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Saved by the (Alexander Graham) Bell: An Analysis of Synchronous Communication and Student Satisfaction / Retention Rates in the First Year Online Composition Classroom

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Saved by the … (Alexander Graham) … Bell!

An Analysis of Synchronous Communication and

Student Satisfaction / Retention Rates in the First-Year Online Composition Classroom

by

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ABSTRACT

Online first-year writing courses, with all of their promise, still maintain alarmingly low retention and student satisfaction rates, driving online curriculum designers to take another look at ways to increase both retention and satisfaction. To replicate the high rates of face-to-face classes, we must revisit and revise our approach to communication in the first-year writing online classroom. Think about it: The online classroom has abandoned a mainstay in education for thousands of years – synchronous communication. Why have we been so quick to dispose of it? Are we now paying the price?

This research will provide additional value to the existing body of knowledge through analyzing the findings of several studies and determining if a causal link exists between synchronous instructor / student communication and student satisfaction and retention rates in post-secondary first-year online composition courses. The research will also examine if the student's perceived level of teacher presence impacts student satisfaction and retention rates. From this analysis, this thesis will also draw conclusions and make recommendations regarding professional development policies and best practices regarding synchronous communication in the first-year online composition course.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Why this topic?

Synchronous communication, an integral practice in the art of teaching where a teacher stands before students lecturing, interacting, and fielding questions has been a longstanding practice in education since Socrates lectured Plato in Athens circa 450 B.C. However, it now demands our attention in the contemporary online composition world of the virtual classroom. Why?

Online first-year writing courses, with all of their promise, still maintain alarmingly low retention and student satisfaction rates, driving online curriculum designers to take another look at ways to increase both retention and satisfaction. To replicate the high rates of face-to-face classes, we must revisit and revise our approach to communication in the first-year writing online classroom. Think about it: The online classroom has abandoned a mainstay in education for thousands of years – synchronous communication. Why have we been so quick to discard it? Are we now paying the price?

Let me further explain my background and the conception of my research premise: I have been a secondary English instructor in both public face-to-face (for five years) and public online teaching environments (three years and continuing to the present). What surprised me most moving from face-to-face to the online world, or from "brick to click," and working for FLVS, Florida Virtual School, an award winning model in virtual secondary instruction, is that I am *more* connected to my students than I was in the traditional classroom – not *less*.

Why is this? Could the best practices that I use in my secondary online classroom be applicable to the post-secondary first-year writing online one and help solve the current concerns about low retention and satisfaction rates? To address this problem and establish the importance of this research, I began to wonder if part of the solution to the high online drop-out and low satisfaction rate was not right under our noses – the telephone! Yes, perhaps one of the answers lies in a technological device we all know how to use – the telephone! To date a virtually ignored technological consideration in post secondary best practices literature, it may be one of the answers we are looking for to improve retention rates and student satisfaction in first-year online writing courses. Let me explain.

At FLVS[1], instructors, students and parents begin the course with a *Welcome Call* introducing them to the teacher, building rapport, and reviewing expectations. Thereafter, each student must complete *Monthly Call*s every 30 days with teachers and parents to discuss progress and questions about assessments. Throughout the 18 week course, students must also complete about four *Discussion Based Assessments* about classroom content. These assessments are conducted over the phone or in Elluminate, a virtual classroom which allows synchronous communication. FLVS teachers also encourage

> *In my online course, I deliver more differentiated, personalized, and affective communication and instruction than was ever possible in the face-to-face classroom!*

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[1] FLVS is the recipient of the following prestigious awards: 2008 Better Government Award, 2007 Ed Net Pioneer Award, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2007: United States Distance Learning Association Best Practices Awards, 2003 Business Week - Named as a "Top 50 Web Smart Organization" (Florida 4).

students to call and use text messaging to contact them with questions or concerns as they progress through the course material.

What are the results of all these phone calls and text messages? In my online course, I deliver more differentiated, personalized, and affective communication and instruction than was ever possible in the face-to-face classroom! After sharing several one-on-one phone conversations with students, along with the inevitable laughs, frustrations, and discussions about course content, it follows that I am more connected to and understand my online students better than my traditional classroom students. Thus, I am able to better motivate them to completion and serve FLVS with higher retention and student satisfaction rates.

I began to ask, could first-year online writing instructors receive training to implement a model similar to FLVS that weaves *Welcome Calls*, *Monthly Calls*, and *DBA's (Discussion Based Assessments)* into the first-year online writing curriculum to help increase retention rates and student satisfaction in the post-secondary first-year online composition courses? Would a stronger online teacher presence make a difference? Does contact and connection count when considering retention rates and student satisfaction?

