



## Conversation: Online, Course “Talk” Can Become Writing

*This chapter describes a cornerstone of my online pedagogy: the use of asynchronous message boards to facilitate student communication. I also mention some other technologies that enable students to have a conversation online.*

One of my primary pedagogical goals is *conversation*. Online, these conversations can take place much as they would in an onsite class, but they have a significant advantage for the online writing teacher: they are often written. So we don't have to think of our virtual conversations as just as good as our onsite conversations—they can be better. Adult education expert S. Joseph Levine said of online course conversations, “Not seen as merely a tool to make online learning ‘as good as’ in-person education, the online discussion board presents unique opportunities for teaching in new ways” (“Online” 73). This chapter is about capitalizing on those opportunities.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, we start the migration to online teaching with our pedagogical goals. For me, regardless of whether I am teaching online, **hybrid**, or onsite, I want my students talking to each other because, following from the work of social constructionists like Bruffee, I feel that the dialogue between myself and my students builds the knowledge of my writing courses most effectively. I can't accomplish this by just talking *at* my students. M. M. Bakhtin stated, “To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding” (282). In my courses, I want to

*Conversation: Online, Course “Talk”*

- ◆ create an open environment in which students can contribute their ideas;
- ◆ allow all students to voice their thoughts;
- ◆ give students time to think over their ideas and by their colleagues, and respond;
- ◆ write, write, and write some more.

### Asynchronous Conversations

You can have conversations in many ways, but I will focus on using **asynchronous** message boards. Message boards can be more effective than my best in-class conversations. I should point out, with all humility, that the success of my on my in-class dialogue facilitation is due to the compliments on course evaluations and the friendly environment of my onsite class. The simple technology of message boards is made possible by the kind of work your students do. Writing instructors have long been in the virtual environments. Some years ago Beth Bruffee wrote about virtual world environments (sometimes called “dungeons”) words carry the day (62). In these formal writing my students produce work that is astounding, and that message boards are a great way for much of what I want to do in a class.

All CMS packages have some form of message boards themselves are versatile and many of the options are free: type *free message boards* (lots of options). Although I will sometimes call them the holy grail of writing, they can provide a means of facilitating the conversation in your class in ways that open up new ways of teaching, learning, and writing.

In addition, some normal constraints on conversations are absent in the message boards: asynchronous or onsite environments.

## Online, Course Can Become Writing

a cornerstone of my online pedagogy. I also mention some other ways students can have a conversation

pedagogical goals is *conversation*. Online, conversations can take place much as they would in an onsite class. A significant advantage for the online environment is that everything is written. So we don't have to think about what to say just as good as our onsite conversations. As education expert S. Joseph Levine writes, "Not seen as merely a tool to supplement in-person education, the online environment offers unique opportunities for teaching in a new way." This chapter is about capitalizing on

In the introduction, we start the migration to an online pedagogical goals. For me, regardless of whether the course is online, hybrid, or onsite, I want my students to write because, following from the work of Peter Bruffee, I feel that the dialogue between students builds the knowledge of my writing. Students can't accomplish this by just talking at each other. As I have stated, "To some extent, primacy of the activating principle: it creates the conditions for it prepares the ground for an active conversation." (282). In my courses, I want to

### Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing

- ◆ create an open environment in which students feel free to contribute their ideas;
- ◆ allow all students to voice their thoughts;
- ◆ give students time to think over complex points made by me, and by their colleagues, and respond to those points; and
- ◆ write, write, and write some more.

### Asynchronous Conversations through Message Boards

You can have conversations in many ways using digital technology, but I will focus on using **asynchronous** communication via message boards. Message boards can work even more effectively than my best in-class conversations for the earlier objectives; and I should point out, with all humbleness, that I have worked hard on my in-class dialogue facilitation skills, and I receive many compliments on course evaluations from students about the open, friendly environment of my onsite classes. If you haven't used the simple technology of message boards, prepare to be amazed by the kind of work your students can do in this environment. Writing instructors have long been intrigued by e-communication environments. Some years ago Beth Kolko noted that in text-based virtual world environments (sometimes called **MUDs**: multi-user dungeons) words carry the day (62). I have found that the semi-formal writing my students produce on message boards is often astounding, and that message boards can provide a major vehicle for much of what I want to do in an **OWcourse**.

All CMS packages have some form of message board, and the boards themselves are versatile and easy to use (many applications are free: type *free message board* into a search engine for lots of options). Although I will stop short—but *just* short—of calling them the holy grail of writing pedagogy, message boards provide a means of facilitating the *efficient* sharing of writing in your class in ways that open up intriguing opportunities for teaching, learning, and writing.

In addition, some normal constraints of **synchronous** or onsite conversations are absent in the message board environment. In synchronous or onsite environments, the conversation is fairly

linear, almost always meaning that not everyone can participate. With message boards, conversations can build in parallel fashion. Some students might be shy about speaking their minds in a classroom conversation or even a fast-paced chat setting, where by the time you respond, the rest of the group is on to another topic. The relative anonymity of the message boards can create, as Gail Hawisher said of networked conversations, an open environment with more equitable participation ("Electronic" 88), or what Adesso called a place where "there are no lost opportunities to speak" (114). Lester Faigley took it a step further in his comment about networked classrooms: "The utopian dream of an equitable sharing of classroom authority, at least during the duration of a class discussion, has been achieved" (167). Message boards provide students with reflective time, and many "welcome the opportunity to compose thoughtful, probing contributions" (Collison et al. 2). Hewett and Ehmann noted in tutoring situations "the fact that [online writing instruction] often is anonymous *and* non-real-time gives the student the time to make drafting and revising decisions without the pressure of an immediate audience" (159). I find that the natural delay helps conversations on the boards achieve a level of sophistication beyond many, if not most, onsite class discussions.

Message boards, by their very design, provide a complexity of audience: students are writing not just to the teacher but to each other. While negotiating the multiple audiences of a message board, students can practice invention skills, take risks, and develop their own authoritative voices. They aren't just writing to please you; most writing teachers are familiar with that sense of writing indifference that Britton and his coauthors discussed, in which students' apathy can manifest itself in a piece of "audience-less" writing (65). In addition, students are writing all the time on the message boards. I want my students to learn how to incorporate writing into various aspects of their thinking and learning, not just how to write dutiful college papers. Message boards can be a tremendous pedagogical tool to help them see the writing-learning link, and as Susan McLeod pointed out, they can learn from each other in a more active way (343). Also, with message boards, conversational digression can become an asset instead of a problem. Joseph Ugoretz commented on the value

of digression in message board con

When teachers and students, like F  
Not Taken," encounter two roads  
discussion allows them to avoid b  
travel both / and be one traveler.  
it is possible to diverge, to digress.  
different kinds of "traveling" tha  
(par. 21)

That tantalizing digression that we  
can flourish on the message board  
that you and the class can determin  
Dewey's comment, "Perhaps the gr  
ures is the notion that a person learn  
is studying at the time" [49].) Mes  
course. Faigley discussed how these  
into chaos because they are so free  
aged, students can certainly dodge c  
as long as you curb hostility or tri  
guidelines and a solid level of pres  
find this a powerful environment w  
your OWcourse.

**Guideline 21:** The asynchronous te  
can create a powerful and effectiv  
ronment for your students.

In my ten-week online classes, s  
ficial" posts, creating thousands an  
dition to the longer writing projec  
been strong; in some cases, brilliant.  
said, "inquiry in dialogue" for these  
course design that enables them to co  
together. The facilitated online discu  
construction of meaning and usefu  
first-year students think hard about  
in the science curriculum to expla

ing that not everyone can participate. Conversations can build in parallel fashion, even a fast-paced chat setting, where the rest of the group is on to another activity of the message boards can create, networked conversations, an open environment participation ("Electronic" 88), or where "there are no lost opportunities." Faigley took it a step further in his classrooms: "The utopian dream of classroom authority, at least during the day, has been achieved" (167). Message boards provide a reflective time, and many "welcome thoughtful, probing contributions" (167). Faigley and Ehmann noted in tutoring situations [writing instruction] often is anonymous and gives students the time to make drafting and editing decisions without the pressure of an immediate audience. The natural delay helps conversations on a level of sophistication beyond many, if not all, face-to-face interactions.

