Adapting a Framework for Designing and Teaching an Online Academic Writing Course for L2 Writers

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The Internationalization of US Higher Education and Online Learning

As demonstrated by the vast number of recent newspaper articles from higher education, national media, and professional organizations, the transition to teaching and learning online is a cause of stress for many students, faculty, and institutions. Despite the increasing prevalence of online learning in higher education over the last 12 years, these stakeholders are in many ways underprepared, even skeptical of their ability to produce quality online teaching and learning that will meet the needs and expectations of all parties involved. This has been particularly evident with the move to online teaching and learning in Spring 2020 due to the global pandemic of COVID-19.

According to the Institute of International Education (2020), there were more than one million international student enrollments in higher education.
education in the United States (US) in 2020, contributing $44 billion to the US economy. Nearly a third of these students came from China, followed by India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, as well as many others from across the globe; international undergraduates in the United States numbered at over 400,000 with international graduate students numbering just under 400,000.

Most undergraduate students are required to take first-year writing or some type of academic writing course as part of the general education curriculum in order to prepare them for the writing they ostensibly will need to do in their other coursework, and this is the context for much of the research in composition studies. Likewise, the majority of second language writing (SLW) research has been conducted in the undergraduate context, not only in North America but worldwide. The purpose of this work has primarily been to improve instruction in L2\(^1\) undergraduate writing classrooms (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008; Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013).

This internationalization of US writing programs has presented challenges for undergraduate writing programs and their instructors in developing and teaching academic writing courses, whether they be courses specifically for L2 writers or mainstream composition courses that include international, domestic, or resident L2 writers. These challenges stem, in part, from disciplinary differences and varying degrees and availability of local expertise in rhetoric and composition and SLW pedagogy, as well as writing program administration and instructor preparation and support (Tardy & Miller-Cochran, 2018). Matsuda (2013) described SLW as an issue-driven “transdisciplinary field’ because the intellectual work in the field transcends various disciplinary and institutional structures in addressing issues surrounding second language writing and writers” (p. 448). One such issue, highlighted by the almost unilateral, abrupt move to online teaching and learning in Spring 2020, entails the challenges of designing and teaching online academic writing courses for L2 international students.

\(^1\) Leki et al. (2008) use the term “L2 writers” as “one of the more neutral ones” (p. 9) in their book-length synthesis of this L2, Second Language Writing, research to refer to learners of English as a Second or Additional Language represented in the research; L2 writer, speaker, or learner will be used throughout this chapter.
One prevailing challenge has been the skepticism about the quality of online teaching and learning in general. In a 2015 survey, only 29% of academic leaders reported that faculty accepted the “value and legitimacy of online education” (Online Learning Consortium, 2020). Skepticism about the effectiveness of online writing instruction (OWI) in particular has also been prevalent (see Blakelock & Smith, 2006; Gillam & Wooden, 2013; Warnock, 2015). Warnock (2015) countered this skepticism of OWI by questioning the effectiveness of face-to-face writing courses, as did Rendahl (2009), who proclaimed, “The privileging of face-to-face, classroom-based educational interactions is becoming harder to justify in a world where boundaries in all categories are blurring. The ‘habit’ of meeting in classrooms may be very familiar but now cries for critical examination” (pp. 138–139); this is especially true as many institutions transition from the emergency move to online teaching to planning for subsequent semesters online.

Other challenges include resistance to teaching online and dissatisfaction as a result of bad experiences doing so. Salisbury (2018) determined that negative attitudes toward online teaching and learning were partially a result of “instructors [who] are limited by their understanding of effective online learning practices and their presumptions of loss” (p. 11). Adnan (2018) and Salisbury highlighted the need for teachers to cultivate competencies with their institutions’ learning or content management system (LMS or CMS) which can have an impact on their overall satisfaction with online teaching. Salisbury explained that “just as instructors did not always know how or why to apply specific tools, they did not always know what CMS applications would reflect their teaching philosophy” (p. 11). Blakelock and Smith (2006) discovered that while teachers understood that there was an increased workload associated with distance learning, they had misconceptions and a lack of knowledge of it in general that resulted in resistance; however, the authors noted that “as with administrators, when faculty began to familiarize themselves with online courses, their resistance began to break down” (p. 144). Furthermore, Blake (2013) surmised that low rates of faculty acceptance of online teaching were due, in part, to a fear of relinquishing a teacher-centered classroom to a more learner-centered environment, as well as learning online teaching methods and how to use new technological tools.
These challenges point to a general lack of readiness to teach writing online.