Pam Birtolo et al in the article, "Virtual Success: Transforming Education Through Online Learning*"* explains that at FLVS we understand that students are drawn to the communication tools they use daily to interact with their peers--cell phones, e-mail, and text messaging. "We are effectively using these same tools to inspire students to reach for higher levels of academic achievement, and we are seeing true school reform. We have reinvented the educational delivery system with the end user--students--in mind,

using tools, content, and teaching strategies that help students develop critical-thinking skills, build global awareness, and gain 21st-century skills" (Birtolo1). Karen Faucett's article, "Virtual Schoolteacher," details what this teaching philosophy looks like in practical application. Her article gives an overview of a typical "day in the life of a Florida Virtual teacher" demonstrating her skill at balancing synchronous communication with grading and classroom management issues. (Faucett 1).

The authenticity of the interaction … matters more than anything. It is commendable that FLVS has garnered such high marks for caring, even in a virtual environment"

To ensure course rigor and maintain academic integrity in instruction, FLVS conducts student surveys consisting of eighteen questions on different aspects of the course on each individual teacher on a quarterly basis and compiles the empirical data to compute annual results. According to FLVS external survey data of our parents and students, "95% of all students say that their teacher shows a special interest in them." In education, whether virtual or face to face, "the authenticity of the interaction between a student and a teacher matters more than anything. It is commendable that FLVS has garnered such high marks for caring, even in a virtual environment" (Birtolo 2). In my personal FLVS classroom experience, 97% of my students, when surveyed, responded with either a *Strongly Agree* or an *Agree* that to the question, "My online teacher demonstrated an interest in my success as a student." Would a similar survey of first-year online writing students yield similar results? Would 97% agree that their teacher demonstrated an interest in their success? Or, would the student response reflect what many of us have

experienced in online learning in college – the unavailability of the professor – meeting only at the beginning or ending of the semester (Simpson 2).

Part of this thesis will include a survey of relevant literature that situates my research question within the published scholarship and establishes the importance of it. My literature review will detail the continued rise of online learning in general, the migration in English Departments from face-to-face first-year writing courses to online ones, and the alarmingly low retention and student satisfaction rates in first-year online composition courses.

Chapter 2: Statement of Research Question and Thesis

Since most major universities are now offering first-year composition online, the identification of best practices for teaching first-year writing online carries implications for writing program faculty, university administrators, and students. This research will provide additional value to the existing body of knowledge through analyzing the findings of several studies and determining if a causal link exists between synchronous instructor / student communication and student satisfaction and retention rates in post-secondary first-year online composition courses. The research will also examine if the student's perceived level of teacher presence impacts student satisfaction and retention rates.   From this analysis, this thesis will also draw conclusions and make recommendations regarding professional development policies and best practices regarding synchronous communication in the first-year online composition course. Specific research questions include:

➢ Is there a causal link between synchronous instructor/student communication and student satisfaction and retention rates in first-year online composition courses?

➢ What impact does the student's perceived level of teacher presence have on student satisfaction and retention rates in first-year online composition courses?

> ➢ What research-based professional development policies and best practices should writing program administrators implement regarding synchronous communication in the first-year online composition course?

Definition of Terms

The term, *synchronous communication,* means a one-to-one synchronous interaction with a student. Examples include the following: face to face conversation, phone calls, an instant message, text messaging, or a tutorial session in a virtual classroom like *Elluminate Live*, *Blackboard Collaborate*, *Skype, Wimba Live*, *Saba Center*, or *Adobe Acrobat Connect*. In other words, the communication is instantaneous. *Asynchronous communication,* or communication that is not simultaneous, includes email, a recorded lecture, a video clip, electronic discussion boards or any other digital platform where the student is not able to interact immediately with the professor.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Basis for the Research

In their 2010 book, *Teaching and Learning with Technology: Beyond Constructivism*, the editors map the theoretical foundations of 21st century technologies indicating that technologies for teaching and learning have become more "sensorially and spatially sophisticated and socially interactive … able to create educational experience through a spatial immersion in and interaction with psychological perceptions or illusions of teachers, learners and submitted matter in virtual learning environments" (Stewart 261).

The classroom has embarked on a path from a once-linear, hierarchical, sender-message-receiver system drawing on the instructivist paradigm from the research dating 1956-1998 to an interactive social network seated in a social constructivist framework starting with Albert Bandura's social learning theory in 1977 and Jean Piaget's work. Then, theorists have promoted an engaging spatial environment that promoted cognitive (thoughtful) and affective (satisfying) performance from a cognitive constructivist perspective (Stewart 261).

Today, theorist rely on a combination of systems linking the conceptualization of "spatial and social telepresense [through the work of Short et al 1976] with the characteristics of media richness [through the work of Daft & Lengel's 1984 work: *Informational Richness, A New Approach to Managerial Behavior and Organizational Design*] and social presence theories and the pedagogies of instructivism and social and cognitive constructivism" (259).

Media richness theory suggests that the more cues afforded to a user by a medium, the richer the medium (Stewart 74). "Specifically, richness and its inverse, leanness, are determined by four dimensions: (1) availability of instant feedback, (2) the use of multiple cues, (3) the use of natural language, and (4) personal focus" (Daft 556).

