tan replied that she had wanted to use "WebCT as a place for discussion and for preliminary material distribution." She then clarified her answer by describing how she would use technology (in this case WebCT) differently in courses with varying degrees of computer mediation. In a completely face-to-face course that had few, or no required technological components, Tan believed that WebCT would be best utilized, "as an enhancement ... or, as a 'dumping ground' for materials and syllabus and assignments."

In contrast, in a blended course that had a higher level of hybridity, one where technology is an integral part, so she would use it for facilitation:

... when I have students read stuff before class and come to class with discussion ideas, most of them won't. But if I have them read ... and do some preliminary discussion on WebCT ... I can [could] see that they've done the job. So this is one way of using

technology ... [A]s for how this will [would] improve their writing I'm not so sure.

In this statement we see Tan speculating about how she might have been able to accomplish more with the online portion of her class had that portion been more than the $\frac{1}{3}$ assigned to her course.

In the blended course she taught in this study, Tan had hoped to use the online portion of the class as much more than a “dumping ground” for information—and she did attempt to do this with the peer review activities. However, Tan viewed the peer review activities that were a part of her $\frac{1}{3}$ -online course as relative failures, citing that students didn't seem to know how to engage in peer review (even after she explained it to them), didn't post the activity materials when and where they should have, and appeared unable to even find the related course materials she had posted. In later follow-up discussions Tan speculated that her students may not have viewed the online portions of the course (where peer review occurred) as very important to the class since it was such a small portion of the class. As noted above, Tan experienced some of the same frustration about being able to assign an appropriate amount of work to the online portion of the course since “it's only $\frac{1}{3}$ of the class.”

Despite being dissatisfied with the results of the online peer review that occurred in her blended course, Tan was still able to achieve a relatively high level of pedagogical remediation in her course because she devoted so much of her efforts towards thinking about the changes in her pedagogy brought on by teaching a course in the blended environment in which such a low proportion was carried out online. It seems reasonable to believe that she could have achieved even higher levels of pedagogical remediation had her course taken place as a $\frac{1}{2}$ -online course like the other instructors in this study taught.

The purpose of this research was not to make value judgments regarding which type of educational environment is better or to assert that instructors are better teachers because they teach blended courses, but to provide a guide of sorts of “what to pay attention to” when developing or teaching blended composition courses. One recommendation that came about as a result of this

study deals with the degree of hybridity of blended courses. Instructor Tan described her tensions dealing with a course that was “only $\frac{1}{3}$ -online” and her attempts to balance the amount of work she felt she could facilitate in the online environment. A search through the literature revealed little that discussed varying levels of the proportion of work that may occur online in a course designated as blended—the Sloan Consortium (2009) designated blended/hybrid learning as any course in which between 30 and 79% of course activities occur online. This research makes the argument that the degree of hybridity of a blended course influences both the instructor's and the students' perception of the importance of the online portion of the course. This perception can make the endeavor of engaging in peer review activities in a blended course very confusing and off-putting to many instructors.

At the institutional and programmatic level universities and departments may wish to define how much and what types of online work are required for courses with specific degrees of hybridity. Doing this would allow instructors to better gauge the amount and type of activities suitable for the online portion of the course. This degree of hybridity designation would make the process of planning a blended course less stressful for instructors, especially those new to teaching blended courses, such as instructor Tan. Perhaps even more importantly, a degree-of-hybridity designation would open the door to admitting that not all blended courses are the same—differing degrees of hybridity affect the amount and type of activities that can be incorporated in those courses. Differing degrees of hybridity also have an effect on how important the students, and instructors, view the online portions of the course to be (as witnessed by instructor Tan's comments regarding this matter).

Individual instructors will have a better understanding of how much work in the class should be online depending on the degree of hybridity designation. This could lessen the stress associated with selecting courses to teach and designing course activities. If an instructor knows that the course they're teaching is designated as a $\frac{2}{3}$ -face-to-face course and $\frac{1}{3}$ -online they will have a better idea of what types of activities will be best suited for that hybridity

designation. Students may also be more willing to enroll in blended courses in which they know the proportion of online activities they will be required to complete. These designations would, of course, differ across disciplines.

Engaging in peer review activities in the blended composition classroom requires a reexamination of our current pedagogical practices if we want to best serve our students. Only by challenging our own beliefs about technology use in teaching and being more open to taking advantage of the opportunities it can provide can we hope to provide our students with educational experiences that will serve them throughout their lives.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing (Communication) Coach/ Instructor, Michigan Technological University, Department of Cognitive and Learning Sciences, Houghton.