For very design, provide a complexity of writing not just to the teacher but to the students, recognizing the multiple audiences of a message board. Encourage invention skills, take risks, and embrace diverse voices. They aren't just writing for the teacher; teachers are familiar with that sense of audience. As Britton and his coauthors discussed, this sense of audience can manifest itself in a piece of "audience-aware" writing. In addition, students are writing all the time. I want my students to learn how to write in various aspects of their thinking and to write dutiful college papers. Message boards are a pedagogical tool to help them see writing as a more active way (343). Also, with the use of message boards, digression can become an asset. Ugoretz commented on the value

### *Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing*

of digression in message board conversations:

When teachers and students, like Frost's narrator in "The Road Not Taken," encounter two roads that diverge, asynchronous discussion allows them to avoid being "sorry that I could not travel both / and be one traveler." In asynchronous discussion, it is possible to diverge, to digress, and to acknowledge all the different kinds of "traveling" that are involved in learning. (par. 21)

That tantalizing digression that we might miss in an onsite class can flourish on the message boards, assuming an importance that you and the class can determine as it develops. (Recall John Dewey's comment, "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical failures is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time" [49].) Message boards aren't perfect, of course. Faigley discussed how these conversations might devolve into chaos because they are so free (190), and when poorly managed, students can certainly dodge engagement in the course. But as long as you curb hostility or triviality and you provide clear guidelines and a solid level of presence and engagement, you'll find this a powerful environment when helping students learn in your OWcourse.

**Guideline 21:** The asynchronous technology of message boards can create a powerful and effective writing and learning environment for your students.

In my ten-week online classes, students write dozens of "official" posts, creating thousands and thousands of words in addition to the longer writing projects. These conversations have been strong; in some cases, brilliant. As Collison and his coauthors said, "inquiry in dialogue" for these participants "emerges from a course design that enables them to *construct their own knowledge*, together. The facilitated online discussion is the container for this construction of meaning and useful outcomes" (3). Indeed, my first-year students think hard about topics ranging from changes in the science curriculum to explications of literary works. They

learn to make a forceful point in a succinct way. They learn to accept criticism gracefully, even when it comes under the glare of their peers' eyes. They practice careful reading, because arguments in an online setting often involve considerable rhetorical precision. They continually practice the difficult skill of using evidence—including direct quotes from other posts—to help reinforce their positions. By using message boards, I provide students with many low-stakes opportunities to write, helping them practice and refine their thinking through writing. And they use their writing to develop a point, building authority while speaking not just to me but to their peers. Perhaps most important, I think the kind of writing they do in these environments—short, mini-arguments to a diverse audience—better prepares them for the writing many of them will do as professionals (for support for this argument, see Jim Henry's *Writing Workplace Cultures*). The students often have a community learning experience that surpasses their onsite courses, knowing their "online co-learners more deeply than they would in a class where they would all be physically present with each other" (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudki, and Conceicao-Runlee 25). For example, at the conclusion of my winter 2009 persuasive writing OWcourse, one student said to her classmates, "Just wanted to say that you guys are awesome and this online English course enabled me to feel closer to my classmates, more so than a lecture. Thanks so much guys!"

### *Creating a Persona to Generate Conversation and Knowledge*

In Chapter 1, I discussed creating your persona as an online writing teacher. That persona will help you as you interact with students electronically, and it will play a major role in the dynamic environment of the message board. In *Facilitating Online Learning*, Collison and his coauthors provided a useful framework for constructing a persona in this environment. They urged instructors to remember that the goal as a message board facilitator "is to clarify and extend the thinking of other people" (104–5), and they encouraged the adaptation of different voices to facilitate this role: "By consciously using *different* voices, you'll be reminded that the purpose of any composition as an online facilitator is to

illuminate the thoughts of others, not just to craft a position that puts you on center stage. In 2001, I introduced these voices, and I continue to use them as they are useful in helping shape the conversation. In OWcourse students on message boards, I set up a message board **thread** addressing a specific issue, specifically asking to what extent individuals can contribute to society. This example was one I had in my winter 2008 persuasive writing OWcourse. Wood's text, *Perspectives on Argument*, was an interesting conversation because many students felt that individuals are solely responsible for their fate, and I work from that premise here.

- ◆ **Generative guide.** The generative guide encourages positions to indicate different perspectives that one might pursue in a conversation. In a conversation with a prompt that asks, "What are the different positions regarding the welfare of disadvantaged people? How much responsibility do we have for contributing to the greater good?"
- ◆ **Conceptual facilitator.** A conceptual facilitator is the voice of a lecturer but in a conversational style. Participants' postings and perhaps the facilitator's delivering content. In this capacity, I make sure the issues are clear and that there are readings. In a class this might require a message board environment, I build the conversation but the student texts.
- ◆ **Reflective guide.** The reflective guide emphasizes elements of a message board conversation begins with many questions, "What is the poor and disenfranchised in America?" many students ask, "What can we do to change the us-versus-them theme?" I encourage students to consider the different perspectives to success. In fact, I ask, "What is the role of the reflective guide, I act as a person who is not a person."

int in a succinct way. They learn to even when it comes under the glare practice careful reading, because arguments often involve considerable rhetorical practice the difficult skill of using quotes from other posts—to help using message boards, I provide opportunities to write, helping them thinking through writing. And they use int, building authority while speaking to their peers. Perhaps most important, I do in these environments—short, audience—better prepares them for will do as professionals (for support Henry's *Writing Workplace Cultures*). community learning experience that s, knowing their “online co-learners d in a class where they would all be o other” (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudki, or example, at the conclusion of my ing OWcourse, one student said to l to say that you guys are awesome se enabled me to feel closer to my eature. Thanks so much guys!”

### Generate Conversation and

creating your persona as an online a will help you as you interact with will play a major role in the dynamic board. In *Facilitating Online Learn-* ers provided a useful framework for s environment. They urged instruc- al as a message board facilitator “is king of other people” (104–5), and on of different voices to facilitate this *different* voices, you’ll be reminded position as an online facilitator is to

### Conversation: Online, Course “Talk” Can Become Writing

illuminate the thoughts of others, not to cleverly or entertainingly craft a position that puts you on center stage” (120). In Chapter 1, I introduced these voices, and I define them more clearly next, as they are useful in helping shape the way you interact with your OWcourse students on message boards. Say, for instance, that I set up a message board **thread** addressing issues of civic responsibility, specifically asking to what extent individuals are responsible to contribute to society. This example is based on conversations I had in my winter 2008 persuasive writing course using Nancy Wood’s text, *Perspectives on Argument*. It was a particularly interesting conversation because many students believed strongly that individuals are solely responsible for their place in society, and I work from that premise here.

- ◆ **Generative guide.** The generative guide provides a spectrum of positions to indicate different avenues of questioning students might pursue in a conversation. As a generative guide, I start the conversation with a prompt that describes, based on our readings, the different positions regarding this issue: Who is responsible for the welfare of disadvantaged people? Government? Charity? The people themselves? How much should individuals be responsible for contributing to the greater good?
- ◆ **Conceptual facilitator.** A conceptual facilitator might resemble the voice of a lecturer but instead focus on elements of participants’ postings and perhaps the course readings, not just on delivering content. In this capacity, after a few opening posts, I make sure the issues are clear in both the posts and our class readings. In a class this might resemble lecture, but in the message board environment, I build the content from not just the course but the student texts.
- ◆ **Reflective guide.** The reflective guide restates, with different emphasis, elements of a message or sequence of messages. The conversation begins with many people criticizing the plight of the poor and disenfranchised. “Why can’t they find success in America?” many students ask. As a reflective guide, I try to change the us-versus-them theme arising on the boards, and I ask students to consider the different factors that might contribute to success. In fact, I ask, “What is success?”
- ◆ **Personal muse.** The personal muse might offer a personal internal dialogue about central issues. Building on the work I did as a reflective guide, I act as a personal muse by writing about the

factors that led to my own success in life. I then invite students to think about factors that have contributed to their ability to attend college.