Jill Schiefelbein explains in her 2011 article, "Media Richness and Communication in Online Education" that instructors should choose a Media Richness Theory (MRT) framework to select the best medium to deliver a message. "In MRT, richness is signified by the medium's competence in achieving four goals: sending multiple cues, supporting language variety, providing immediate feedback and allowing personal nature to be communicated. Given these parameters, a simple text-only, asynchronous element in an online course would be the least rich medium, whereas a synchronous videoconference or webinar would be the richest" (Schiefelbein 7). Thus, Media Richness Theory seems to support a more synchronous approach to online learning. Engaging in more conversational assessments certainly meets the criteria of MRT.

Chapter 4: Literature Review: Online Learning

In the eighth annual report, the most recent, on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education published in 2010, the Sloan Consortium found based on responses from more than 2,500 colleges and universities that "There is **no** compelling evidence that the continued robust growth in online enrollments is at its end" (Allen 4). In fact, online enrollments have continued to grow at rates far in excess of the total higher education student population. "Over 5.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2009 term; an increase of nearly one million students, and the twenty-one percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the less than two percent growth of the overall higher education student population (2).

Scott Warnock, in his 2009 book, *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*, cites the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) issued revised technology standards for teachers in June 2008, and "the creators began with the assumption this time that every teacher recognizes the importance of technology and how it can transform teaching and learning" (Warnock x). In fact, Larjeane Thomas, chair of ISTE's standards committee and director of the group's National Educational Technology Standard project states that "technology is increasingly becoming a given in instructional design – the question now is not *if*, but *how* teachers will use it" (Warnock x).

Similar sentiments seem to be echoing through the halls of English Departments nationwide; "Online first-year writing courses are now accepted in higher education, not fatalistically, but realistically, and attention has turned from justification toward best use"

(Boyd 224). Patricia Boyd succinctly summarizes the general consensus in the field of composition studies: the first-year composition online classroom is a permanent fixture, and "we must now focus on best practices or face the perils of not paying attention" (Anson, Blair, Clark, Selfe).

Merry A. Rendahl conducted a case study for her 2010 dissertation called *Moving First-Year Writing Online*, and she listed the proliferation of first-year composition online courses as of her publication date of 2010: The following are just a small sample of schools that offer first-year writing courses in an exclusively online environment: University of Northern Arizona (Eng 105); University of Colorado Denver (ENGL-1020-3 —Core Composition); University of Florida (ENC 101), University of Minnesota (WRIT 1301 University Writing); University of Wisconsin (ENG 101) . . . Arizona State University (ASU) and the University of Minnesota (UMN) (Rendahl 7-8).

Although the field agrees that the online first-year writing course is now a permanent fixture, and many schools are even offering first-year writing courses in an exclusively online environment, we still have more work to do to create a successful online classroom experience for our virtual students. Scott Warnock explains that he joined Drexel University in the summer of 2004 as director of OWT, Online Writing Teachers, with the new initiative in the Department of English to offer first-year writing (FYW) courses in fully online formats. He explains that after hundreds of hours working with teachers who were learning how to incorporate teaching technologies into their pedagogical approaches, he began to realize that although resources for teaching online were plentiful, materials specifically designed for teaching writing online and the teaching philosophy that accompanies online composition instruction are scarce. (x).

Literature Review: Online Writing Synchronous Communication Research

Clearly, face to face classrooms rely on synchronous communication almost entirely. Naturally, the professor and students speak to each other and communicate both verbally and non-verbally. However, administrators and professors, in developing online classrooms, often negate or fail to replicate this vital synchronous communication element virtually. Not only is Scott Warnock correct in his findings that materials are scarce for teaching writing online and the teaching philosophy that accompanies online composition instruction, but even less information exists on synchronous communication in the online writing classroom. (Rendahl, Simpson, Warnock).

Katherine Simpson's 2006 work with synchronous peer tutoring also emphasized the dearth in research regarding synchronous communication in the online writing classroom in her study on the use of online peer tutors to facilitate the writing process (Simpson 8). With these limitations in mind, I will broaden my literature review to include studies examining the link between communication, dialogue, interaction and student satisfaction / retention generally in an online learning setting to examine the findings of current research.

Communication and dialogue are important elements in all teaching environments, particularly the online classroom. In the virtual classroom, instructors must strive to optimize interaction between learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-

content through effective modes of communication (Chen & Willits, 1999; Jung 2001; Moore, 1993; McBrien, 2009). Online classrooms need improved modes of teaching and learning strategies and access to real-time interaction with the instructor and class peers similar to the traditional classroom setting. In fact, "students have asked for more opportunities to interact with each other in synchronistic ways" (West 7). Amy Weiss cites a study of online chat from 2001 that concludes that more "learning can be experienced and revealed in the synchronous versus the asynchronous discussions" (Stewart 94). Her article discusses the move away from online chat because of its labor-intensive nature, but she advocates for more synchronous interactions, not less, and the study affirms her premise. She further reveals that scholars experimenting with synchronous technologies like Skype to discuss course material anecdotally found that it helped students "understand, recall and clarify the information in the interactions … the students were more motivated to learn in the course as a result of using Skype" (Steward 94).