The Need for a Framework for L2 Online Writing Course Design and Instruction

Although there is an emerging body of scholarly work on online writing instruction that provides principles and strategies for online writing course (OWC) design and instruction (see Borgman & McArdle, 2019; Hewett & DePew, 2015), this work by rhetoric and composition instructors does not address online academic writing instruction for L2 learners to the degree that is warranted. Likewise, the widely used Quality Matters™ (QM) Rubric with its 8 standards and 41 rubric items serves as a useful general online course design tool with which to start but does not account for content-based pedagogy. Adair and Shattuck (2015) describe QM as an educational input in and ongoing design-based research project that combines educational theory and research “to provide validated tools and replicable processes for improving and assuring quality in online education” (p. 160). According to Adair and Shattuck (2015), though, neither the QM Rubric nor any other single tool is a panacea for assuring quality in online instruction and that “the effective pursuit of quality requires a process, with integrated and aligned tools and shared benchmarks” (p. 161). Considering online course design and instruction as a process versus a product is essential, and an adaptable framework can be one of the integrated and aligned tools to guide instructors in that process.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the adaptation of Casanave’s (2017) broad framework for making instructional decisions to serve as a guide to help writing programs and instructors conceptualize the design, or redesign, of their L2 online writing courses among myriad realities of local, and distant, contexts, especially as higher education continues its shift to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of a small-scale exploratory study of instructor and student perceptions of their online writing courses in the context of a large university writing program in the southwest United States inform this adaptation.
Exploring Student and Instructor Perceptions

In researching the working conditions of online composition and other writing intensive course instructors, Blakelock and Smith (2006) found that “we have no idea whom we are teaching in our online classes” (p. 156) and called for educators to be more proactive in gathering information about their students to meet their needs in online course design and pedagogy. Similarly, Ehmann and Hewett (2015) called for an investigation of student perceptions of online writing instruction (OWI), stating that, as primary stakeholders, students’ “first-hand experiences warrant exploration in addition to their reasons for engaging in OWI and their views about its purpose and value in postsecondary education” (p. 533). In addition to collecting student feedback about their online course experiences, Greer and Harris (2018) argued that it is essential to include students in our research to ensure inclusivity and accessibility in student-centered OWC design.

While Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) considered a needs assessment that includes student perceptions and demographics as essential in course design and instructional planning for L2 writing courses, they recommended collecting student data at different points during a course “because student wants, expectations, and perceived needs often shift” (p. 152); the authors also recommended that student perceptions should be used to complement instructor perceptions as well, stating, “one should never overlook factors such as teachers’ workloads, their willingness to take on instructional innovation, or the ways in which their teaching philosophies align or clash with a new approach to instruction or course design” (p. 150). However, scholarly investigations examining instructor perceptions prior to this event have been rather limited (Major, 2015). The small-scale exploratory study described in this chapter includes both instructor and student perceptions of their online writing courses which serve as part of a needs assessment to better inform the design and instruction of those courses.

Combined data for exploring student perceptions of their OWCs was collected from short-answer responses on beginning and end-of-course student surveys and Teacher Course Evaluations (TCEs). Responses were
analyzed recursively and categorized as follows: (1) what students liked about their OWC; (2) what students perceived as affordances of the course; (3) what students liked about the way their instructor taught the course; (4) what students disliked about their online writing course; and (5) student recommendations for improving the OWC and instruction. Next, using text files of the combined categories, I created word clouds using TagCrowd (Steinbock, Steinbock, n.d.), a web application used for visualizing word frequencies. After that, I returned to the text files to locate the most frequent words in context so that I could report the most common trends in the data. Key findings as they relate to students’ pedagogical needs and expectations in the OWCs, and the realities and constraints of their learning context were used to inform the framework.