- ◆ **Mediator.** Mediators try to assess participants' unstated reasons for their reactions; in doing so, however, they do not avoid argument tension altogether. The civic responsibility example is particularly interesting in demonstrating the role of mediator. Students' positions might be informed by their unconscious feelings for the poor. Can I tease out the reasoning behind their positions to shed light on them?
- ◆ **Role play.** A role player can assume the voice of different characters, perhaps drawing on tales of personal experience delivered from a different role. The role player can successfully use the power of the Web in an asynchronous conversation. As a role player, I can provide examples of real-world people and how they have responded to the call for civic duty. I can even be someone I am not, taking a contrary position based on the stances I see being expressed on the board. (See Collison 106–17 for discussion of these terms.)

This collection of personas that Collison and his coauthors describe presents just one range of options for how you might envision yourself as a facilitator of online dialogue, and you can see how these voices overlap and complement each other. Having a sense of the different approaches you might take, and knowing when to use one over another, will help you maximize the conversations in your course.

**Guideline 22:** Remember that in the written environment of the message board, you will likely assume different voices and roles.

### *Joining the Conversation: You Need to Be Involved, but How Much?*

Regardless of *how* you approach the message boards, you will want to figure out ways to push students' thinking; I believe that requires you to be involved. Janet Eldred recognized nearly two decades ago that productive exchanges in e-communications do

"not emerge automatically" (56). ent feelings about what is an app but I believe that your responsibility a regular, engaged participant in s Collison and his coauthors offered moderating message boards:

1. "Moderating takes place in b context" (5).
2. "The style of 'guide on the sid appropriate for leading a virtu
3. "Online moderation is a craf strategies—that can be learned

Following that, I'll offer a straight

**Guideline 23:** Although you do conversation, you need to be in asynchronous conversations.

One consequence of not being inv students to have the "Whoosh, I lison 166). Students who see their less void might shut down in the teachers' participation in respondi including that teachers' comments students and help the instructor student (72).

Although you should be invo ment differs, both among teach conversation in a particular class. I hijacking the dialogue (Collison 1 to shut down in another way. One ing message board conversations the conversation but resist the u into discussions when they are irr

own success in life. I then invite students that have contributed to their ability to

to assess participants' unstated reasons doing so, however, they do not avoid either. The civic responsibility example in demonstrating the role of media might be informed by their unconscious when I tease out the reasoning behind their in them?

can assume the voice of different character tales of personal experience delivered the role player can successfully use the asynchronous conversation. As a role models of real-world people and how they all for civic duty. I can even be someone ary position based on the stances I see board. (See Collison 106–17 for discus-

that Collison and his coauthors range of options for how you might tor of online dialogue, and you can and complement each other. Having oaches you might take, and know- other, will help you maximize the

t in the written environment of the y assume different voices and roles.

### *You Need to Be Involved, but*

each the message boards, you will ish students' thinking; I believe that anet Eldred recognized nearly two exchanges in e-communications do

### *Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing*

"not emerge automatically" (56). Instructors might have different feelings about what is an appropriate level of involvement, but I believe that your responsibility as a teacher includes being a regular, engaged participant in students' online conversations. Collison and his coauthors offered three principles for effectively moderating message boards:

1. "Moderating takes place in both a professional and a social context" (5).
2. "The style of 'guide on the side' (vs. 'sage on the stage') is most appropriate for leading a virtual learning community" (7).
3. "Online moderation is a craft that has general principles and strategies—that can be learned" (12).

Following that, I'll offer a straightforward guideline:

**Guideline 23:** Although you don't need to be the center of conversation, you need to be involved with your students' asynchronous conversations.

One consequence of not being involved is that you risk allowing students to have the "Whoosh, It Went Right By" feeling (Collison 166). Students who see their posts disappear into a teacherless void might shut down in the class. Sandy Hayes noted that teachers' participation in responding to posts serves various roles, including that teachers' comments model "peer review talk" for students and help the instructor build relationships with each student (72).

Although you should be involved, the level of that involvement differs, both among teachers and from conversation to conversation in a particular class. Don't go to the other extreme of hijacking the dialogue (Collison 166), as that might lead students to shut down in another way. One of the tough parts of conducting message board conversations is that you must participate in the conversation but resist the urge of being constantly drawn into discussions when they are irresistibly good—which, I warn



you, happens often. In her oft-cited book about distance learning, *E-Moderating*, Gilly Salmon offered this *just right* principle for e-moderators: they should provide “enough, but not too much, intervention,” which as a rough guideline should be not more than one in four messages from you (125).

Indeed, the problems with underparticipation are probably obvious, but there are reasons to guard against overparticipation as well. If you have one hundred or more students, you will burn out quickly if you read carefully, think about, and comment on every post. Luckily, in this environment, you don't *need* to comment on every post, because students do much of that work for you. I agree with Salmon that it is sounder pedagogically to avoid commenting on every post or even every conversational thread. Let the students roam. Let them sustain the conversation with questions and comments. In onsite classrooms, discussions can easily take the form of a teacher's question, a single student's response to the teacher, and then on to the next teacher question, a pattern “in which teachers ask test-like questions and students give short, test-like answers” (Cazden and Beck 165). Students rarely talk to each other. In the online environment, the same structure could develop if you are overzealous about responding, so choose your responses carefully.

The decision about when to comment must match the way you envision your role on the message board. Working from Collison's categories for constructing a persona earlier, I comment on message boards for these purposes:

- ◆ **To raise a question.** Acting as the generative guide, conceptual facilitator, or reflective guide, I often will respond to a batch of posts on a given thread with a question. Normally, as I go through the posts, I write questions that come to me in a separate notes area, usually in a Word file (so I can just copy and paste). Sometimes I hold off on a question for a day or two to see if the students arrive at it themselves.
- ◆ **To respond to a direct address to me.** I always respond when a student directly brings me up in the conversation. I want students to respond to their colleagues when they are directly addressed as well.
- ◆ **To state my position.** I *like* being part of the message board

conversations. Not all teachers I have written long posts in rhetorical situation and not in the classroom, students online the stage” delivery. If I am writing they simply might not read my direct commentary on the conversational observations that apply to the during the term. Although I do my propaganda, I don't shy away from the conversation. After all, I am as a conceptual facilitator or moderator complex post now and again.

- ◆ **To model.** Posts can be modeled teachers have our own writing examples great advantage of the message board how seldom we model other forms of students.
- ◆ **To summarize a variety of positions.** Of the week, I act as a reflective student positions in one post and position. While doing this, I am also to interweave evidence from the type of post often during the last primary and secondary post deal of using posts).
- ◆ **To offer a correction.** This can also keep in mind that I am the a fact or quote wrong. I try to will correct mistakes made on the boards and in the class culture mistakes and the boards are a feel embarrassed by an error. I respond within this feeling of correction find a class that will not challenge of line or incorrect.

The level of participation you choose comfort level, but I think your role the students, much as you would in of teacher participation in online responses into three categories: (1)

ft-cited book about distance learning, n offered this *just right* principle for provide "enough, but not too much, rough guideline should be not more from you (125).

with underparticipation are probably ns to guard against overparticipation dred or more students, you will burn fully, think about, and comment on nvironment, you don't *need* to com- e students do much of that work for t it is sounder pedagogically to avoid or even every conversational thread. them sustain the conversation with onsite classrooms, discussions can acher's question, a single student's hen on to the next teacher question, ask test-like questions and students " (Cazden and Beck 165). Students the online environment, the same a are overzealous about responding, efully.

n to comment must match the way message board. Working from Col- lecting a persona earlier, I comment purposes:

ng as the generative guide, conceptual guide, I often will respond to a batch ad with a question. Normally, as I go questions that come to me in a separate word file (so I can just copy and paste). question for a day or two to see if the selves.

dress to me. I always respond when a up in the conversation. I want students gues when they are directly addressed

like being part of the message board

### *Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing*

conversations. Not all teachers will. But on numerous occasions I have written long posts. I do my best to remember the rhetorical situation and not come off as a windbag—unlike in the classroom, students online are not captive to our "sage on the stage" delivery. If I am writing in self-serving ways all term, they simply might not read my posts. Instead, I try to offer direct commentary on the conversation and make useful general observations that apply to the lessons I hope to communicate during the term. Although I don't want to fill the boards with my propaganda, I don't shy away from adding my opinion to the conversation. After all, content aside, I am the teacher, and as a conceptual facilitator or mediator, I should offer a smart, complex post now and again.