Another synchronistic solution similar to Skype is Elluminate, a virtual classroom. In "Virtual Spaces: Employing a Synchronous Online Classroom to Facilitate Student Engagement in Online Learning," J. Lynn McBrien and Phyllis Jones (of the University of South Florida) along with Rui Cheng engaged in a collaborative study among faculty in social foundations, special education, and instructional technology in which they analyzed student data from six undergraduate and graduate courses related to the use of a virtual classroom space. Their research questions examined the strengths and weaknesses of the synchronous online learning platforms and the effect of the platform on student learning experiences. They focused on the three elements of Moore's 1993

Theory of Transactional Distance: dialogue, structure and learner autonomy in an effort to reduce the "distance" students feel in distance learning.

Their research questions examined the strengths and weaknesses of the synchronous online learning platforms and the effect of the platform on student learning experiences. Specifically, their research questions were:

1. Do synchronous online platforms (specifically Elluminate Live!) increase the social interaction that is missing in other, older forms of distance learning? Is this increase sufficient to create a positive learning experience for students?

2. What are the specific strengths and weaknesses of currently available synchronous online learning platforms, and what could be done to reduce the weaknesses?

McBrien et al found that the students reported positive experiences with the virtual classroom, and the students reported increased participation and increased reflection time (13). As well, the synchronous environment empowered students in conversation and expression particularly with shy students who do not usually initiate conversation in a face-to-face setting (13).

McBrien et al report a 2007 study where Ng used the synchronous virtual system called Interwise for online tutoring offered by Open University of Hong Kong. They collected interview data from six tutors and eight students to examine teaching effectiveness and opportunities for interaction. The results indicated positive student feedback from the students viewing the platform as successful for online tutoring (McBrien 2). They also cite a 2004 study of nursing students who used Elluminate. The

Battin-Little, Passmore, and Schullo study reported enhanced learning experience, improved communication, high levels of satisfaction with the course and strong group cohesion (McBrien 2).

In a meta-analysis called "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Distance Learning: A Comparison Using Meta-Analysis" conducted my Mike Allen et al in 2004 evaluated twenty-seven educational designs that were synchronous, and "those approaches demonstrated a small positive correlation, indicating distance education groups obtained improved outcomes." The Allen et al meta-analysis also found that the type of communication used in a distance course may influence student satisfaction and retention, and student satisfaction is a major factor in predicting drop-out and retention rates (Allen 411).

In "Learning From a Distance: The Experience of Remote Students," Owens et al states that "a significant factor underlying the attrition of distance students has been reported as a sense of isolation, influenced by physical isolation and a sense of not belonging to the learning institution" (Owens 57). Central to the engagement of students in their learning is the quality of interaction. "Interaction is one of the factors affecting student satisfaction and retention" (Owen 57).

Craig Bailey conducted a qualitative phenomenological research study in 2008 of best practices for online teaching; he examined and found nine predominant best practices that emerged from an analysis of his data: timeliness, organization, relationships, technology, engagement, flexibility, high expectations, communication, and understanding the differences between teaching online and on-ground university classes. Interestingly, one third of his nine predominant best practices concern

instructor/student connection: specifically, *relationships, engagement and communication*. (Bailey 55).

These studies seem to indicate a causal link between synchronous instructor-student communication and student satisfaction and retention rates in first-year online composition courses. Finally, Donald F. Logsdon in his article, "Online Teaching Defended," states that in a virtual classroom,

> Instructors are in contact with students almost every day,
>
> rather than just at a regular class time or during office hours.
>
> . . The truth is that in an online course each student has a
>
> one-on-one relationship with the instructor and most students
>
> are therefore able to learn much more than just sitting in a
>
> large class (200+) in a typical auditorium style on-ground
>
> class. While some of the experience of being in an on-ground
>
> class may be good, it is of little value if you never actually
>
> get to talk to the instructor (1).

Chapter 5: Virtual Problems: The Crumbling Retaining Wall

Many institutions, like Scott Warnock's Drexel University, stopped offering fully online writing classes to first-term first-year students because the add and drop rates and grades in these classes were so high that this sent a signal that students were not being well served. He states that in 2004, his face-to-face class only had an 8 percent drop rate while his online course had a 44 percent drop rate (Warnock 13). His 2009 book, *Teaching Writing Online*, does effectively explore how to teach an online (or hybrid) writing course by discussing teacher preparation, online learning, and managing student written communications. Much of it is applicable and useful; however, he does not really provide concrete solutions to the student retention or dissatisfaction issues; instead, he simply suggests that the course be limited to motivated, prepared students "who can thrive in the fully online course and receive the full benefits of operating in a completely textual class environment" (Warnock 14). He advocates heavily for the use of discussion boards, list servs and other asynchronous tools in constructing a virtual writing class. He only devotes a small paragraph to the telephone and other synchronous tools and even states that the "normal constraints of synchronous or onsite conversations are absent in the message board environment" (Warnock 69, 114, 130).

