

BOOK REVIEW

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Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes, by Beth L. Hewett and Christa Ehmann

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Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes, by Beth L. Hewett and Christa Ehmann (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 2004, 203 pages, \$35.95).

Several years ago, I inherited a fairly flightless OWL (Online Writing Lab) as part of my job as a writing center administrator. In all the hustle and bustle to fix broken links and answer e-mailed questions and papers sitting in the queue, my focus for training online tutors was centered on the “how” of online instruction, rather than the principles behind the practice. If only Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann’s book had been out then, my earlier training methods would, no doubt, have been different. And yet, this book is not a blanket training manual for busy educators; it is a book aimed at jump-starting the process of developing

training tailored to the needs of individual programs and institutions and based on guiding principles and best practices from the field.

The authors define their audience as “readers who train professional teachers, graduate teaching assistants, and advanced undergraduate tutors for online writing instructional contexts, as well as administrators and educators from different academic disciplines” (p. xi). An endnote further explains that “this book is geared primarily toward training writing instructors for one-to-one, online writing conferences” (p. 28). It is also clear that Hewett and Ehmann are directing their text to both those with distance education backgrounds and those taking their first step out of the traditional face-to-face classroom. The authors’ principle-driven approach seems ideal, and yet so often principle and practice differ widely.

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For this reason, the writing across the curriculum (WAC) approach to training outlined by Hewett and Ehmann provides a broader base for their wide audience who will certainly be applying the principles to very different programs.

“Part One: Online Writing Instruction Program Development” consists of two useful foundational chapters. Chapter One, “The Online Training Spiral,” focuses on “five pedagogical principles for training instructors to teach in online environments: investigation, immersion, individualization, association, and reflection” (p. 3). Not supporting one platform over another, but focusing on sound educational principles, is advantageous for both trainers and trainees who may read this text. As the authors explain, “the result [of focusing on principles] will be a program that is philosophically sound, yet situationally adaptive—a program that maintains its coherence even when the institution purchases different or updated software” (p. 5). This approach to training is vital, given educational trends and rapid changes in technology. Additionally, the principle-based approach lends itself not only distance education or online instructors, but traditional face-to-face educators. The authors provide succinct theoretical overviews and practical applications for each of the five principles. This format is especially functional for undergraduate peer tutors or new part-time faculty who may need both the “how” and “why” of teaching writing. However, it could be equally purposeful to seasoned educators who need to rethink and revitalize their curriculum and instruction. This connects to the authors’ idea of an ongoing training spiral—that training is not just some one-week boot camp instructors attend before beginning work, but an ongoing process of rethinking and reworking skills and instructional methods. However, while the ideals set forth seem sound, some of the practical applications and solutions offered seem a bit too simple. For example, Hewett and Ehmann often seem to be functioning under the assumption that there is always ample time and money to support train-

ing programs, and the problems posed in their scenarios are not always well aligned with the training solutions offered

Chapter Two, “Theoretical Perspectives for Online Writing Instruction,” covers everything from the writing process and discourse communities to how online writing instruction (OWI) can be and is often grounded in several commonly accepted theoretical constructs (current-traditional, expressivist, neoclassical, and social-constructivist). As the authors suggest, there is solid reasoning behind including theoretical foundations as a vital part of training: “Having such understandings, we believe, will help directors make program decisions that are defensible to future online trainees and trainers, as well as those who fund and assess online programs—and, most important, that are in the best interests of the students served by such programs” (p. 31). Also, Hewett and Ehmann wisely provide not only theoretical foundations and an overview of research in writing and online writing instruction, but they expose the gaps and stumbling blocks in the field (i.e., the confusion students feel when they are pushed to work collaboratively, yet told not to appropriate or plagiarize another’s ideas). They even point out that there is no empirical evidence in composition studies proving that CMC [computer mediated communication] significantly improves student writing quality” (p. 46). Overall, the authors show how a lack of research and, consequently, empirical evidence suggest that the cornerstones of our work, our best practices in OWI and WI, may not be as solid as we think. This is not a new concept for the writing community, but it is a vital reminder as training methods and programs are being developed. With the gaps in research and theory exposed, the authors choose to close this chapter focusing on the importance of questioning and research as the first steps in program development and training. In fact, the most helpful part of this first section may be the many questions posed at the end of Chapter Two. Certainly, they are what I will return to as I begin or con-

tinue the discussion of OWI with my administrators, colleagues, and tutors.