- ◆ **To model.** Posts can be models for the students. After all, we teachers have our own writing expertise. This modeling is another great advantage of the message board environment: think about how seldom we model other forms of writing that we ask of our students.
- ◆ **To summarize a variety of posts or positions.** Toward the end of the week, I act as a reflective guide, summarizing a variety of student positions in one post and, I hope, advancing the conversation. While doing this, I am also demonstrating to students how to interweave evidence from their peers into a post. I use this type of post often during the lull that sometimes occurs between **primary** and **secondary post** deadlines (see below for my methods of using posts).
- ◆ **To offer a correction.** This can be tough. While I try to be fair, I also keep in mind that I am the teacher. Sometimes a student has a fact or quote wrong. I try to be gentle and constructive, but I will correct mistakes made on the boards. I try to establish, on the boards and in the class culture at large, that everyone makes mistakes and the boards are a public place, so no one should feel embarrassed by an error. I get the sense that these students respond within this feeling of collective good—and I have yet to find a class that will not challenge me when they think I am out of line or incorrect.

The level of participation you choose will relate to your own comfort level, but I think your role is to participate and challenge the students, much as you would in an onsite course. One study of teacher participation in online forums categorized instructor responses into three categories: (1) cheerleading, or posting rein-

forcement such as “Great job!” that added no new information; (2) adding new information; and (3) questioning or challenging. The study found that challenging was more valuable than cheer-leading in helping “move the conversation forward” (Stansbury, par. 10). Encourage your students with positive reinforcement, but if their comments always just pass by you—a person who is trained to help them write and think critically—will they really be pushing their knowledge in the course?

Ultimately, you need to be active in your course discussions, perhaps in line with Sarah Haavind’s suggestion that the quality of learning that takes place in an online course is highly dependent on the skills of the discussion moderator, who must guide the conversation in a “restrained but effective way” (par. 2). Peter Albion and Peggy Ertmer added that “once the discussion has begun, the instructor plays a key role in *managing* the discussion: keeping the conversation focused while also moving it forward” (screen 7; italics added).

In the Teaching Materials Appendix, I provide an extended abstract of an annotated message board conversation from one of my courses.

### *Lay Out the Rules*

Decisions about choosing voices and personas can be more akin to an art, but successful message board conversations also depend on providing students with clear-cut guidelines. An *eCampus News* article about teaching with forums noted, “Simply providing online discussion forums is not enough to keep students engaged in virtual courses, according to educators who are well-versed in online instruction: For real learning to occur in an online setting, virtual-school educators must establish clear rubrics and enforce rules for participation” (Stansbury, par. 1). Smith remarked that in a Web environment, “you have to focus on interactions by being more purposeful about creating situations for interaction among the students”—directions must be clearer and more specific than in the onsite environment (65). Message boards, and any other assignment, are most effective when students understand what they are doing.

**Guideline 24:** To get the most out of your message board, ensure your instructions and expectations are clear.

How can you make message board conversations should cumulatively build on each other. The message board discussion board typically accounts for 25 to 35 percent of the overall course content (Chapter 12). I had to make a conscious decision to release some of the course work to the message board to place it with the message board. I am more confident about the wisdom of my students create on the board. In addition, they do much of it under the guidance of a varied audience. They learn a lot from each other to that level of learning. Second, you want—without being so rigid—to have a clear focus before it starts. Following are some examples of message boards that I provide to my classes. Although these rules are for online courses, they also apply to my onsite and hybrid courses, and they play a role in those as well.

Conversations that we have in our message boards make up a major part of our course. In most cases, I will pose a question or issue and then you will respond to it. We are all on the same level. The responses will be in the form of a question about the issues we are discussing. Please read the material below carefully.

#### 1. Rules for “official”

- **Essays.** Responses should be in paragraph form, and I will expect a reasoned thought about what you might put in your response. Think of it as a way to help you make a contribution. Remember, you’re trying to make these posts are good.
- **Detailed.** Each of your responses should be at least 125 words long.

that added no new information; and (3) questioning or challenging. Writing was more valuable than cheer-leading conversation forward" (Stansbury, comments with positive reinforcement, must pass by you—a person who is and think critically—will they really the course?

active in your course discussions, David's suggestion that the quality in an online course is highly dependent on a moderator, who must guide the in a but effective way" (par. 2). Peter noted that "once the discussion has its key role in *managing* the discussion: moderated while also moving it forward"

Appendix, I provide an extended message board conversation from one

s and personas can be more akin to message board conversations also depend on clear guidelines. An *eCampus News* forum noted, "Simply providing enough to keep students engaged to educators who are well-versed in learning to occur in an online setting, establish clear rubrics and enforce (Stansbury, par. 1). Smith remarked that in order to focus on interactions by being in writing situations for interaction among students must be clearer and more specific than (Stansbury, par. 1). Message boards, and any other writing, must be clear when students understand what

**Guideline 24:** To get the most out of message boards, make sure your instructions and expectations are clear and detailed.

How can you make message boards work best? First, the conversations should cumulatively count for something worthwhile. The message board discussions in my online classes are worth 25 to 35 percent of the overall grade (I discuss grading more in Chapter 12). I had to make a conscious and initially difficult effort to release some of the course weight from the major projects and place it with the message board conversations. Now, I am more than confident about the wisdom of that decision. The writing that my students create on the boards is serious, smart, and complex; plus, they do much of it under tight deadlines with the pressure of a varied audience. They learn a lot, and they deserve credit equal to that level of learning. Second, you must define carefully what you want—without being so rigid that you kill the conversation before it starts. Following are instructions about using message boards that I provide to my class in the beginning of the term. Although these rules are for online classes, I use similar rules in my onsite and hybrid courses, as message boards play a large role in those as well.

Conversations that we have via message boards will make up a major part of the work in this course. In most cases, I will pose a question or issue to you, and then you will respond to me or to your colleagues. The responses will form a useful conversation about the issues we are tackling. Please read the material below carefully.

**1. Rules for "official" posts**—These posts should be:

- **Essays.** Responses should not be one simple paragraph, and I expect them to reflect some reasoned thought on your part, thought beyond what you might put into a normal email or chat response. Think of them as mini-essays that help you make a clear, focused point. Remember, you're trying to develop your writing; these posts are great practice.
- **Detailed.** Each of your "official" posts must be at least 125 words. (Note: I'm not as inter-

ested in the actual word count as I am in the depth of your ideas. Obviously a post like "Me too!!!" doesn't qualify as an "official" post.)

- **Semiformal.** Your posts should contain some degree of formality: spell-checked, organized, etc. However, they will also be part of a dialogue, so in that regard, they will differ from an essay you turn in for a class. It is inevitable that we will take some time to reach a mutual understanding of the appropriate level of formality.
- **Referenced.** While you won't always need citations in your posts, you should look for opportunities to build your argument by referencing our readings, other sources, or your colleagues' comments.
- **Courteous.** We don't always have to agree, but no one should resort to flaming.

2. **Grading**—I will grade your "official" posts in accordance with these rules. In total, you'll be responsible for 30 "official" message board posts. I will evaluate each one on a 10-point scale:

- If you complete them adequately, you will receive 8s.
- If you go above and beyond the basic requirements of the assignments, you will receive 9s.
- Very good—completed with a great deal of effort and thought—posts will receive 10s.

A message board post will receive a 7 or below if it

- is too short.
- shows little thought.
- is excessively sloppy in terms of grammar, spelling, and mechanics, especially to the point that it was difficult to understand.
- engages in personal attacks or other breaches of common online etiquette.
- is late (see Course Policies).

3. **Reading**—You are responsible for reading all of the posts in the class, although you can obviously focus your attention on the threads in which you are directly engaged.

4. **Shorter posts**—Feel free to post as many shorter, informal comments on the message board threads

as you like; for instance, clarify a point or to another author's point rules for "official" posts.