While, I do agree that asynchronous communication can be a part of a successful online writing program, I disagree with his almost entirely textual and asynchronous approach to first-year composition. As well, I disagree with his student "profiling" approach to online success; rather than pre-selecting prepared and motivated students, I

would advocate for approaches that reach all learning types. For example, in my secondary virtual classroom, I am often faced with special needs or lower functioning students who would not even meet the Drexel or any other university admissions standards committee criteria, yet I am able to provide a successful learning experience through using best practices including synchronous communication to yield matriculated students rather than a pre-qualification process he seems to employ and advocate. If I am able to successfully navigate a low functioning student through my online class, why does he need to use profiling criteria on higher level, college-admitted students? With the proper tools, should not all college students have the opportunity to be successful in the online classroom?

I believe that if we marry the synchronous communication elements detailed in this thesis and practiced successfully every day in the secondary virtual environment to elements sound composition practices for online writing instruction, we will have the magic formula to not only keep the students in the class and end the year with high satisfaction rates, but also ensure strong pedagogical fundamentals in the first-year online writing classroom.

David Sapp and James Simon in their work published in Computers and Composition, "Comparing grades in online and face-to-face writing courses: Interpersonal Accountability and Institutional Commitment" cite seven educational research studies that document the challenges regarding retention rate and student satisfaction resulting from the shift from face-to-face classroom interactions to online learning. In addition to high student attrition (students who do not complete the courses and do not earn passing grades), they also report higher levels of dissatisfaction than

students enrolled in equivalent face to face courses. Students also "tend to leave with higher instances of unfinished learning goals, a sense of decreased importance of teacher feedback and a lack of engagement in the learning process" (Sapp 472).

In the 2011 work of Jungjoo Kim et al, their research shows that "the retention rate of overall online courses is still low compared to face to face instruction" (1512). Kim et al conducted a study published in *Computers & Education* where they found that media integration and instructor's quality teaching were significant predictors of social presence, and online learning experiences have reported a close relationship with social presence and learning satisfaction (1513).

The "Thrive or Dive" Phenomenon in Online Writing

Sapp and Simon, mentioned previously, who are two first-year writing program directors at a comprehensive university located in New England, conducted a 2005 study of the phenomenon they coined "thrive or dive" syndrome in online writing courses. The phrase describes the online sections in which most of the students received final grades grouped at either the top or the bottom of the range. In other words, "students in online courses were nearly as likely to receive a grade of A, A−, or B+ (38%), what we and most students would consider *thriving*, as they were to either withdraw, receive a grade of D or F, or take an incomplete in the course (33%), that is, *diving*" (Sapp 474).

Sapp and Simon constructed another table that showed that in the "four courses examined, 30% of students did not complete the courses on schedule; that is they withdrew, received incompletes, or failed the courses. In contrast, none of the students in the face-to-face courses failed to complete. This pattern is consistent across both writing

courses we examined" (Sapp 473).   Their final table showed that in equivalent face-to-face courses taught by the same teachers at the same time, students tended to receive higher final grades compared to their online counterpart (Sapp 474).

As a result of the above data and their continuing search for answers, Sapp and Simon interviewed online faculty and learned that high performing students tend to complete virtual courses; however, other, less driven students disappear and receive failing grades. (475). They also reviewed other potential causes for the high drop-out rate in online writing courses: faculty differences, part-time v. full time faculty, class size limits, faculty investment, grading standards and learning objectives and expectations. Ultimately, they concluded that the differences were not a result of the courses being offered by different faculty, using different textbooks, assignments or learning methods, but rather found that "one of the primary reasons for the difference in the grades students received seems to be that the student dropout rate in online writing courses is significantly higher than it is for students in equivalent face to face courses (475). Sapp et al cite three other studies published between 2001 and 2003 about reasons students perform poorly in online courses with the findings as lost motivation, institutional failure to recognize excused absences, and increased student dropout (476). Thus, the problems facing online writing instruction seem to be well documented and universally experienced in learning institutions offering online courses. Let us now explore and analyze some potential synchronous solutions and the research findings that accompany them.

Chapter 6: Repairing the Retaining Wall: Mortar, Glue and Spackle

My ironic metaphor of the brick and mortar retaining wall actually plays well when considering this issue. When a wall is in need of repair, we look to compounds such as mortar, glue, and spackle – items that bring materials together and connect them. To repair our crumbling virtual retention walls, we need the same: solutions that will bring instructors and students together and connect them. Sapp and Simon agree and conclude their study arguing for increased interpersonal connections among teachers, students, and writing program administrators in higher education (477).

"The factor that made the difference was the amount of personal attention and online interaction."