In addition, three online instructors, one adjunct faculty member and two Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), each participated in a semi-structured interview about their perceptions of the OWCs after their courses had ended and grades were submitted. Transcribed interviews were coded for emergent themes and presented as the following categories: (1) instructors’ views of the OWC as a whole, (2) challenges with the OWCs, (3) instructors’ perceptions of the students’ experiences with the OWCs, and (4) instructors’ views of teaching online writing in general. The next phase of analysis involved comparing and contrasting findings to relevant literature to confirm existing patterns and reveal new ones. Results shed light on instructor beliefs and assumptions of teaching and learning writing online, how instructors view and/or address L2 writing pedagogy in the OWCs, and the realities and constraints of the local online teaching context.

**Student Perceptions**

One primary theme identified in student comments about their online writing courses was that of interaction. When students commented about feedback, they mentioned the clear, helpful, timely suggestions and advice the instructor provided them; for example, one student wrote,

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2 Comments are quoted as written by L2 writers.
“My instructor always give us feedback quickly, like a mirror which can let me know my strengths and shortcomings, love these ways.” Another L2 writer commented, “I learn from reviews that she is a very patient and kind person.” Furthermore, some students perceived the instructor as caring about their learning, being “very determined and helpful.” These quotes illustrate that students perceived this type of interaction from their instructor as quite positive.

Accessibility, reliability, and availability of the instructor also seemed to have a positive impact on student perceptions. For instance, one student wrote, “She made it available for us to arrange appointments with her frequently. She always did the grading from 8:00 a.m. in the morning the day after the due date.” It is important that students know the instructor is available and when; it is also important to set a schedule and adhere to it, so that they know when to expect their grades and feedback, so they can use that information when completing subsequent activities and assignments. Students also appreciated regular videos posted to the course with one student noting, “I feel that my instructor did a great job introducing herself and continuing the connection with students via her videos for each due date.” As part of their approach to online writing instruction, Borgman and McArdle (2019) recommended that instructors make and adhere to a work schedule to grade, among other things, and be personal, or personable, so that students have a sense of who the instructor is and that they are not alone.

In addition, students mentioned that the online courses helped them learn new technology skills. However, some also mentioned that it was inconvenient to access too many different platforms outside the course LMS due to internet availability, speed, and restrictions in their home countries. Moreover, the available internet-based tools within or outside the LMS will affect how one can organize instructor feedback and peer-reviews of writing drafts. It is important to know which websites and web-based applications international students may or may not be able to access in their home countries. Accessibility then is another practical reality to consider in designing asynchronous versus synchronous courses, as there may be certain times of day when accessibility is more reliable or convenient than others.
Online students also expressed the advantages of their asynchronous online courses in terms of time. For example, students thought of time as flexible, saying things like, “It is much more manageable having an online course because you can fit it in your schedule better” and “I am able to complete the work at my own pace and it feels less stressful than a classroom course.” Students also made several comments about their OWC contributing to the development of “student time-management” as in “learn to use time more effectively based on the daily allocated assignments.” Learners also considered the time of taking online summer writing courses as a reallocated resource that would allow them more time for additional courses at the same time or to focus on other courses during regular fall and spring semesters; for instance, one L2 student wrote, “Writing intensive courses are very time consuming for me thus finishing it in the summer can help me left more time for my major courses.”

Online learners made several recommendations for instructors to address in redesigning their OWCs. Some students recommended having fewer assignments and/or more time to complete them, in part, to improve student learning; for example, one L2 summer student wrote, “I think sometimes there are too many assignments, and we do not have enough time to acknowledge the knowledge we have learned.” A couple of students recommended having continuity among the courses offered, saying, “Make sure that the courses taught by each teacher are the same, such as the same number of projects, I find other courses just has three projects, and my course has four.” A couple of other comments called for more examples of assignments for students to follow; when online instructors encounter a student paper that could serve as an example in future courses, they can obtain permission from that student to share that paper, or excerpts from it. Students had differing opinions on the number of activity due dates per week; some preferred more frequent due dates and others preferred one per week, but for L2 learners who might need more time to read, process what they read, and compose in their L2, more frequent due dates with smaller chunks of assigned work allow more time to complete those processes and assignments and are really useful for completing peer-review and providing instructor feedback throughout the week. Bolliger and Halupa (2018) found that “instructors who can accurately gauge the time their online students will spend
engaging and assimilating content can promote high expectations and ensure students are not set up for failure” (p. 302). Providing students an estimated time of completion for each online activity and assignment helps the instructor plan and pace activities and due dates so as not to overwhelm students; as part of the feedback process then, students can comment on whether or not the estimated times were accurate or not.

**Teacher Perceptions**

The semi-structured interviews with three contingent online academic writing instructors revealed negative feelings and beliefs about OWI. Two of the instructors, for example, expressed concerns about continued employment in voicing their beliefs that online writing instruction was ineffective or an inferior way for students to learn how to write. First of all, employment concerns of instructors are part of the crucial understanding of the institutional and program contexts in which they serve, so it is important to recognize a work culture of fear so that it can be addressed or avoided. Secondly, myriad reasons and explanations may exist for their beliefs that OWI is not a good option. For instance, these instructors were using pre-designed courses (PDCs), which they all described as “overwhelming” or “insane” because of the amount of text in assignment descriptions and instructions; the use of PDCs has been criticized with online instructors/trainers pointing out that they restrict teacher autonomy and hinder the self-reflection process in aligning theory and practice (Grover, Cargile Cook, Skurat Harris, & DePew, 2017.) While instructors were told they could “adapt’ the PDC, they were not provided adequate time to do so before the courses began, nor did they feel confident in modifying the assigned points in the assignment or the gradebook in the LMS.

Another important finding was that none of the instructors considered L2 language instruction or support a core component in the design of these online academic writing courses. For example, one of the instructors added links to internet-based resources that offered “a fair amount of material as online support for language-related concerns… grammar and other things that language learners would be more likely to need or want,
vocabulary resources as well. Outside of D2L [the LMS] and definitely outside of the scope of the class, but there is support.” Another instructor mentioned that there was not time to address language instruction in the L2 writing course. At the same time, though, this same instructor expressed concern about her L2 students’ reading, writing, and speaking proficiency levels several times during her interview; after reading students’ introductory discussion posts in the LMS and some of their initial emails to her, she became concerned about their ability to clearly understand the course instructions and material, saying, “I did see that a lot of them had language issues. They were not maybe at the proficiency level that I would have wished for them to be taking an online course.” She also commented on her L2 students’ speaking proficiency in their final assignment in which students provided a voice recording to accompany their presentations. She said that although the students wrote to the desired level in their presentations, some of the students “struggled a little bit more verbally” while others “were so low that I could really tell that that was really, really hurting their performance.” It is unclear how this might have been different with the same L2 learners in an f2f course. One advantage of a recorded presentation would be that students could re-record it before submitting it if they wanted to; it would also be easier to provide peer and instructor feedback, as well as have the students reflect on presentations that they could view multiple times. These findings related to writing teachers’ language instruction and expectations for L2 English proficiency were very similar to those in Matsuda et al. (2013) who pointed to a need for writing programs to increase their awareness of these issues and to inform course goals, curriculum, and instructional approaches.

Adapting a Framework for Making Decisions

Trying to conceptualize an adaptable framework for designing and teaching an online academic writing course for L2 writers that was both research-based and pragmatic, I turned to Casanave’s (2017) Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction in which she presented a broad framework for
decision-making in teaching; this framework included three categories: (1) instructors’ beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning L2 writing, (2) knowledge of the relevant issues in teaching and learning L2 writing, and (3) the practical realities of the local teaching and learning setting. In Controversies, Casanave claimed that the fundamental realities of teaching, either face-to-face or online, have essentially remained unchanged:

Among these unchanging realities is that teachers make hundreds of decisions in their teaching practices every day. Some decisions involve planning. With greater or lesser degrees of control over their decisions, teachers decide what content to teach; what materials to use; what sequences to present content and activities in; what pedagogical activities to set up using different participation structures; what kinds of homework and in-class work to assign; and what kinds of assessments and grading criteria to use… Other decisions need to be made on the spot: how to respond to students’ questions; how to explain an activity if students misunderstand the initial set of instructions. (Ebook, chapt. 1, para. 1)

Whereas these realities are representative of both f2f and online teaching, particularly those decisions that f2f teachers make in real-time interactions with students whose questions and non-verbal cues contribute to formative classroom assessment, the reality of online course design and teaching requires that responses to questions and interactions are planned for or anticipated in advance without the benefit of those f2f questions and cues. This reality of online teaching, in addition to integrating L2 writing pedagogy knowledge with the use of the LMS, can be daunting to any instructor, novice or seasoned, when called to make these decisions to teach online.