5. **Staying current**—One of taking an online version will make it a daily boards and stay current taking place there.

6. **Extra credit**—Those of become active members will find that you will the message board complete you post more than 30 be eligible for extra of you may naturally say on some of our top to reward you if you of the message boards

The rules aren't complicated, but might seem restrictive, but I have like multiple paragraphs and a word idea of the expectations (a word only message board posts, but assign We are, in a simplified way, providing of the genre in which they are write them for references (with the occasional meet you more than halfway. Building appropriate—while remembering that pieces of writing—and you'll find expectations. Most important, the In general, I think that teachers mystery to students.

### Secondary and Primary Posts

You can assign message board method has worked well for most their posts as *primary* and *secondary* scheme—as in the earlier instruction twice as long and worth double

tual word count as I am in the  
deas. Obviously a post like "Me  
qualify as an "official" post.)

r posts should contain some  
lity: spell-checked, organized,  
hey will also be part of a dia-  
at regard, they will differ from  
rn in for a class. It is inevi-  
ill take some time to reach a  
nding of the appropriate level

le you won't always need ci-  
posts, you should look for  
o build your argument by ref-  
adings, other sources, or your  
ments.

on't always have to agree, but  
esort to flaming.

ade your "official" posts in  
hese rules. In total, you'll  
r 30 "official" message board  
luate each one on a 10-point

them adequately, you will re-

and beyond the basic require-  
signments, you will receive 9s.  
eted with a great deal of effort  
ts will receive 10s.

ill receive a 7 or below if it

ought.

sloppy in terms of grammar,  
mechanics, especially to the  
as difficult to understand.

onal attacks or other breaches  
e etiquette.

urse Policies).

esponsible for reading all of  
class, although you can obvi-  
attention on the threads in  
ectly engaged.

l free to post as many shorter,  
on the message board threads

## Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing

as you like; for instance, a couple of lines to  
clarify a point or to state your agreement with  
another author's point of view. But remember the  
rules for "official" posts.

5. **Staying current**—One of your responsibilities in  
taking an online version of English is that you  
will make it a *daily* habit to check the message  
boards and stay current on the conversations  
taking place there.
6. **Extra credit**—Those of you who are diligent and  
become active members of these conversations  
will find that you will receive a high grade for  
the message board component of the course. If  
you post more than 30 "official" posts, you will  
be eligible for extra credit in the course (some  
of you may naturally find that you have more to  
say on some of our topics this term, so I want  
to reward you if you put in extra work on some  
of the message boards).

The rules aren't complicated, but they are detailed. This detail  
might seem restrictive, but I have found that simple constraints  
like multiple paragraphs and a word count give students a clearer  
idea of the expectations (a word count works wonders for not  
only message board posts, but assignments such as peer reviews).  
We are, in a simplified way, providing students with a better sense  
of the genre in which they are writing. For example, if you ask  
them for references (with the occasional reminder), students will  
meet you more than halfway. Build in the rules you think appro-  
priate—while remembering that these posts are conversational  
pieces of writing—and you'll find that the students exceed your  
expectations. Most important, they will *know* your expectations.  
In general, I think that teachers' expectations are too often a  
mystery to students.

## Secondary and Primary Posts

You can assign message board posts in many ways, but one  
method has worked well for me: have students think about  
their posts as *primary* and *secondary*. Basically, in my grading  
scheme—as in the earlier instructions—primary posts are about  
twice as long and worth double the value of secondary posts.

Posts should be conversational, and secondary posts help apply conversational glue to the discussions. If all posts are extended essays in response to my prompts, the message board becomes more a series of disconnected essays responding to the instructor's question than a conversation.

In the beginning of a term, you might want to carefully monitor students' primary and secondary contributions, but I find that once we get into the flow of the term, students don't need to differentiate their primary and secondary posts. You can just tell. Some students will start off with a secondary post, reserving their longer primaries for later in the week. If you don't want that to happen, you could use a different nomenclature, perhaps calling the secondary posts response posts. More often than not, I find that many students post more than is required once they are engaged in a conversation on the message boards. I give a little extra credit for extra posts, and in a recent first-year course, the students posted an average of seven extra posts per student to the message boards.

## Deadlines

I have experimented with different schedules for deadlines, but for me, the message is clear: in any FYW class, you must have students adhere to clear deadlines for their posts. Avoid a one-tiered deadline. You don't want all posts due on Friday, for instance. You might get a pile of poorly conceived posts just written to meet the deadline. Since a core goal is conversation, you might not get what you want with one fixed deadline.

In line with my use of two types of posts, I use a two-tiered deadline system. I ask students to submit a number of primary posts (as defined earlier) on a certain day, say Wednesday. Then I ask them to post a number of secondary (or response) posts by Friday. Using these two levels helps to build a conversation. Students have time between the posting deadlines to think about the initial posts and respond to their peers—as do I. Eventually the students don't seem to need the deadlines; they just have an ongoing, rolling conversation that spans the whole week and sometimes carries over to the following week. But in the begin-

ning, the two-tiered deadline system of conversation. Or, if you aren't conversation that you seek, you could system: student posts could be due Saturday.

*Length*

As you can see from my sample in the table above, I stumbled across as a teacher is creating a message board for posts. This was a surprisingly easy task. I did not understand the message board generation process. The situation: how long was the post supposed to be?

## Grading Posts: Don't Be the Boy

A key philosophy underlying my use of writing is that all students need to write in low-stakes contexts to improve their writing. This is an entrenched philosophy in many approaches ranging from Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* to Fulwiler. Despite this, many well-meaning professors, in the semester-long battle, inadvertently create a barrier by becoming the bottleneck in the process. In their intentions, they slow the process by requiring too much of their students write, and then they slow it down by not trying to reply to every word. This may be a good thing to do, but the ultimate effect is to create a reluctance to assign any more writing.

When some teachers hear that I board posts from each student, they think I do an impossible amount of grading. I described my grading scheme in the last post, and in more detail it looks like this:

- ◆ I grade primary and secondary posts on 5-point scales. Especially if you're grading primary posts, it's easy to tell them apart. Longish posts during a given week or month already go above and beyond.

nal, and secondary posts help apply discussions. If all posts are extended prompts, the message board becomes essays responding to the instructor's n.

term, you might want to carefully and secondary contributions, but I find ow of the term, students don't need y and secondary posts. You can just off with a secondary post, reserving ater in the week. If you don't want se a different nomenclature, perhaps response posts. More often than not, ost more than is required once they on on the message boards. I give a sts, and in a recent first-year course, age of seven extra posts per student

ifferent schedules for deadlines, but in any FYW class, you must have stu- es for their posts. Avoid a one-tiered ll posts due on Friday, for instance. orly conceived posts just written to ore goal is conversation, you might one fixed deadline.

two types of posts, I use a two-tiered ents to submit a number of primary a certain day, say Wednesday. Then er of secondary (or response) posts levels helps to build a conversation. the posting deadlines to think about d to their peers—as do I. Eventually eed the deadlines; they just have an on that spans the whole week and e following week. But in the begin-

### *Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing*

ning, the two-tiered deadline system can help generate that kind of conversation. Or, if you aren't getting the critical mass of conversation that you seek, you could try a three-tiered deadline system: student posts could be due on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.

### *Length*

As you can see from my sample instructions, a simple thing I stumbled across as a teacher is creating a length requirement for posts. This was a surprisingly effective way to help students understand the message board genre as well as the rhetorical situation: how long was the post supposed to be?

### *Grading Posts: Don't Be the Bottleneck in the System*

A key philosophy underlying my use of **informal writing** is simple: students need to write in low-stakes environments to improve their writing. This is an entrenched idea in many compositional approaches ranging from Peter Elbow to Chris Anson to Toby Fulwiler. Despite this, many well-meaning teachers, in the heat of the semester-long battle, inadvertently short-circuit this process by becoming the bottleneck in the system. Starting with good intentions, they slow the process by trying to read every word their students write, and then they grind the process to a halt by trying to reply to every word. This might *seem* like the responsible thing to do, but the ultimate effect for most of these teachers is a reluctance to assign any more writing.