"We believe increased interpersonal contact between teachers and students (and among students) is necessary" (Sapp 478). They acknowledge that online courses do offer opportunities for socialization through email, online chats, and other computer-mediated interactions, but conclude that these forms of interaction do not replace synchronous interaction, nor do they provide the interpersonal camaraderie that increases student's motivation to learn (478). In this sense, "education – even online education – is (and must be) more than the delivery of content; it is the purveyor of the social skills necessary for living satisfying and productive personal and professional lives" (478).

Dean Spitzer's article "Don't Forget the High-Touch with the High-Tech in Distance Learning," discusses a program he led and designed at Boise State University in 2000 for an online Masters Degree Program in Instructional and Performance Technology. By his own admission, the technology in his 2000 course was very primitive and cumbersome, and all of the courses were almost entirely text-based, but he only had a 5% drop-out rate. The factor that made the difference was the "amount of personal attention and online interaction" (Spitzer 52). He admits that this approach is labor intensive, but he credits it with overcoming "all of the other weaknesses in the program and meet the human needs of the students" (52).

Spitzer then cites a 2000 study from the American Society for Training and Development that replicates the findings previously discussed for the drop-out rate. The reasons relate mostly to human factors such as lack of incentives and lack of accountability for course completion (Spitzer 52). Spitzer discusses two other studies who cite the importance of human interaction in distance learning stating that the "lack of effective human interaction was usually the main culprit" for the failure most virtually based technological programs (52).

Spitzer's article, albeit from 2001, cites studies that date back over twenty years stating the importance of human interaction in online education. We seem to have known that human interaction is important for years, but have grappled with integration. Universities have been slow to incorporate this interaction when designing their online writing courses. Perhaps, writing program administrators and university faculty perhaps fear that a more synchronous approach may be too labor-intensive, training-intensive, expensive, and difficult to replicate in the online classroom.

However, in my own classroom at FLVS, significantly larger than the course load of most full-time first-year college writing instructors, I am able to handle the grading, phone calls and synchronous meetings each week reasonably. Since most first-year writing instructors teach only about three classes combined with their own graduate work – or about 75 students, my belief is that writing administrators can implement synchronous best practices that are not labor intensive and will allay the fears that teachers will have to act as a personal tutors to each student individually.

Chapter 7: Exploring Synchronous Solutions for Teachers of Online Writing Courses

➢ *The Telephone*

The telephone, both texting and phone calls, is perhaps the most useful synchronous tool, and it requires no training! At FLVS, instructors, students and parents begin the course with a *Welcome Call* introducing them to the teacher, building rapport, and reviewing expectations. Thereafter, each student must complete *Monthly Call*s every 30 days with teachers and parents to discuss progress and questions about assessments. Throughout the 18 week course, students must also complete about four *Discussion Based Assessments* about classroom content -- also conducted over the phone or in Elluminate, a virtual classroom which allows synchronous communication. FLVS teachers also encourage students to call and use text messaging to contact them with questions or concerns as they progress through the course material. I would advocate a similar model for first-year writing courses.

Scott Warnock makes a similar suggestion in this book. He advocates for the use of ice-breakers via an asynchronous message board encouraging students to tell a little about themselves, post a picture, and name some possible debate topics (7). He responds to every post the first week in an effort to build a connection and sense of camaraderie with each student.

A Welcome Call would serve the same purpose and expedite the connection building process faster than a posting on a message board. In the Welcome Call, the

instructor gets to know the student through synchronous communication, builds

connections, and ascertains the student's reasons and motivations for taking the course.

The professor can streamline the introduction and ice-breaking process since she does not

need to respond textually.   The Welcome Call would also provide the opportunity to

assess the student's access to technology with questions like: Do you plan to work from

your own personal lap top? Will you rely on computer labs on campus to complete your

work? Is this your first online course? What concerns or reservations do you have about

this class?

Instructors can also exchange text messaging information and encourage students

to also text the instructor with concerns or questions. I have found in my work with

seniors at FLVS, mostly age 17-19, that they are shy and intimidated of speaking directly

with a teacher on the phone, and I can imagine that this fear is only intensified in their

first college course speaking directly with a professor. From my own experience, I know

that students who did not contact me prior to the Welcome Call will freely do so after it.

This contact tells me that the call was successful in building a connection and opening the

virtual office door.

I also advocate that first-year online writing courses build in a *Monthly Phone*

Call component. At FLVS, each student must complete Monthly Calls every 30 days

with teachers and parents to discuss progress and questions about assessments. FLVS

courses are 18 weeks in length, but most college courses are 14 weeks. Notwithstanding

Discussion Based Assessments, after the Welcome Call, the instructor would need to only

make three additional phone calls throughout the semester to ascertain student progress in

the course. In total, college instructors would only make four mandatory phone calls per

student / per semester to implement this model. Knowing this should allay the fears that this approach is too labor intensive.