Casanave (2017) continued to explain that “These decisions are based on teachers’ past experiences, their current goals for and beliefs about teaching and learning [online], their current knowledge of their subject matter and relevant content-based issues [online], and the constraints of the immediate teaching context [online]” (chapt. 1, para. 1). Budhrani (2018), an instructional designer from the University of North Carolina, adds “online” to the end of statements about teaching because doing so
directs instructors to a new set of roles and competencies. Adding “online” to the more familiar f2f context may complicate or challenge a teacher’s concept of their pedagogical approach to academic literacy and even their own identity when confronted with changing roles and expectations associated with online course design and instruction.

Because online course design and instruction require so much forethought in planning and implementation, working through Casanave’s (2017) categories for decision-making in teaching served as a foundation for an adaptable framework for online L2 writing course designers and instructors to make decisions based on “systematic reflection and conscious choice” (chapter 1, para. 2). As Casanave acknowledged herself, teachers who are inundated with the day-to-day requirements and responsibilities of teaching may not find the time and mental energy for “systematic reflection” prior to teaching online in the most favorable or usual circumstances not to mention during the onset of a pandemic. As a result of COVID-19, however, many teachers will likely soon have online teaching experience to reflect on at some point in the future, and a framework may help them to sort through that experience in a more systematic way so that they can make better informed choices in teaching L2 writing going forward.

**Key Considerations for Online Academic Writing Course Design and Instruction: An Adaptable Framework**

Adapting Casanave’s (2017) framework, specific questions for key considerations related to teaching and learning academic writing online are presented to prompt and facilitate an ongoing process of systematic reflection to inform decision-making in the process of design and instruction of online academic writing courses. Adding “online” to each category of the framework, the audience is prompted to reconsider L2 writing instruction in that context. The key considerations are meant to move online course designers and instructors toward alignment among the three categories in light of the practical realities and constraints of the local teaching and learning context.
Category 1: Beliefs and Assumptions About Teaching and Learning L2 Writing Online

Beliefs

• What are your beliefs about teaching and learning L2 writing online? What evidence do you have to support those beliefs? How are your beliefs informed by personal experience, professional development, and scholarship in L2 writing and distance education?

Assumptions

• What assumptions do you have about your students (e.g., their online experiences, goals, language needs) online? What evidence have you collected from student surveys (see, e.g., a needs assessment instrument in Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014), course evaluations and/or student writing samples to support those assumptions? What patterns have you identified?

Instructor Roles

• What roles do you see yourself in as an L2 writing teacher online? How does your sense of agency affect your roles online? What experiences have shaped these roles?

Category 2: Knowledge of the Relevant Issues in Teaching and Learning L2 Writing Online

L2 Writing Pedagogy

• What is your foundational knowledge in composition and L2 writing pedagogies, as well as the theories that inform them (see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Paltridge, 2017; Paltridge et al., 2009)? How can you further develop your knowledge?
• What are the course goals and student learning objectives (SLOs)? How will you map these onto the curriculum? How can you address L2 writers’ linguistic and academic needs in mapping the course goals and SLOs to content and instruction? How will course content address relevant issues? Will course content be flexible or fixed? What concrete information do you have about the types of writing assignments students are actually doing in their other undergraduate coursework in their disciplines?

• What will be your approach to teaching L2 writing? How can you use the approach as a lens through which you design writing activities, tasks, and assignments that are scaffolded toward achieving the course goals and SLOs? For example, will you take a genre approach (see Tardy, 2016, 2019), an academic literacies approach (see Paltridge et al., 2009), or a linguistic approach (see Aull, 2015)?

• What are L2 writers’ developmental language needs? What patterns can be deduced from their self-assessment and diagnostic writing sample, such as those found in Dana Ferris’ (2014) book of grammar and language-related tutorials, Language Power, as well as their writing coursework posted and submitted online?

Distance Learning

• How can you convey your online teaching persona to the students at the beginning of the online course, as well as through your feedback, weekly announcements, email, and any virtual office hours you may offer?

• How can you pace reading, writing, and peer-review activities throughout the week to help students manage their workload and their time, as well as yours? How do you take into account the time needed for L2 learners to read, write, and respond to classmates’ online discussions and writing drafts?

• How can you leverage your institution’s LMS to keep course design simple and accessible for learners with disabilities? For example, are there templates available within the LMS that are formatted for com-
pliance? Is there a mobile application for the LMS that formats course material to fit mobile device screens?

Category 3: The Practical Realities of the Local Teaching and Learning Setting Online

Institution

• What are the institutional realities and constraints, including the strategic goals, current culture and practice of online teaching and learning, and institutional support? Is there a central office in charge of supporting the LMS, for example? Does the institution employ instructional designers to assist with online course design or offer workshops?

Program

• What are the writing program requirements? For example, does the program require instructors to use PDCs? What kinds of initial and ongoing online teacher training exist for full-time, tenure-track, and contingent faculty? Is there an effective online course design feedback process for instructor input, as well as for continuous evaluation and improvement available, such as the Quality Matters™ Rubric?
• Are there course sections specifically for L2 writers, or can L2 writers enroll in mainstream first-year writing courses? Are there programwide student surveys, or do instructors need to create their own? Is there a depository of shared online teaching materials available?

Instructor

• How much lead time do you have to prepare the design of an online writing course? Have you identified available local resources you might be able to use to facilitate the instructional design?
• What are your other obligations, for example, administrative and service commitments, graduate coursework, or caregiving? What does a realistic weekly schedule look like for you to grade student coursework, provide feedback, and communicate with students throughout the duration of the course? How can you balance your own workload with coursework you design and assign for your students and program requirements?
• Are synchronous meetings reasonably practical or feasible for all participants (some of whom may be several time zones away, traveling, or working), or is it better to design a completely asynchronous course and provide students scheduled opportunities to meet virtually or connect by phone or social media? What do the students in your online courses want/need?

Students

• Who are the students? Have the students taken online courses before at your institution? Where are the students? If they are in their home countries, what is the time difference? What kinds of internet access and website restrictions might they have? Do they have any concerns at the beginning of the online writing course? Can you incorporate a short student survey using Google Forms or another survey tool to easily collect student data (and re-use this survey each time you teach the course to determine patterns)?
• Have you established and clearly communicated a set schedule for grading and feedback for student work, as well as being available for students via email, for example, that you can commit to throughout the course?
• Can you create a short end-of-course survey tool that collects student feedback on what they liked/disliked about the course and instruction, as well as recommendations for improvement? Can you schedule a review and reflection of student feedback to evaluate and improve future course design and instruction?
This framework of key considerations for designing and teaching online writing courses for multilingual international students serves as a pragmatic starting point for making crucial decisions in doing so. This research and exploratory study of instructor and student perceptions of their online writing courses uniquely inform the adaptive framework, making a useful contribution to the fields of rhetoric and composition, second language writing, and technology-enhanced language learning, advancing the lack of research into online writing instruction with L2 students, as well as instructors.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the expansion of internationalization and domestic diversity of US colleges and universities, Rose and Weiser (2018) called for institutions and their faculty to become “better attuned to the diverse language, literacy, and cultural experiences and practices of all their students” (p. 12). As a result of the realities and practical constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, though, it is possible that the internationalization of US colleges and universities may not proceed with L2 international students taking courses while inside the United States. Rather, the internationalization of US higher education may actually take place more often abroad, online, if it is to continue to expand in the near future and in ways that have not yet been considered. It is possible that the pandemic will foster an expansion of online higher education that will indeed require a global collaboration with universities in many different countries, requiring all stakeholders to be better attuned to language, literacy, and cultural experiences and practices. Consequently, we will need frameworks based on those myriad experiences in various contexts, as well as student and instructor feedback and reflection to reshape those broader online global contexts to better align evolving needs and expectations. Additionally, online writing programs and instructors should build on online academic writing research with data collected in their contexts in order to contribute to the growing base of knowledge of effective online writing pedagogies worldwide.
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