With the framework of principles, theory, and research in place, “Part II: Principle-Centered Online Training in Asynchronous and Synchronous Environments,” tackles the task of training in specific online formats. As Hewett and Ehmann explain, “each section is written with trainees as the primary audience” (p. 67), preceded by an advice section for trainers. While these chapters read like a basic tutor or instructor training manual, they prove themselves as a valuable resource for both online and face-to-face tutors, teaching assistants, and instructors who could use basic instructions and feedback (verbal and written) guidelines. The authors first walk readers through basic steps of an asynchronous session as well as introduce what are considered best practices for writing and OWI—meeting students at their point of need, giving a global-to-local focus, addressing aspects of the rhetorical triangle, etc. Additionally, at the end of the chapter are wonderful, probing assessment questions, a sort of rubric, useful for both trainers and trainee reflection. Hewett and Ehmann also do well to address some of the challenges and characteristics of an asynchronous format—loss of nonverbal communication, time limits, strategic use of formatting and document design in responses, etc., many of which online instructors and distance educators may be quite familiar. However, some aspects of asynchronous tutoring are not fully discussed. For instance, the authors themselves point out the problem of not having the writer accessible during the session to clarify and contextualize his or her work, but do not delve much further into this issue. Where synchronous communication seems ideal for the kind of contextualizing and clarifying Hewett and Erhmann see as problematic, they leave synchronous interactions to deal with “the writing processes of brainstorming ... and grammar” (p. 116).

The synchronous section is somewhat limited in its scope because of the narrow focus on brainstorming and grammar, the latter seeming to be a better fit for the asynchronous platform

where questions can be answered and links provided to further resources. The authors contend that “generally, synchronous teaching interactions require more sophisticated technology than do e-mail and Internet-based asynchronous interactions” (p. 116). Yet, in this day and age, it seems programs such as Instant Messenger are just as accessible and user-friendly as e-mail, not to mention all the synchronous possibilities with text messaging from a camera cell phone. And while the authors suggest that the learning curve of certain synchronous platforms may initially inhibit the interaction (p. 117), it seems to be a perfect example of how generational technological experience has become. While a decade or even half a decade ago, e-mail was the reigning form of electronic communication, many of today’s first-year composition students are equally well versed in blogging, IMing, and text messaging (while MUDs and MOOs seem to have mostly returned to their gaming roots). Consequently, it is most helpful when the authors return to applying principles to a synchronous process and discussing such vital topics as engaging the writer, defining roles within the interaction, and finding a balance between addressing the writer’s wants and needs. Again, it is important to note that many of the “techniques” for online instruction outlined in these chapters apply to general writing instruction and are by no means limited to online work. The assessment questions, or training evaluation rubric, found at the end of the chapter is again invaluable as part of training and program development.

While the chapters of asynchronous and synchronous platforms and training feedback examples may be most suitable for new educators and program directors, the appendices prove useful, especially to administrators of online writing programs or distance education departments. “Appendix A: Choosing Online Instructors” is helpful as a way to think of hiring as a precursor to the training ideas outlined in the book. Finally, “Appendix B: Research into Writing Students and OWI” examines some of Hewett’s recent research, but more

importantly, it calls again into the spotlight the need for research in this field that is growing so rapidly when its foundation is still settling.

Perhaps the best part of reading this book was the reflection brought on by a return to the educational principles Hewett and Ehmann outline. In the fast-paced and ongoing discussion of the merit and methods of OWI, this book calls for us to slow down and reconsider our work as we prepare to train others in it. For me, this book was a nice fit as both an instructor and tutor trainer because it opens up that conversation and shows the gaps in our work, with the authors not hesitating to admit they do not have all the right answers either. While

some of the practical examples offered prove problematic, I am again reminded that in my own work belief and behavior don't always equate. I find myself in the training spiral wondering if we, as online educators, are yet at a point in the development of OWI where we can reflect, rethink, grapple with some of the harder questions, and undertake more research. While we have certainly felt the pressures over the past decade and a half to get online and be on the cutting edge, perhaps now that these programs are in place, we should follow the introspective approach suggested by these authors to see if we can make them fly better.