When some teachers hear that I ask for several dozen message board posts from each student, they shake their heads, envisioning an impossible amount of grading. But it's not onerous for me. I described my grading scheme in the example instructions earlier, and in more detail it looks like this:

- ◆ I grade primary and secondary posts quickly, using 10-point and 5-point scales. Especially if you stress multiple paragraphs for primaries, it's easy to tell them apart. (Some students write *all* longish posts during a given week—so any that count as secondary posts already go above and beyond my expectations.)



- ◆ The baseline grade is 8 for primaries and 4 for secondaries; it's important to establish this baseline number.
- ◆ If a post is decent, it gets 8 or 4 points.
- ◆ If a post is deeply thought out, much longer, and more engaged, it gets 9 or 4.5. Although I can fall victim to the automated test scoring prejudice that favors longer posts, I don't automatically up the score because a post is long. A long, sloppy post or a long, redundant post does not charm me by its length; but because these posts are informal and numerous, I am swayed a bit by people who simply had a lot to write.
- ◆ Excellent posts get 10 or 5 points, and excellence does not mean perfection for these informal grades: I give plenty of 10s and 5s.
- ◆ Late posts, extremely short posts, posts with many errors or vacuous ideas—these get 7 or 3.5 points or lower. I also grade down for people who don't add much to the conversation.

Your own grading conventions, or quirks, will emerge. For instance, I demand that primary posts be more than one paragraph; I want some movement among ideas, even in short posts. If I see one paragraph, it can be no better than an 8. You might have similar guidelines in terms of penalties for length, number of spelling errors, or being off topic; and rewards for use of sources, references to previous posts, or use of course concepts.

You can record the grades in a spreadsheet or directly into a CMS gradebook (every CMS has something like a gradebook). It may be quaint, but I still record grades by hand into an old hard-copy gradebook, much to the bemused amazement of some colleagues (I might avoid this by having two screens/monitors connected to my computer, but that's a technology option few of us have). It's a quick way to record grades as I read, and it takes me only a few minutes to transfer manually a whole week of grades to my CMS gradebooks. You can take advantage of the built-in post-grading functions that your CMS might offer, but my system of primary and secondary posts is not well served by those functions. (See Chapter 12 for more about grading.)

I feel strongly that I am not abandoning my responsibilities by grading so—well, efficiently. I use message boards because they create opportunities for low-stakes writing. I recognize that I cannot be the bottleneck, especially because the boards easily

allow the other students to be an im audience. In fact, feeling professional word that students write (and at some more watching than reading if you students write) seems ill-conceived. hawkishly watch every move they them to practice, make mistakes, and board environment represents an e and practice, as it creates an ideal pl or discovery writing to happen. He because what they are writing is en in the e-environment) pieces of post don't short-circuit this writing opp don't have time to read every wor job is to help them develop as wr micromanage their process to do s

A final comment about grading this has never happened—had a stud post received an 8 and not a 9. The 1,000-point scale in my classes that Occasionally, a student will ask wh and that allows us to have a dialogo posts, which helps the student's wr short, too error-filled, unoriginal, or a handy communication mechanis about improving work. Isn't that v

**Guideline 25:** Let your students w  
Don't be the bottleneck in the sys

### *Generating Prompts: How Do Y*

In a fully online course, students ha and two to four secondary posts o other course work. I always offer threads in which they can participa I set up between three and seven pr

for primaries and 4 for secondaries; it's this baseline number.

ets 8 or 4 points.

ght out, much longer, and more engaged, gh I can fall victim to the automated test favors longer posts, I don't automatically post is long. A long, sloppy post or a long, ot charm me by its length; but because al and numerous, I am swayed a bit by a lot to write.

or 5 points, and excellence does not mean ormal grades: I give plenty of 10s and 5s.

short posts, posts with many errors or et 7 or 3.5 points or lower. I also grade don't add much to the conversation.

ions, or quirks, will emerge. For in- ry posts be more than one paragraph; ong ideas, even in short posts. If I see o better than an 8. You might have of penalties for length, number of opic; and rewards for use of sources, , or use of course concepts.

les in a spreadsheet or directly into a (S has something like a gradebook). record grades by hand into an old to the bemused amazement of some his by having two screens/monitors but that's a technology option few y to record grades as I read, and it s to transfer manually a whole week ebooks. You can take advantage of nctions that your CMS might offer, nd secondary posts is not well served pter 12 for more about grading.)

not abandoning my responsibilities ntly. I use message boards because t low-stakes writing. I recognize that especially because the boards easily

### *Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing*

allow the other students to be an immediate and often responsive audience. In fact, feeling professionally obligated to watch every word that students write (and at some point it really does become more watching than reading if you try to grade everything your students write) seems ill-conceived. Mentors and coaches do not hawkishly watch every move their charges make. They allow them to practice, make mistakes, and thus develop. The message board environment represents an elegant combination of theory and practice, as it creates an ideal place to allow such exploratory or discovery writing to happen. Help guide conversations. Read because what they are writing is enjoyable. Clip out (easily done in the e-environment) pieces of posts to make specific points. But don't short-circuit this writing opportunity because you feel you don't have time to read every word. That is not your job. Your job is to help them develop as writers, and you don't have to micromanage their process to do so.

A final comment about grading posts: I have never—really, this has never happened—had a student ask me why an individual post received an 8 and not a 9. There are so many grades in the 1,000-point scale in my classes that 1/1,000 of a point is irrelevant. Occasionally, a student will ask why he or she *always* gets an 8, and that allows us to have a dialogue about the requirements for posts, which helps the student's writing: maybe the posts are too short, too error-filled, unoriginal, or even late. The grade becomes a handy communication mechanism to facilitate conversation about improving work. Isn't that what grades should be for?

**Guideline 25:** Let your students write on the message boards. Don't be the bottleneck in the system.

### *Generating Prompts: How Do You Get Them Started?*

In a fully online course, students have two to three primary posts and two to four secondary posts due each week in addition to other course work. I always offer students flexibility about the threads in which they can participate in a given week. Normally, I set up between three and seven prompts based on the readings,

their progress on drafts, or other course material from that week. Because they have more prompts than posts due, they can choose where to engage. I expect them to read all the posts, yet they can decide on which threads to concentrate their energies. Some weeks, I create one mandatory prompt to which everyone must contribute, such as a prompt that asks them to post a topic for a project and then comment on other students' topics or a prompt that addresses a key lesson we reviewed that week, for instance logic or process.

This is very important: don't get too clever with your prompts. It's tempting to make up complex prompts with multiple constraints. I find that the value of message board conversations goes up when you start simple. Often, I just use a one-sentence prompt. This is another reason that you should be an active participant in the conversation: I often map out a series of questions, but I reveal them gradually, much as I would in an onsite classroom, while the conversation develops and deepens. Here are some examples of message board prompts and questions to a few commonly used readings in the FYW course:

**For E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake"**

**Initial prompt:** Why does White experience "the chill of death" at the end of his essay?

**Question later in the week:** How do his observations of his son connect with his thoughts about the cycle of life?

**For Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson"**

**Initial prompt:** What kind of lesson is the story about?

**Question later in the week:** Why does the narrator resist Mrs. Moore so strongly?

**For Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"**

**Initial prompt:** Who is King's audience, and what strategies does he use to persuade them of his approach?

**Question later in the week:** How does King convince his audience that some laws are not just?

**For George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"**

**Initial prompt:** Why does the narrator shoot the elephant?

**Question later in the week:** How do you help support the argument about making?

**For an excerpt from Annie Dillard's**

**Initial prompt:** Provide some examples of the natural order used by Dillard.

**Question later in the week:** What do you use to indicate about the natural order?

**TIP: SAVE YOUR PROMPTS**

In the beginning of the term, start with simple prompts. Your CMS might allow you to repurpose prompts from one term to include these discussion starters so you don't have to create new ones for other term, but you might also want to save prompts for use later if you teach the course again. You can refine the prompts, and take advantage of leveraging the technology when you have a large class environment: you can save hundreds of prompts.