To address the fear that these phone calls may interfere with the time needed for grading compositions, keep in mind that teachers are alleviated of the responsibility of preparing and teaching weekly classes. The synchronous contact though phone calls and meetings in Ellumiate would simply replace the time an instructor would spend preparing and teaching a face-to-face class in a traditional program.

I know that in my face-to-face and online college experience, speaking on the phone or during office hours more than once or twice during a semester was rare, and often the context was regarding mundane issues. Personally, I would have loved for a professor to personally contact me to discuss content and ascertain my progress and learning goals; most of us have rarely experienced this type of one-on-one attention at the post-secondary level.

➢ *The Discussion Based Assessment*

To ensure academic integrity at FLVS, each course conducts one-on-one Discussion Based Assessments at varying points each semester to assess a student's knowledge of course content. For example, English 4, Senior English, has a total of eight discussion-based assessments per year or four per semester. To conduct a discussion-based assessment, a student will schedule about a 20-minute appointment with the teacher using a system called *Flash Appointments*. Using scheduling software where the teacher sets the calendar times will help to eliminate phone / text tag with students and give them an opportunity to schedule an appointment with the teacher at their convenience. The

teacher will then contact the student at the designated time and begin the conversation about the particular lessons covered in the discussion based assessment. For example, in my English 4 course, students read and study the Shakespearian play, *Much Ado About Nothing*; then they schedule a discussion-based assessment where we discuss themes of trickery, deception, family dynamics, and attitudes about marriage throughout the play. I will ask them prompting questions to elicit a response and follow up with questions depending on their responses to ascertain content mastery. These assessments are meant to be conversational rather than an intimidating barrage of questions.

Adding a discussion-based assessment similar to this to the first-year online composition course will help ensure that students are not only meeting learning objectives and reading the material, but will also help to establish a connection to the professor and the course which research has shown will not only improve retention rates, but also ensure student satisfaction.

Much of the literature reviewed to prepare for this thesis discusses discussion-based assessments in the context of a group setting online either through an asynchronous message board or in a virtual office like Elluminate. I will also detail the information on current best practices regarding a discussion based assessment in a synchronous group setting in the next section.

➤ *The Virtual Office*

Several software products exists that will replicate a virtual classroom: *Elluminate Live*, *Blackboard Collaborate*, *Skype, Wimba Live*, *Saba Center*, or *Adobe Acrobat Connect*. In my FLSV classroom, I use Elluminate which has the ability to allow several

students, even over 1000 people at time, into an office. Each participant can see the same computer screen, so a teacher can load a Powerpoint presentation or view a web site on the internet. Students, wearing a headset, can click on the microphone to speak. Teachers are granted "moderator" status, and this allows them to choose to give students privileges to use the following tools: microphone, drawing, and chat box. This allows teachers to engage in classroom management if necessary. If a student is being inappropriate in the chat box, you can simply remove his chat box privileges with one keystroke. Or, if a student is not being respectful, you can remove his microphone, or ultimately, remove the entire participant if necessary.

The Virtual Office: Individual Discussion Based Assessments

In my FLVS Senior English classroom, when I work with students individually for a discussion based assessment, I like for them to log into Elluminate where I load a board game. For example, I have a tic-tac-toe game that lists nine questions regarding course content. The students are given three tokens that they are able to click on using their mouse, and they have to form a tic-tac-toe to complete the assessment. They choose three questions to answer, and these questions serve as our jumping off point. I build the conversation and follow-up questions around the questions they choose in accordance with the rules of the game we are playing, or in this example: tic-tac-toe. This gives the students a feeling of control and helps to lessen their anxiety surrounding the assessment.

I like to call students on the telephone individually while they are also logged into Elluminate because a lot of secondary students do not have the necessary headsets, and many are more comfortable on the telephone than using unfamiliar Elluminate features.

Although in a college classroom, you could easily require headsets on the supply list for the course and include Elluminate training as part of the orientation; these are more difficult to require in the public school setting. My experience in working with Elluminate is that after the first session, students *almost never* choose to return to a phone call only conversation to complete the discussion-based assessments. This should not be a surprise since I am offering a rich media experience; in fact, my findings tie well into Richard Daft's Media Richness Theory that suggests that the more cues afforded to a user by a medium, the richer the medium (Stewart 74). "Specifically, richness and its inverse, leanness, are determined by four dimensions: (1) availability of instant feedback, (2) the use of multiple cues, (3) the use of natural language, and (4) personal focus" (Daft 556). Elluminate meets all four of his criteria: (1). *Instant feedback*: you are synchronously communicating with a student on the phone or through a headset microphone, (2). *Multiple Cues*: you are using your voice, the computer screen, a Powerpoint presentation. (3). *Natural Language*: you are speaking in your own voice – not a recording or a computer-generated voice. (4). *Personal Focus*: in Elluminate, you are allowing natural interpersonal communication and personal focus.