**Student-Led Prompts**

You can also use student-generated prompts. You can ask your students to moderate the conversation. Donaldson provided examples of lessons in which students take the lead in generating discussion activities in a class. Students can develop prompts for their colleagues through that week. You can take a step further, as Katrina Meyer did in her graduate course, where students serve as judges/evaluators of each other's prompts. She came to several conclusions, including the important role of some students in the collaborative process. She recognizes their importance in influencing the way the class proceeds, so "both instructors and students" influence the way the class proceeds, creating an ongoing feedback loop in the course.

other course material from that week. prompts than posts due, they can choose them to read all the posts, yet they ds to concentrate their energies. Some tory prompt to which everyone must pt that asks them to post a topic for a on other students' topics or a prompt we reviewed that week, for instance

don't get too clever with your prompts. omplex prompts with multiple con- of message board conversations goes ften, I just use a one-sentence prompt. ou should be an active participant in o out a series of questions, but I reveal ould in an onsite classroom, while the deepens. Here are some examples of l questions to a few commonly used

ore to the Lake"  
hite experience "the chill of death"

How do his observations of his son  
out the cycle of life?

**The Lesson**  
Lesson is the story about?  
Why does the narrator resist Mrs.

etter from Birmingham Jail"  
audience, and what strategies does  
s approach?  
ow does King convince his audience

g an Elephant"  
narrator shoot the elephant?

# Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing

**Question later in the week:** How does the narration in the story help support the argument about imperialism that Orwell is making?

**For an excerpt from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek***

**Initial prompt:** Provide some examples of the kind of description used by Dillard.

**Question later in the week:** What does Dillard's description seem to indicate about the natural order of things?

## TIP: SAVE YOUR PROMPTS

In the beginning of the term, start saving all of your prompts. Your CMS might allow you to reproduce templates that could include these discussion starters so you can copy them into another term, but you might also want to save them to a single file to use later if you teach the course again or use a different CMS. You can refine the prompts, and this is one of the many ways of leveraging the technology when teaching writing in an online environment: you can save hundreds of thousands of keystrokes.

## Student-Led Prompts

You can also use student-generated message board prompts, or ask your students to moderate conversations. Conrad and Donaldson provided examples of learner-led activities (110-19) in which students take the lead in generating conversations and activities in a class. Students can develop prompts and then guide their colleagues through that week's discussion. You can take it a step further, as Katrina Meyer did. She investigated having students serve as judges/evaluators of each other's posts in an online graduate course, rating posts based on their value to their class. She came to several conclusions, including that "investigating the role of some students in the collaborative learning process recognizes their importance in influencing the performance of other students," so "both instructors and highly regarded students" influence the way the class proceeds (16). This also creates an ongoing feedback loop in the course that she found valuable.

These are just a few examples, but students can certainly participate more in your message boards. This is another area of the OWcourse where you can productively give them the reins to help foster a student-centered environment.

### *How Do We Know They Are Reading the Posts?*

I discussed this topic in Chapter 7, and it's a tricky question without perfect answers. Here I offer several additional strategies to encourage students to read and stay current with the message board posts.

#### ESTABLISH REWARDS AND PENALTIES FOR ORIGINALITY AND PARTICIPATION IN THE DIALOGUE

My rules include the stipulation that posts should contribute to the overall conversation. If I post an opening prompt that asks a question, and seven students simply respond to it in similar fashion, by student seven I am giving 8s, even on otherwise good posts. This is one way to check that students are *building* on the conversation.

#### USE MESSAGE BOARD POSTS AS SOURCES IN PROJECTS AND ESSAYS

I often ask students to use class posts as sources in their papers and projects. I like this strategy, as I think that asking for this type of evidence addresses numerous pedagogical goals. Students must read the posts more carefully to find material for their particular writing project. They also begin to construct or consider authority in the course, as students who are peer reviewing a colleague's paper may find (with pleasant surprise) themselves being quoted, perhaps juxtaposed with "other" experts from the course texts. And they think about ways of incorporating alternative forms of evidence into their writing. In addition, using posts in this way can discourage plagiarism.

Of course, if you want students to use posts as evidence, then you must set up threads that are relevant to the project or essay topics you assign, but that is normally not a problem. For instance,

say students are working on persuasive intelligent design, and you asked posts. You can use thread prompts for opinions—such as the simple thread of the concepts of intelligent design ties to find opinions from classmates.

#### USE MESSAGE BOARD POSTS AS PART

Another way to encourage student participation is to use message board materials over the course of the message board materials. I often use "My Favorite Post" (see Chapter 9) to encourage students to think about the course, choose a favorite, and post a thread like this both at the end of the course and at the beginning. I have had an overall excellent post, a particularly great post. In addition, an assignment allows students to "post" an advantage of using an assignment to encourage better assessment. As Message board assignments, "using an on-going evaluation of posts" or some other mechanism—both into earlier stages of the course" to urge to give them my own favorite stand out for me. When asked, I used the father of three kids: "You're

### CMS Tracking Functions

It has taken me a while to get the most out of your CMS most likely has functions for participation in the course. This can be used seldom use these functions, but they are good by helping you identify empty participation so you can notify students. The students who have barely checked

examples, but students can certainly message boards. This is another area of I can productively give them the reins moderated environment.

### *Are Reading the Posts?*

Chapter 7, and it's a tricky question I offer several additional strategies and stay current with the message

### CHALLENGES FOR ORIGINALITY AND UNIQUE

tion that posts should contribute to I post an opening prompt that asks students simply respond to it in similar form giving 8s, even on otherwise good check that students are *building* on the

### SOURCES IN PROJECTS AND ESSAYS

class posts as sources in their papers gy, as I think that asking for this type ous pedagogical goals. Students must y to find material for their particular gin to construct or consider authority who are peer reviewing a colleague's (not surprise) themselves being quoted, "other" experts from the course texts. of incorporating alternative forms of In addition, using posts in this way

students to use posts as evidence, then t are relevant to the project or essay normally not a problem. For instance,

### *Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing*

say students are working on persuasive essays about the topic of intelligent design, and you asked them to cite their classmates' posts. You can use thread prompts and responses that would elicit opinions—such as the simple thread starter, "What do you think of the concepts of intelligent design?"—so they have opportunities to find opinions from classmates that are worthy of citation.

### USE MESSAGE BOARD POSTS AS PART OF OTHER ASSIGNMENTS

Another way to encourage students to read is to use some informal assignments over the course of the term that draw back on the message board materials. I often use the informal assignment "My Favorite Post" (see Chapter 9 for an example). This assignment asks students to think about other posts they have read in the course, choose a favorite, and compliment that poster. I use a thread like this both at the end of the term, for someone who has been an overall excellent poster, and early in the term, for a particularly great post. In addition to helping them read, the assignment allows students to "pay it back" to each other. One advantage of using an assignment like this mid-term is that it can encourage better assessment. As Meyer noted of such "evaluative" assignments, "using an on-going evaluation process—such as 'best posts' or some other mechanism—brings a form of useful feedback into earlier stages of the course" (16). Incidentally, I resist the urge to give them my own favorite, although usually one or two stand out for me. When asked, I use the lame strategy I learned as the father of three kids: "You're all special. . . ."

### CMS Tracking Functions

It has taken me a while to get here, but you should know that your CMS most likely has functions that help you track students' participation in the course. This can feel Orwellian, and in fact, I seldom use these functions, but they might do some pedagogical good by helping you identify empirically low levels of participation so you can notify students. The data will be obvious for those students who have barely checked in on the boards.

## Other Types of Conversations

The focus of this chapter has been asynchronous communications through message boards. I think the pedagogical opportunities for the OWcourse are richest in this environment, and most new teachers can quickly and easily become acclimated to CMS-driven message boards. But there are many other options, and I consider them briefly here.

### *Listserv*

You can do many of the things described earlier with a **listserv**, an email list to which you and your students subscribe. Messages sent to the listserv email address go to everyone in the class. Students can manage conversations by emailing the list, and you can sort conversations by subject. In terms of organization, a listserv seems inadequate when compared to message boards, but all the listserv requires is that students have an email address. So in that regard, it's simpler than a message board, as there is no login, and the messages go directly into a student's inbox.

### *Chat*

Chat is a well-established method of online communication and certainly has its use for OWcourses. For FYW courses, I think chat has some limitations, because the focus of the FYW course is often different from that of other courses: content is not king. Because I am building the course through student texts, I want more time with those texts, and I want students to spend more time creating them. Also, multiple-user conversations on chat can quickly fall into chaos. In comparing the advantages of boards to chats, Hayes said, "Chatrooms are fast-paced and ephemeral. The threads of the discussion are all tangled together, which is not as much a problem for the IM-savvy students to follow as it is for us. Bulletin boards save all the discussion so it can be continued days or even months later" (72).

Teachers have found good uses for chat and synchronous

conversations in online English c  
Donna Logan observed that real-tim  
space for engaging reading in makin  
Katherine Simpson described a syn  
five to seven students and a peer tut  
Simpson noted the dearth of com  
environments, remarking that in h  
sion participants "felt much more p  
classmates, and the peer tutors,"  
who don't miss many f2f classes. "  
their online courses to have the inte  
have," she said, "to try a synchro  
and involve peer tutors who can ex  
that we as social beings need to ens  
(429). Like Simpson, I sometimes u  
or small groups of students about  
tems have chat functions, and man  
companies, such as book publishers  
to converse in this way. Ko and R  
"establishing effective synchronou  
limiting the size of chat groups to  
allowing time for students to social  
(213–17). You can find uses for syn  
the bulk of the communication in  
methods like message boards seem

### *Voice*

Companies like Horizon Wimba an  
technologies, which can even be us  
experience by bringing all students  
times video tools. A number of peo  
way, and it's common for students  
a virtual classroom facilitated by A  
I am not highly experienced with t  
approach to the OWcourse is to  
technologies.

## tions

been asynchronous communications. I think the pedagogical opportunities in this environment, and most new people become acclimated to CMS-driven systems. There are many other options, and I consider

As described earlier with a listserv, you can have your students subscribe. Messages sent to the listserv go to everyone in the class. Students can unsubscribe by emailing the list, and you can archive the list. In terms of organization, a listserv is similar to message boards, but all the messages have an email address. So in that way, it's like a message board, as there is no login, and messages go into a student's inbox.

One method of online communication and collaboration in OW courses. For FYW courses, I think the focus of the FYW course is on writing. In other courses: content is not king. In OW courses through student texts, I want to encourage students to spend more time on peer-to-peer conversations on chat can be a good thing. Comparing the advantages of boards to chat, chat is fast-paced and ephemeral. The messages are tangled together, which is not as easy for students to follow as it is for a discussion so it can be continued later).

I use chat and synchronous

## *Conversation: Online, Course "Talk" Can Become Writing*

conversations in online English courses. Kathleen Carico and Donna Logan observed that real-time chats provide an alternative space for engaging reading in making meaning through literature. Katherine Simpson described a synchronous environment where five to seven students and a peer tutor work in an "office" (424). Simpson noted the dearth of commentary about synchronous environments, remarking that in her class synchronous discussion participants "felt much more positive about the course, their classmates, and the peer tutors," and likening this to students who don't miss many face-to-face classes. "I encourage those who want their online courses to have the integrity that face-to-face classes have," she said, "to try a synchronous discussion component and involve peer tutors who can extend the personal connection that we as social beings need to ensure that learning takes place" (429). Like Simpson, I sometimes use chat to talk to individuals or small groups of students about their writing. Most CMS systems have chat functions, and many sites by educational support companies, such as book publishers, provide options for students to converse in this way. Ko and Rossen offered helpful tips for "establishing effective synchronous communication," including limiting the size of chat groups to four or five participants, and allowing time for students to socialize and ask off-task questions (213-17). You can find uses for synchronous technologies, but for the bulk of the communication in an OWcourse, asynchronous methods like message boards seem superior.

## *Voice*

Companies like Horizon Wimba are ahead of the curve on voice technologies, which can even be used to replicate the classroom experience by bringing all students together via audio and sometimes video tools. A number of people teach online courses in this way, and it's common for students and teachers to be linked in a virtual classroom facilitated by AV conferencing technologies. I am not highly experienced with these technologies because my approach to the OWcourse is to use asynchronous text-based technologies.



### MOO Environments and Avatar

As I wrote this book, I understood that online communications are rapidly changing. I have recently begun experimenting with Second Life, a more sophisticated virtual world than older environments like the MOO (Multi-User Domain–Object Oriented). Millions of people participate in immersive networked gaming experiences. Educators have been working with ways to use these technologies, including Second Life, to provide virtual classrooms where *avatars*—representations of the users—can assemble and learn. These technologies, though imperfect for some educational uses, offer yet another way of facilitating classroom community and conversation. I have a Second Life avatar (and I even have a virtual desk for it), but up until now it has led a lonely, mostly neglected existence. Perhaps at some point I will put it into action to see how I can teach with it.

**Guideline 26:** Some interesting synchronous technologies exist out there; you can experiment with them as you develop as an online writing teacher.

A final word about these more “advanced” conversational technologies: many of them might seem to render the message board rather humble, but let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. The message board is still a superb, flexible, easy-to-use technology for the online FYW experience because it allows students time to read, think, and write. Basic message board technology also provides an easy, one-stop way for instructors to manage these conversations. Levine asserted that message boards don’t just reproduce f2f conversations, but instead “support higher-order constructivist learning and the development of a learning community. . . . The discussion board has the potential to provide the basis for creating a climate whereby the learning process is not limited by the traditions of face-to-face instruction” (“Online” 68). By using this simple technology, you can set up your class to do many of the things you want in your first OWcourse term.

### Pre-term Questions

- ◆ *What type of communication will you use in its operation in your CMS. If you use message boards will work for you. You will learn how to set them up. Do you have a thread prompt before the term begins to proceed.*
- ◆ *Do you have a grading scheme? How about the way you want to grade? Chapter 12 might help you. How does your grade fits into the overall grade?*
- ◆ *What kind of deadlines do you have? Lines around times when you will read and respond to student posts. If you are busy on Saturdays, don’t have a thread. By the time you check the posts.*
- ◆ *Do you want to try some of the new technologies? You’ll want to think through you will ensure students can “meet” you.*

## Avatar

understood that online communications recently begun experimenting with a more sophisticated virtual world than older environments (Multi-User Domain-Object Oriented). The move to immersive networked gaming environments has been working with ways to use these environments to provide virtual classrooms. The avatars of the users—can assemble and interact in a virtual world, though imperfect for some educational purposes. The goal of facilitating classroom community in a virtual world. I have a second Life avatar (and I even have a virtual pet). Until now it has led a lonely, mostly virtual life. At some point I will put it into action.

Existing synchronous technologies exist and integrate with them as you develop as an

more “advanced” conversational environments might seem to render the message board obsolete. We might not get too far ahead of ourselves. The new, superb, flexible, easy-to-use technologies are being developed because it allows students time to interact. Basic message board technology also allows time for instructors to manage these environments. I think that message boards don’t just replace the classroom but instead “support higher-order learning.” The development of a learning community in a virtual world has the potential to provide the same benefits as face-to-face instruction. (“Online” learning technology, you can set up your class environment in your first OWcourse term.

## Conversation: Online, Course “Talk” Can Become Writing

### Pre-term Questions

- ◆ *What type of communication will you use?* Learn the basics of its operation in your CMS. If, based on what you have read here, message boards will work for most of your communications, then learn how to set them up. Don’t feel pressured to lay out every thread prompt before the term starts. You’ll be inspired as you proceed.
- ◆ *Do you have a grading scheme for these conversations?* Think about the way you want to evaluate student conversations. Chapter 12 might help you consider how your message board grade fits into the overall grading scheme for the term.
- ◆ *What kind of deadlines do you want to have?* Base those deadlines around times when you will be able to most productively read and respond to student posts. For instance, if you are often busy on Saturdays, don’t have the deadlines fall on a Saturday. By the time you check the posts, the conversation will be over.
- ◆ *Do you want to try some of the newer synchronous tools?* If so, you’ll want to think through your pedagogical objective and make sure students can “meet” you in that cyberspace classroom.