Susan Ko and Steve Rossen's 2010 book, *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide*, gives several tips for establishing effective instructor-facilitated synchronous communication. Susan Ko recommends meeting with students individually during virtual office hours particularly if the student needs additional help or writes cryptic emails with key information missing (333). In a personalized Ellumiante meeting, the teacher can load the student's paper and review it while speaking directly with the student. The process is literally the equivalent of having the student in your office, opening up your

computer, bringing up his/her paper and both looking at the same screen while discussing it together.

The Virtual Office: Group Discussion Based Assessments

What would a group discussion look like? Perhaps ten to fifteen students will log into Elluminate at a pre-designated time to participate in a group discussion led by the instructor. Each student would have on a head set that would allow him/her to click on the microphone and add to the conversation. Students would also be able to type in the chat box. Elluminate allows you to open up to six microphones simultaneously, so student do not have to "wait" to give up the microphone – they can even speak over each other – as it often happens in the face-to-face setting.

In Tisha Bender's book, *Discussion-based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning*, she devotes an entire chapter on how to facilitate and stimulate online discussions. She suggests that the professor set a definitive time when group discussions will occur like every Wednesday from 11:00 to 12:00 p.m. Elluminate also allows you to divide students even further once in the office into "break-out" rooms of five or seven students. The students are then separated from other students and only able to hear and participate in the conversation in their own break-out room. Then, at the end of the hour, the teacher can close the break-out rooms and bring the students back to the main room for summarizing their individual discussions and concluding remarks. Bender emphasizes setting up the grading system to ensure that participation counts towards the final grade, and to make sure that students understand that the quality of the response counts as well. The conversation should be thoughtful, substantive and insightful (Bender 58).

Ellluminate allows for sessions to be recorded; this records the chat box discussions as well. So, rather than a professor trying to grade the discussion as she is in the discussion, she can listen to the recording and review the chat box comments to ascertain a fair grade for each student. Bender further emphasizes the importance of discussing the rules of civility and etiquette and review expectations of students at the beginning of the semester (Bender 59-60).

> ➢ *Using Skype*

Skype, a software application that allows users to make video calls over the Internet, is a free and practical way to not only speak and see your student simultaneously, but it is also a free service. Again, in accordance with media richness theory, you are giving your students the ability to use body language and read both verbal and non-verbal clues in the conversation.

Amy Weiss, in her journal article entitled, "A New Lens for Learning in the Communication Field" included in the 2010 edited book, *Teaching and Learning with Technology : Beyond Constructivism*, she discusses using Skype in the educational setting. She further reveals that scholars experimenting with synchronous technologies like Skype to discuss course material anecdotally found that it helped students "understand, recall and clarify the information in the interactions … the students were more motivated to learn in the course as a result of using Skype" (Steward 94).

Susan Ko et al recommend using Skype to bring in a guest speaker to an online classroom. She states that this is best done in conjunction with an assigned paper or lecture, and it is important to prepare students for the guest chat by asking them to

formulate questions they can pose to the guest during the chat (333). In my own graduate

school experience, one professor, Dr. Joseph Moxley, used Skype on several occasions to

bring in renowned authors of the texts we were studying, and I found the experience very

enriching. As a result, my knowledge of the topic was not only enhanced, but I can recall

those Skype conversations more readily than information delivered in the basis lecture /

conversation format on a typical graduate school classroom.

Chapter 8: Concluding Remarks

My hope is that this research analysis has provided additional value to the existing body of first-year online composition knowledge. The research does indicate that a causal link exists between synchronous instructor / student communication and higher student satisfaction and retention rates in not only the post-secondary first-year online composition classroom, but generally in online classrooms. My additional desire for the first-year online classroom is an implementation of the research based synchronous communication techniques discussed in this work. As the research demonstrates, an implementation will ultimately lead to an increase in student retention and satisfaction rates and create a better constructed online first-year writing course for the post-secondary student.

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Jennifer Lynch graduated from Baylor University with a B.A. in English in 1990. Four years later, she earned her J. D. from South Texas College of Law in Houston. She then relocated to the Chicago area and passed the Illinois Bar in 1994. Jennifer practiced bankruptcy law in the courts of Chicago for several years before moving to Florida where she embarked on a teaching career as both a high school English instructor and as an Adjunct Professor at a local community college.

During the five years she taught in traditional school, Jennifer brought Debate I and II to the curriculum of Pasco County. She sponsored a successful Debate Team earning a record twenty-six "Best Speaker" Awards and the title of "2006 J.S.A Junior State of America Chapter of the Year" for the entire State of Florida. In 2007, Jennifer received the prestigious nationwide AFT, American Federation of Teachers, Robert G. Porter Scholars Award. Since June 2009, Jennifer has taught English 4 with Florida Virtual School, an online high school, where she enjoys incorporating best practices surrounding synchronous communication and the online classroom. As a confirmed life-long learner, Jennifer will earn a Masters in English with a concentration in rhetoric and composition in 2011 through the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida.