

EXPLORING THE WRITING PROCESS ACROSS MODALITIES:
LEARNING IN FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE CLASSROOMS

By

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Abstract

This study was conducted in a public institution of higher education in western Puerto Rico in order to explore the effects of adapting a traditional face-to-face intermediate writing course for second language learners into a digital online modality. Classroom action research was adopted to specifically consider students engagement with the writing process, their face-to-face and online interactions and responses, and how these shaped student outcomes. A focus group interview and writing conferences served as primary sources of data and were narratively and reflexively analyzed from a social constructivist theoretical standpoint. Results demonstrated that differences exist across traditional and digital modes of instruction in relation to peer interactions, independence and/or dependence of instructor, and drafting revisions of essays using the writing process as a roadmap for students' production of written material.

Resumen

Este estudio se llevó a cabo en una institución universitaria pública en el oeste de Puerto Rico, para explorar los efectos de la adaptación de un curso de redacción a nivel intermedio, para estudiantes del inglés como segundo idioma, enseñado de modo tradicional en el salón de clases, a ser enseñado a distancia utilizando modalidades digitales. Se utilizaron técnicas de investigación de acción participativa para considerar el desempeño de los estudiantes en el proceso de la redacción de un ensayo, las interacciones y respuestas en el salón de clases y en el aula virtual, y cómo estas moldearon el desempeño de los estudiantes. Un grupo focal y unas conferencias sobre redacción se utilizaron como la data principal, y se analizaron narrativa y reflexivamente desde un enfoque socio-constructivista. Los resultados demostraron las diferencias entre la modalidad de enseñanza tradicional del salón de clases y la modalidad digital, en relación a las interacciones entre estudiantes, la dependencia e independencia del instructor, y el desarrollo de borradores y revisiones de los ensayos, utilizando el proceso de escritura como guía para la producción de materiales escritos.

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List of Abbreviations

DE: Distance Education

DL: Distance Learning

SLLs: Second Language Learners

UPRM: University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez

Chapter I. Introduction

“Nowadays, the boundaries between distance and campus universities are in a continuous process of blurring and convergence, and it is likely that the future interrelations between them will be marked by a growing competition and a growing cooperation.”

(Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, p. 281)

I do not mind my students’ writing using their phones, messenger and posting on Facebook. Unless it is during class, they are simply carrying out the “labor of composition” (Yancey, 2008, p.1). I had taught INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I,¹ a first year composition course offered in the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez (hereafter referred to as UPRM) campus twice before. Each class was different, the students’ writing unique, and the topics that interested them diverse. Thus, as an educator it was important for me to learn how to adapt the same curricula to fit the needs of each group. I became intrigued by the possibilities presented by integrating technology in the course, such as the use of computer and web-based tools. I believed merging these tools into the traditional composition curriculum might be beneficial for my students, all second language learners (hereafter referred to as SLLs) whose first or native language was Spanish. Therefore, in order to improve my personal teaching practices in this regard, I enrolled in an online program for teachers in the fall semester of 2007, which was given fully online. The purpose of the course was to support teachers in adapting their traditional assignments, class material, or courses to an online modality. During this time, I was presented with valuable information on ways to transform a traditional face-to-face course, regardless of the area or subject, into an online course. I then decided to put my learning to the test and teach the intermediate writing course once again, but this time in an online medium. I decided I would

¹ As included in the syllabus and defined by the 2006-2007 Undergraduate Catalogue of the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus, the course description reads as follows: “Analysis of selected readings, such as essays, fiction, poetry or drama, and practice in writing compositions with attention given as needed to grammar and idiomatic expressions”. I include the 2006-2007 course description here because this was the year that appeared on the master syllabus, even though the present study was conducted in 2007-2008. In 2008-2009, the course description remained the same.

not only teach the course in this manner, but explore the outcomes of my own and my students' learning in this new interface for a composition-based course. As such, learning intermediate writing via an online modality became the focus of my research in the spring semester of 2008.

The idea for this research developed because, as an instructor for the course, I had used WebCT² as a web-based aid in previous semesters and found that students enjoyed the activities done online and the access they had to information and assignments outside of class hours, more so than those presented exclusively in the classroom. The use of WebCT in distance learning (hereafter referred to as DL) and in the traditional classroom was certainly already a teaching aid promoted in the above mentioned institution. However, an added bonus was that, independently, students already typically engage in numerous online activities outside of formal sites of education. Integrating the use of technology into their basic writing course, particularly when English was their second language was like adding a new dimension to their daily routines of e-mailing, chatting and searching the World Wide Web. This is particularly essential because the use of English on the internet is so prevalent and “with digital technology and, especially Web 2.0, it seems, writers are everywhere—on bulletin boards and in chat rooms and in emails and in text messages and on blogs” (Yancey, 2008, p.4).

Because students in this context are SLLs, and given the dominance of the English language in digital based technologies, it seemed a particularly appropriate strategy for engaging them with authentic materials in English. All students who enroll in the UPRM are required to take English courses, a large number of these take writing courses, and more than a thousand students take the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course during their first year of classes. Therefore, I designed a study that adopted an online version of this course in order to explore

² Private educational web platform used to teach courses, paid for by the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez and available for all professors and teaching assistants affiliated with the institution.

possible differences in the outcomes of students' work when teaching the writing process, in both a face-to-face and online modality. I believe offering an online modality of this course would present a unique option for students who enrolled. As a researcher, then, I primarily would focus on identifying potentially unique outcomes of adapting traditional coursework to a virtual environment using digital technology.

Digital technology³ has become such a pervasive and intertwined part of our daily lives that we seldom take explicit notice of it. Because of this, researchers and practitioners from different fields of knowledge have been intrigued by its potential. The field of education is not an exception to this trend. Currently, online teaching and learning has enabled people who are outside the reach of traditional institutions and classrooms to have access to an education and a degree. As noted by Hewett and Ehmann (2004), online learning, specifically in the area of online writing instruction, was first created as a networked classroom environment in 1985, at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. This form of teaching allowed deaf students to discuss their ideas and express them textually, thus, "increasing the number of people who could engage in a discussion and eliminating the need for the close proximity and visual contact that hand-signing requires" (p. 40). Since then, digital technology for the purpose of online learning has come a long way, and as Martínez (2007) insists, evidence is accumulating of online learning, or DL, as a mainstream, rather than alternative, instructional approach for post-secondary courses and degree programs.

Higher education institutions, including the UPRM, are constantly exploring ways in which excellence in education can be achieved and improved. As such, online learning initiatives are noticeably on the rise. These initiatives appealed to me, both as an instructor of a particular course—INGL 3103 Intermediate Writing I, in which digital technology was already being used

³ The term "digital technology" is used to refer to the use of computers and computer networks.

to supplement the course, and as a researcher. My dual roles propelled me to question the potential outcomes of adapting a face-to-face course into an online modality in the specific context the course was and is still given, and gave rise to a series of questions. My research questions surfaced based on specific aspects of the course that I wanted to study and explore in depth. These were: student's engagement with the writing process, teacher-student interactions, and peer interactions across a traditional face-to-face modality and an online modality. The research questions I ultimately devised to address these questions were:

- How might students' engagement with the writing process differ across a face-to-face writing course and an online writing course?
- How might teacher and student responses to writing vary between a face-to-face and online course?
- How might student to student responses vary between a face-to-face and online course?

The primary focus of my research would therefore center on observing the differences, if any, in the outcomes of students' written assignments produced using the writing process and their interactions across modalities. I was interested in seeing whether or not students' work was uniquely influenced by their course-based interactions, particularly in an online modality. I also wanted to explore whether or not there were particular strengths or limitations in relation to students' learning of the writing process in a non-traditional online teaching environment. Given that my research interests mainly focused on student engagement with the writing process, responses between students, and interactions between students and myself as their instructor, I adopted social constructivism as a theoretical standpoint for this study. Theorists such as Vygotsky, Kuhn, and Bruffee (in Hewett and Ehmann, 2004), as well as researchers such as

Hewett and Ehmann (2004) have conceptualized, studied and supported social constructivism as one of the pivotal theoretical standpoints which describe and shape how online learning takes place. No matter the modality, when there are conversations among individuals, and interactions within a class setting, individuals engage in an exchange of ideas and critical thinking which provides students with a learning experience. Indeed, “many contemporary writing instructors extrapolate their practice from Vygotsky’s ideas and encourage social encounters in the forms of collaborative writing, peer workshops, and peer response groups” (Hewett and Ehmann, 2004, p. 35). Moreover, all of these activities are learning experiences related to writing that can be conducted and engaged in online. These learning experiences enable them to construct their knowledge while learning in a social environment because it is done with others rather than in isolation. Social constructivism, then, theoretically informed my study, due to the fact that students engaged in discussion topics both in the face-to-face and online modality of the course, as well as exchanged ideas and points of view with their classmates about the material being read.

The Writing Process as Taught in the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I Course

The INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course is one in which first year students are typically enrolled, and is a requirement for those who take the advanced placement exam, and score either a 3 or 4 on a 5 point scale. The main emphasis of this course, as stated above, is on “[...] practice in writing compositions, with attention given as needed to grammar [...]”. The first objective for the course, as it appears in the master and course syllabus⁴ provided to all instructors, is the “application of the various stages of the writing process to [...] written work, including drafting, peer editing, and publishing”.

⁴ See Appendix A

Certainly, the writing process has been interpreted and applied distinctly in different contexts by various proponents while simultaneously being roundly critiqued. Gilbert⁵ (1991) defined *writing pedagogy* as one which is prescribed by the teacher, and seeks coherence and unity of the written piece. Therefore, it attempts to make the writing process a prescription for writing realistic, personal and honest texts. On the other hand, contemporary writing pedagogy defends “the voice [...] creativity and inspiration” (Gilbert, 1991, p.45), allowing students to step outside of the writing process, and into a more creative approach to writing, which does not necessarily follow the introduction-body-conclusion format of the writing process to produce essays in the particular context of this study. Yet, for the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course, writing pedagogy is centered on the “labor of construction” (Gilbert, 1991, p.45) due to the significant fact that students are SLLs and their English “voice” is, in most cases, not proficient enough for them to freely write. Moreover, literature has shown that SLLs feel they need models and specific guidelines, such as those in the writing process, in order to begin producing academic written pieces (Nunan, 1992; Stapleton, 2005; Vernon, 2001,). Consequently, as students produce writing, they inevitably need to receive feedback—whether from their instructor or peers, in order to develop and improve their writing. This is yet another reason why social constructivism is essential for theorizing my study.

It is evident that the writing process promoted by the master syllabus is prescriptivist in the sense Gilbert (1991) describes. It promotes coherence and unity in the prescribed stages of drafting, peer editing and the final production of the students’ work in the form of an essay. Nonetheless, departmentally, the writing process is supported as evidenced in various syllabi and other institutional resources, such as the writing center. This certainly coheres with definitions of

⁵ Gilbert (1991) is not a proponent of the writing process, but has extensively reviewed and critiqued both professional and scholarly literature on this subject.

the writing process that describe routine patterns of pre-writing, drafting, peer revision and proofreading.

One definition of the writing process which may help conceptualize the term as used in the specific context of my study, is provided by Vernon (2001), who defines the process as one “establishing a structured approach that is used for every assigned paper [and] is one way to create independent writers and ensure generalization of writing skills” (p. 1). Vernon (2001) explains aspects of the writing process that are similar to the ones mentioned above. To reiterate, this structure and generalization is believed necessary for students in a second language learning context, because it provides a guide for students to do their written assignments (Vernon, 2001). Also, it assists those who have no previous essay writing experience, which is the case of most students in the context of this study. Moreover, it creates coherence among all the sections of this course being taught at the departmental level, ensures that students are prepared for a standard departmental final examination, and prepares them to transition into the second part of the course—INGL3104, which requires students to similarly adopt the writing process.

WebCT as an Educational Platform

The Web-based educational platform used for the online version of the course was WebCT. As defined by e-learning@TAFE, which is a WebCT-supported website, “WebCT is a set of online tools that allows teachers to create, teach and manage online courses.” Moreover, as documented by the owner of this educational platform, Blackboard, “WebCT is the world's leading provider of e-learning systems for higher education institutions.” It is the most common licensing product option for universities, and institutions that may be at any stage of development in distance education (hereafter referred to as DE) and online learning. It was founded by Murray Goldberg in 1995, who was, at the time, an adjunct professor at the

University of British Columbia, and who implemented WebCT initially as a course experiment. Presently, however, over a decade later, “WebCT, which stands for World Wide Web Course Tools, has become an indispensable part of the university learning experience. It is used every day by more than 10 million students at over 2,500 universities and colleges in 80 countries” (UBC Web Page). As stated by Goldberg, “WebCT opens up communication between students and faculty members. It allows students to communicate more effectively with one another and with faculty members” (UBC Web Page).

The WebCT educational platform was adopted as the venue for DL in this study. The UPRM has a license, it is free of charge for professors, and is maintained and updated by university staff. Therefore, it was a platform that permitted assurance of use over the course of the semester, as opposed to other educational platforms, that might be more interactive and appealing to students, but which do not have such guarantee. Moreover, “courses created with WebCT contain searchable course notes, review material, a discussion board, quizzes and exams, image databases and chat rooms” (UBC Web Page). These allowed me to keep track of all communications and reactions from students that I would later use in the process of collecting and analyzing data.

Methodological Overview

Considering that this study was conducted in both the face-to-face and online versions of a class that I myself taught, and that data was collected in these two contexts, my study qualifies as classroom action research. Nunan (1992), and Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) define classroom research as a qualitative research approach in which the teacher/researcher changes specific aspects of a class with the overall aim of understanding and improving personal teaching practices and new approaches to teaching. Specifically, classroom action research would enable

me to consider previous experiences teaching the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course, and how a new approach of teaching such a course using DL might impact my students' engagement with the writing process. It would also allow me to see if students' interactions with myself and their peers changed in any way when the online dimension was added. Personally, this would also enable me to consider how I might later continue using digital technologies in my courses, specifically for writing and sharing class information and materials, as well as for engaging in class discussions.

Data for this study included a focus group interview with a representative number of students. Writing conferences also served both educational and research purposes, because they not only aimed to improve student performance, but also served as data. These were tape recorded as individual interviews in which students discussed the course and materials, as well as their interactions, frustrations and other experiences while taking the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course in the respective modality. I also included my own journaling, in which I constantly recorded the perceptions, expectations and misconceptions that surfaced in my role as both teacher and researcher.

Framework for Data Analysis

Because of the nature of the data that was gathered, namely, narratives of students' experiences while taking the course and towards the end of the semester, I adopted narrative inquiry to theoretically inform my data analysis. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) refer to educational experiences as a narrative, because "all experience happens narratively" (p.19). Because experience happens narratively, I sought to gather the continuous individual experiences of my students, in order to narrate how the course as a whole changed or remained the same across modalities. In order to do so, I used the participants'—my students'—voices as they

narrated their experiences as primary data. It is also essential to reiterate Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) argument, that "an experience is temporal [and] experiences taken collectively are temporal" (p.19). Therefore, in order to present the findings of my study, I narratively constructed my students' stories of their experiences in the face-to-face and online versions of INGL 3103 at a specific point in time. It is important to note, however, that the meaning of these experiences may change overtime, particularly as they are interpreted by different readers in distinct contexts.

Justification

This study contributes significantly to research already conducted in this field, because a particular gap exists in relation to fully online writing courses for SLLs, and how these learners respond to, and interact within, online environments. It also builds on current knowledge of student interactions in second language writing courses and their responses to teacher feedback. Moreover, this research also provides future instructors of the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course, as well as the Department of English of the UPRM, with a means of evaluating different possibilities and limitations in relation to offering this particular course in distinct modalities.

While the study focused on the use of WebCT as a medium of instructions for a basic writing course and the outcomes of doing so for SLLs, it may also potentially inform the practice of INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I more generally. For instance, it may motivate new conceptualizations of how the course is offered, as well as provide ideas for using DL specifically to teach writing in a SLL context. As technology continues to develop at high speed, in the future we may consider the teaching of writing as one aided, or driven, by digital technology. In this sense, this study provides a unique opportunity in this technology driven era

to put this claim to the test in the context of a local institution of higher education and a writing course that is specifically designed for an SLL population.

Chapter II. History of Distance Education & the Teaching of English in Puerto Rico

“Historically, distance education has been moving from the margins to the center of the stage in higher education”

(Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, p.281).

Globally, DE as we know it today began in the 1970s (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). In Europe, universities initially used DE as a marginal method of providing educational materials to remote places in rural areas, using sources such as mail, radio and television. There were early attempts to implement DE in other modalities, which did not necessarily involve using a computer or internet, or taking courses in asynchronous modes. DE occurred as early as in the 1930s with radio transmitted educational programs and paper printed modules sent to remote areas, and is considered, as stated by Guri-Rosenblit (1999), a natural evolution of previous modes of DE. Contemporarily, the above methods have been mainstreamed in higher education, in particular, and online education is the most highly demanded modality among degree seeking students.

DL higher education institutions and programs across Europe were less expensive for students and provided opportunities for those who could not study in traditional classrooms. These were established and implemented taking into consideration students who wanted to get the highest return on their education in relation to the time and money they invested. Distance teaching universities in Europe thus provided greater access to higher education, greater technological support and more flexible curricula and academic programming for students. Success in online learning in this context evolved with a primary main focus on the learning process of students and related teaching practices. Clearly the most difficult task for the professor of online courses was not meeting with the students in a given class period. Rather, DE was considered difficult because, in order for it to be successful, it required preparing all material for the course ahead of time, so that these could be evaluated in advance.

Nevertheless, efforts to incorporate DE programs in higher education institutions were never done in isolation, but achieved through a gradual process of integrating individual courses into the already established curricula of these institutions. As noted by Guri-Rosenblit (1999) however, acquiring an education and having a choice between online and traditional modalities had both contradictory and complementary counterparts in future higher education programs around the world. That is, while some institutions have benefitted from the choices students are now able to make in relation to DE, sometimes it is more traditional means of education that are presently perceived as non-accessible. Clearly, DE has moved from the margins to center stage (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999), as demonstrated by the increase of part-time adult students in higher education institutions. Indeed, online enrollment has surpassed enrollment by full-time students due to the ease of study in a format that fits divergent student profiles.

In the United States, DE began to proliferate in the 1980s though its use is documented as far back as the 1920s, with the use of the radio for a variety of educational purposes especially in rural areas (Saba, 2005). After World War II, DE branched out in multiple media venues, transmitting segments via radio and television alike. Those who tuned in were able to hear the news and learn about historical events and discoveries in astronomy and science (Saba, 2005). During this time however, “campus-based systems of public education and corporate training also grew rapidly, which in effect relegated DE to a peripheral role” (Saba, 2005).

In contrast to Europe, in the United States, DE went from the center of the stage to the sidelines during this period. Nevertheless, after the release of the internet for civilian use by the Department of Defense in the 1980s, it became a renewed focus of attention in the US. In the 1990s, although the use of distance teaching and learning in higher education institutions had already begun, the rise of DE as we know it today was first linked to corporate interests and was

used by companies to provide training for their employees. Later on, it was integrated into professional development programs for those who had already earned a degree. The increasing need for accessible technology to achieve this, for both students of higher education and employees, however, lead to the gradual development of pertinent resources and particularly an infrastructure that could support online networks and collaboration across distant groups of individuals and institutions. Contemporarily, DE continues to expand, and is used for home-schooling, virtual K-12 schools, and higher education. In addition, military programs and public and private corporations continue to employ it, with the United States military as one of its largest users globally (Saba, 2005).

The majority of higher education institutions in the United States now offer online courses, or practice some form of distance teaching or learning. As Saba (2005) reports, a study released in 2003 indicated that in the 12-month 2000-2001 academic year, there were an estimated 3,077,000 enrollments in all distance education courses offered by 2-year and 4-year institutions, with these rising to over six million by the year 2005. Therefore, as Saba (2005) explains, those utilizing resources had to step away from the idea of technology advancements as the main aspect of DE, and engage more profoundly in how materials and teaching practices, despite the use of fundamentally distinct modalities, must still transmit the same content and knowledge, while nevertheless potentially enhancing both through an innovative array of technology.

Distance Education in Puerto Rico: Going the Distance in a Small Place⁶

In the island, historical records dating back to the 1930s document examples of DL with a radio show *Escuela del Aire*,⁷ transmitted from the Department of Public Instruction, which aired

⁶ This title refers to Jamaica Kincaide's novel *A Small Place* that addresses the West Indian island, Antigua. While I will refer to Puerto Rico, not Antigua, throughout this thesis, the idea of "a small place" seems appropriate for an island that measure 100 x 35 miles.

until World War II. At the beginning of the 1950s, there was also an attempt to promote formal instruction in the remote interior areas of the island, where children and adults did not have easy access to schools. This was done with the help of tutors, and the use of radio, movies, and educational books and manuals. “The impact of this program in cultural as well as educational forums was noticeable” (Meléndez, 1998, p.3); evidence began to build of more people from the interior of the island reading and writing, as well as more informed about current events. This took place in tandem with the creation of the Department of Education for the Community, from the Department of Public Instruction, which distributed printed modules of basic courses for children in the same parts of the island. Both programs reported great success in the teaching and learning process, but due to a lack of tutors and trained teachers, they were discontinued in the 1970s (Meléndez, 1998, p.3).

From the 70s to the 80s, DE was used to provide qualifying exams for sixth and ninth grade students, as well as high school diplomas. As with their predecessors, printed modules of instruction were provided with an accompanying passing exam for each subject area (Meléndez, 1998, p.3). In the 1980s, DE turned to the television screen with a study program provided by the Ana G. Méndez Educational Foundation. These were mainly courses given at an introductory, first year level of college. The courses were again offered via printed study modules, but supplemented with the use of study guides, text books, exercises, tests, and supplementary televised segments.

In the 1990s, a collaborative effort between the University of New York and the *Sagrado Corazón* university was initiated, based on the idea of enabling a cultural and international interchange between students who were about to enroll at the university level (Díaz, Meléndez, Sánchez & Carballada, 2002). This program included undergraduate and graduate coursework

⁷ Translation: *School on the Air*

conducted via digitalized television and telephone communication. These can be considered hybrid, due to the fact that at a certain point in the program, students met with their professors for special discussion sessions and to provide them with additional practice of the materials taught. That is, the courses were not solely taught via DE, but were taught partially in a face-to-face modality.

Contemporarily, the primary accredited universities in Puerto Rico have all incorporated online offerings in their academic programs since the 1990s and degrees offered fully online are on the rise. There are also initiatives to collaborate with universities in the United States and across the globe in order to increase students' opportunities to engage with educational innovations such as DL university campuses. Indeed, these are readily accessible to most students in Puerto Rico. According to UNESCO, and the Group of Technological Systems and Innovations (2002), there are 40 private and 7 public accredited universities in Puerto Rico, as well as a number of other approved academic institutions of higher education, which add to a total of 98 academic units that offer a diversity of programs in both face-to-face and online venues.

Distance Education Initiatives at UPRM

Situating DL and its outcomes for students, specifically in the context of the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course offered at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus, particularly interests me. One must wonder why students would be interested in DL initiatives in higher education, when they live on an island that measures a mere 100 by 35 miles and which has more than 47 accredited universities and 51 other approved academic institutions to choose from. In the case of other places where geography and distance prevent students from easily

accessing formal instruction, DL seems more than necessary, but in Puerto Rico, it appears to be largely a matter of comfort, given the above statistics.

It is important then, to begin exploring DL initiatives and practices in the context of the UPRM, given the high demand of online courses globally. DL initiatives began at the UPRM with Certification 06-43, ratified by the academic senate of this institution on October 20, 2006. This certification specifically states that “an online learning initiative can be supported if it is based on the innovation of teaching and learning processes to maintain ourselves at the vanguard of technology, in order to contribute to an education of excellence”. Therefore, our institution, as expressed by the University of Puerto Rico *Diez para la Década* (2006)⁸ and the Academic Senate in Certification 123 (2007), is now implementing and supporting DL initiatives as an alternative instructional approach to already established courses. Although the way in which DL initiatives in the UPRM will be interpreted is not overtly described in the certification, these initiatives go hand-in-hand with Meléndez’s (2001) premise that “DE is a legitimate vehicle to carry out institutional transformation in higher education” (p. 536).

Clearly then, in Puerto Rico, DE as a mainstream institutional tool which complements face-to-face courses classroom experiences is evidently on the rise at this time. This is particularly due to the fact that DE is no longer chosen by students because of geographical distance alone, but also because of comfort. Students are more at ease staying home and working in their available time, without having to comply with a routine schedule or getting caught up in

⁸ *Diez para la Década* is an agenda for the preparation of the University of Puerto Rico for and into the XXI century (2006 to 2016), applicable to all its campuses, including the Mayagüez campus. Its main argument is that the university is an ideal place for change and the exercise of imagination to take place. Therefore, its main goal is to update university services and course offerings by means of a rigorous process, which at the same time is flexible, in order to evaluate and improve institutional planning. (*Diez para la Década*, 2006).

traffic.⁹ They enjoy the flexibility of working outside of campus. The idea of choice is also present when considering students' cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, and how familiar they are with digital technology prior to enrolling in an online course. As noted by Martínez (2007), "if lack of technology experience and cultural factors play a role in the students' preferences for a learning environment" (p.3), then those from the UPRM may be in an ideal position to take advantage of the offering of online courses due to the fact that they have the tools and necessary resources available on campus, and basic computer skills are necessary for most courses.

Puerto Rico is one of the main associates of ASPIRA, a national endeavor and international network to improve the educational and leadership capacity of Hispanic youth. As noted by ASPIRA, Puerto Rico and its educational system is "seriously lacking in technology infrastructure [...] and technical programs" (p.6). Nevertheless, ASPIRA clarifies that in spite of the infrastructural problem, Puerto Rico has the highest percent of internet use in the Caribbean and Latin America in relation to the US, and therefore, students are constantly connected to the World Wide Web. Yet, despite the flexibility and comfort that technology and internet access may bring to DL, in combination with the possibility of prior technological familiarity, it is essential to mention that the internet services and the broad band signals across campus as well as in peripheral areas are constantly failing to provide twenty-four hour service to students from the UPRM. Because of accessibility, students are frequently obliged to come to campus in order to access free internet service, and this often occurs during late night hours.

Returning to the geographical reality that Puerto Rico is an island which measures only 100 by 35 square miles, it is a rather small place to consider DE as a mainstream venue for

⁹ The amount of congestion in a 100 X 35 square mile island is at times overwhelming. In the city of Mayagüez, there is constant traffic, particularly coming to and from the University. There is also a constant problem with the amount of parking space available for students on and off campus.

higher education. Regardless, higher education institutions, such as the UPRM, are adapting fully online courses and hybrid courses within their educational offerings. As previously mentioned, the University of Puerto Rico *Diez para la Década* (2006) agenda and the Academic Senate's Certification 123 (2007), promote such initiatives in order to stay at the "vanguard of technology". It is important to reiterate, as noted in Chapter I, that these initiatives parallel students' everyday literacy practices using digital technology, such as the ones which Yancey (2008) highlights as the most common among students today. Specifically, course adaptations have mainly occurred in the fields of business administration, engineering, and computer science, because of the nature of the work done and research conducted in these fields of study. Other fields such as education, humanities and social sciences, have also initiated DL, but not on a regular basis (Díaz, Mélendez, Sánchez & Carballada, 2002).

Limitations of Distance Learning in Puerto Rico

Despite the increasing prevalence of DL in university course offerings in Puerto Rico, Meléndez (2001) conducted a study on the DE initiatives of the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, in which he found that the various attempts to promote DE there had all failed. Meléndez's (2001) analysis focused on an account of previous experiences of failure and success with DL based on a prior study implemented at Harvard University. Indeed, both Melendez (2001) and Martínez (2007) analyze the ways in which DL has been implemented in the past. Martínez's (2007) focus however, is on the literature which has been previously written on DL in higher education unit at large, taking into account variables such as age group, types of DE, gender and its impact on DL and the representation of previous studies done on DE at the above mentioned level. In contrast, Meléndez's (2001) study focuses on Puerto Rico specifically. His research and the previous Harvard studies he considers in relation to the case of PUERTO RICO

were based on three aspects of education and DL: 1) rapid change in computers, communication and society 2) institutional transformation to attend to these changes, and 3) DE as a vehicle to address these rapid technological changes (Meléndez, 2001, p.537). Meléndez (2001) concluded that the main reason for previous failure of DL initiatives was a missing component in relation to each of these three features and that this finding holds true in relation to DL in Puerto Rico.

For many campuses across Puerto Rico, institutions have not implemented DL as a mainstream educational practice and prior planning and evaluation needs to occur to ensure their success. For all of the above reasons, this research in particular will focus on a similar DL initiative, implementing the INGL 3103 Intermediate Writing I course as one offered online, while taking these prior studies into consideration, and comparing the outcomes of students' work in class when the same course is given via two different modalities. While students from public domain universities in Puerto Rico are accustomed to mainstream education, they are only now being gradually exposed to hybrid modes of DE. The phenomenon of DL in Puerto Rico and the results of previous initiatives are therefore carefully considered in this study, and I will argue that they should similarly be considered for future DL initiatives in mainstream higher education in Puerto Rico.

Historical Overview of the English Language in Puerto Rico

Although Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States for over a century, Spanish and English are both official languages in the island, yet Spanish remains the preferred vernacular in all sectors except for the federal court of law. Spanish has withstood countless changes in the government, even when English was periodically mandated as the *only* language of instruction. Currently, all formal public instruction is conducted in Spanish, with the exception of mandatory English classes that are required fifty minutes a day, five times a week, for twelve

years of schooling—K-12. Reznick (1993) describes a number of factors that have prevented “the bilingualization of the island’s population—primarily nationalism, political uncertainty, and the association between language and identity” and notes that these “have created a societal imperative against the learning of English” (p.259).

Failure of students to learn English in Puerto Rico has largely been blamed on the public school system, not only because it is the official means of instruction for a large percentage of the population, but also because of the frequent lack of appropriate books and other teaching materials. Moreover, because English is predominantly spoken inside schools and other limited contexts, and is not the vernacular of the people writ large, language shift has not occurred.

Veléz (2000) clarifies that while Puerto Rico does have many bilinguals, specifically in the educated class, Spanish nevertheless remains the official language of the island. In addition, although Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States, it has been able to maintain a self-government that creates policies favoring Spanish (Vélez, 2000, p. 19). Indeed, for many Puerto Ricans historically “the learning of English meant the loss of identity and subjugation to a foreign colonialist power” (Resnik, 1993, p. 265). And, while Puerto Ricans acknowledge the instrumental need of being able to communicate in English because it is perceived as a language of technology, industry and commerce, as I will address further below, they are largely reluctant to use English when it is not perceived as absolutely necessary for their daily interactions or their perceptions of personal and cultural identity.,

English Education and Language Use in Puerto Rico

“I want to learn English so that I can get a better job, here or in the United States, and be able to communicate better.”

“Learning to write in English will help me with my job and whichever written requirements the employer may have.”

“I need to learn English because I want to live in the United States”¹⁰

In the various writing courses I have taught in the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, I typically ask my undergraduate students what they expect to get out of the course and their motivation for learning to write in English. Their answers seem to be played on a warped record that everlastingly repeats the same lyrics.

Nowadays, English in Puerto Rico is portrayed as the language of science and technology, of industry and commerce and therefore, of progress and a stable economic future. Students highlight their instrumental aims in relation to English language learning and believe that the better they are at English, and the more they master the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, the better opportunities they will have in their professional lives. Clachar (1997) provided evidence of this in a study, in which 71.9% of her participants—all Puerto Rican, disagreed that “Spanish is better able to handle the sciences and business” (p.80) and that their answers were based on their exposure to the language in solely in academic settings (Clachar, 1997, p. 80). At the same time, there are other students who are resistant to the idea of having to sustain a conversation in English, or to using the language for their future professional goals. As Clachar (1997) notes, “in spite of Puerto Ricans’ awareness of the instrumentality and preeminence of English in these areas, motivation to learn it is less than optimal” (p.82). Although Clachar’s (1997) study was conducted twelve years ago, some students today still do not consider English as a potential tool for social interaction, nor one that will support them in meeting their professional goals outside of their fields of study and academic settings.

It is important to reiterate that the teaching of English in Puerto Rico is significantly linked to perspectives on PUERTO RICO’s political status in relation to the U.S. As Carroll

¹⁰ Here I paraphrase the warped record expressions my students use to describe their instrumental use of English as a second language.

(2008) mentions, “any language discussion in Puerto Rico is inherently political” (p. 99). Carroll argues that the importance given to language in the public educational system across the island depends greatly on political party affiliations and individual alignment with “support or animosity towards statehood” (p.99). “Spanish is both the vehicle and symbol of Puerto Rican identity” (Clachar, 1997, p.72); therefore, students often show reluctance to learning English because they fear they will lose their Puerto Rican identity, which has been socially and politically constructed in relation to Puerto Rican Spanish. Students’ resistance or eagerness to learning English must also be considered, however, in light of the K-12 educational sector, which obliges one class period per day (usually fifty minutes), of English instruction. Despite this continuous exposure to English, “only 20% of the island’s population is functionally bilingual” (Clachar, 1997, p. 69), and many students do not master the language, do not know how to express themselves meaningfully in written form, fear to speak among each other, and rarely opt to read a book in English. Mazak (2008) clearly addresses this language dilemma when noting “English has earned the nickname ‘el difícil’ [the difficult one] for its reputation as being difficult to learn, even after years of formal study in school” (p. 52). Of course, there are always exceptions, and not all students are against expressing themselves in English. There are those who do learn the language and are proficient in this language.

Although English is a second official language on the island, students are often not aware of the fact that they use it more than they give themselves credit for, or are willing to admit. Because of Puerto Rico’s political and economic status with the United States, we encounter the English language on a daily basis. In the UPRM, as well as in most higher education institutions across the island, textbooks for most courses are written in English. As Yancey (2008) points out, the language in students’ electronic devices, such as cellular phones, computers and iPods,

as well as text within the web platforms they use are typically set to English. In Mazak's (2008) study, the author considers the use of English and literacy practices in a rural community in Puerto Rico. Literacy practices are "not only reading and writing but all the talk around texts and regularized cultural uses of print" (p. 53). Mazak (2008) found that Puerto Ricans appropriated the use of the English language to meet their ends, and resist "English use in other ways" (p. 53). Both Mazak (2008) and Carroll (2008) then coincide in describing both resistance and appropriation of the language for specific purposes, these being mainly instrumental.

Those who come from the United States or other parts of the world, into the higher education programs of our academic institutions, may also be directly or indirectly affected by the language issues on the island. Since 1898, when the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico and imposed English in the educational system, there has been a constant debate about language in the island. Schmidt (2008) however, notes that "the year of 1969 marked the beginning of a new paradigm in educational language policies in Puerto Rico. The new policy asserted the role of English in public education and re-instated it as a medium of instruction" (p. 36). Indeed, shifting language policies in the political arena "increased the value [of English] for educational use, neutralizing the increase in social use" (p. 370). This points to yet another reason why the English language is highly considered as an instrumental means to an end of professional and economic wellness. As such, many Puerto Rican students have been raised in a context in which English is perceived as an oppressive, yet necessary burden. At the same time, the language phenomenon continues to shift when one considers social uses of language among younger generations on the island, a generation to which students from the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course certainly pertain. When looking at their personal communication mediums, such as cell phone, computer, e-mail, Facebook and Myspace, as well as international e-mailing, the previously mentioned

appropriation of language is again evident. As a college instructor, I have encountered students who claim that they do not know English, and resist speaking and writing in this language. Yet, when they ask for my acceptance in Myspace and Facebook, these requests are typically characterized by information, data and comments written in English. This, I speculate, is due to the fact that in these world-wide forums English is the official language and that those students who choose to adopt English in their personal cyberspaces wish to reach a wider audience. These are environments in which they actively choose to partake, yet in which they also actively engage in hybrid uses of English and Spanish.

To reiterate, this study explores the adaptation of the INGL 3103 Intermediate Writing I course into a digital modality in which students are more accustomed to reading and, most importantly, to writing in English. It presents the outcomes of this adaptation for students enrolled in the course, and compares these outcomes to those of the traditional face-to-face modality, which is the dominant medium of instruction across the educational system in the island.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the literature which informs my research, my theoretical orientation, and the methodological framework which shaped my study. Moreover, I will explain how the web-based platform to which the traditional face-to-face course was adapted.

Chapter III. Research Design, Methods and Methodology

Research Questions

Online writing instruction has already been practiced and researched in several educational institutions. However, this is not the case for the UPRM, at least for English courses. The INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course has previously been offered only in the face-to-face modality, using the WebCT educational platform and other technological applications only as supplementary course resources. Studies such as Warren and Holloman's (2005) assess data between students enrolled in the same course as it is delivered to one section face-to-face and another section on-line (p. 148). The results of this study suggest that there is no significant difference between face-to-face and online instruction. However, their study focused on a course emphasizing teacher leadership and communication, rather than a writing course in which the primary focus is on the writing process. These authors also suggest that further research on the quality of student outcomes should be conducted. As mentioned in the introduction, this is the primary aim of my study, and the ways in which I will assess the quality of my students' work will be explained in further detail in this chapter.

Hewett and Ehmann (2004) present evidence that the most substantial benefit of online writing instruction is that the classroom is immersed in writing, because it is the principal means of communication. Drawing from their study and its findings as I designed my own research project in the context of the UPRM, I posed the following research question: **How might students' engagements with the writing process differ across a face-to-face writing course and an online writing course?**

There is a significant gap in the research concerning the role of the student and how they respond as writers in composition-based courses, in both the online and face-to-face modalities.

Hewett and Ehmann (2004) mention that in online courses, the hierarchy that is established in a face-to-face classroom is diminished and replaced by collaborative communication and thoroughly thought-out responses. The authors observe that the anxiety that is prevalent in face-to-face interactions—and which may increase in a second language contexts—is minimized when students are only facing a screen. Therefore, students step away from the individual personalities and roles that characterize their participation in face-to-face environments, and step into more collaborative roles as they contribute and respond to an ongoing discussion in the virtual environment with well thought out ideas (p. 43).

In relation to teachers, researchers such as Sieber (2005) and Young (2006) discuss the teacher's role as a mediator of knowledge in online courses, rather than as a provider of knowledge. Sieber (2005) specifically observes that teachers need to consciously reduce their level of power in a classroom and allow students to assume responsibility for their own learning. Teachers should provide a structured environment, which at the same time is flexible and open to students' responses and opinions in relation to course improvement and topics for class discussions (Young, 2006). As reiterated by Watson (2001), "learning is regarded as a shared social activity, embedded in classroom interactions" (p. 140). Based on prior experience teaching the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course in its traditional face-to-face modality, I have found that students typically carry out class discussion, but the teacher most frequently acts as mediator, with students constantly referring back to her to see if there is an agreement with what they are saying, while negotiating among each other in relation to their ideas and feedback for their interpretations of texts and written work. In this study, therefore, I sought to analyze how students engage with their writing, and how their questions and ideas might vary across modalities of instruction.

Other studies question student and teacher responses in terms of interactions and writing responses. Loel (2004) argues that all research points to face-to-face instruction as more effective in terms of student response and teacher response. Surprisingly however, Loel (2004) found opposing evidence that students do not differentiate significantly from one modality to the other in terms of feedback on their writing assignments. The students involved in Loel's (2004) research were not able to distinguish whether the feedback to their writing was being given by a particular teacher or several teachers, based on the responses given via audio or written form. In contrast to Loel (2004), feedback to students' writing for this course was only provided by myself as their instructor and students were aware of this. This research suggests then, that further investigation should take place, focusing specifically on interactivity in online instruction, and how student responses shape teacher responses in relation to direction, tone, and topics commented on. This will contribute to the exploration of alternative modalities of instruction as well as modifications to existing practices. For this reason, I also wanted to look at the way in which students responded to written feedback, and the questions that developed after such feedback was given, in order to understand if these did or did not change the process.

Hewett and Ehmann (2004) defend online writing instruction as a modality that inhibits the "marginalization or silencing of some individuals" which often occurs in face-to-face discussion sessions (p. 43). Studies have shown that online instruction overall, requires the student to be more independent and responsible. Yet Young (2006) also clarifies that "[teachers] must remain visibly and actively involved in the learning process, maybe even to a greater degree than in the traditional classroom" (p. 74). When considering the role of the student, researchers such as Hewett and Ehmann (2004) state that students who are allowed to pick pseudonyms and respond in a relatively anonymous way, tend to shift peer competition "from

that of personality to ideas” (p. 23), meaning that the focus is on their contribution, rather than making a joke, not saying a word, or going against what everyone says, which are some the roles students might assume inside a classroom when having peers around them who provide immediate feedback to their participation in class. Online students’ responses tend to be longer and more analytical, because they have a chance to respond freely to what they choose and do not have the pressure of immediate peer feedback. Warren and Holloman (2005) also propose that further research which specifically addresses online delivery should be conducted, noting that this research should consider the impact of online learning on students. The proposed study, then, was conducted in the context of the UPRM to consider: **How might teacher and student responses to writing vary between a face-to-face and online course?** and **How might student to student responses vary between a face-to-face and online course?**

Theoretical Standpoint

Online writing instruction theories, as Hewett and Ehmann (2004) suggest, have been strongly rooted in social-constructivist epistemologies. This means that “knowledge is understood to be dynamic, provisional, developed and mediated socially as people operate within various ‘communities’ of knowledge” (p. 33). This implies—in a context of formal learning—that those individuals engage in new ideas and critical thinking based on conversations they have with their peers in class, the space of the classroom community. This begs the question however, of how is this applicable to online writing instruction. Hewett and Ehmann (2004) base their claim on the theories of Vygotsky, Kuhn, and Bruffee, (in Hewett and Ehmann, 2004) some of the main precursors of social constructivist thought. Vygotsky (in Hewett and Ehmann, 2004), posed that an essential aspect of learning a language is that of thinking and “internalizing thought” (p. 34). It is necessary to point out that such theorist have based their claims and

theorization of social constructivism on face-to-face contexts, yet Hewett and Ehmann (2004) note how it can similarly be applied to online writing instruction. As scholars of language and language learning argue, written language is a reflection of spoken language. Therefore, if the activities that lead to the social construction of meaning in a traditional classroom can be uniquely replicated in an online writing course, then socially constructed learning will take place. Kuhn (in Hewett and Ehmann, 2004), for instance, believes that knowledge is achieved “within limited social groups of likely-thinking members” (p. 35). Applying this to online writing instruction, students who are taking a similar course are discussing the same material, thus, drawing on a common knowledge base that may be discussed among themselves and scaffolded with guiding questions provided by the instructor.

Bruffee (in Hewett and Ehmann, 2004), finds that the failures of students in an online course and those in a face-to-face course in their attempts to think and write critically are the same: “at all levels and in all settings [...] we must learn to converse well” (p. 35). In contrast, Meléndez (2001) identifies these failures, within the context of Puerto Rico’s higher education institutions, as discussed in Chapter I, as emerging from the lack of “consultants to shape solutions [and offer] support” (p. 538). To this end, we can say that students need a social context to be able to achieve course goals. Their social context then, becomes the classroom setting, which in the case of the online modality, is the WebCT platform. Because students are required to engage in discussion forums with “likely thinking members” (Kuhn in Hewett and Ehmann, 2004, p.35), social constructivist learning will occur. For the above mentioned reasons, this study was designed using a social constructivist orientation.

In the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course, the students writing-based practices and interactions were triggered by using peer review, peer feedback, group work, and writing

conferences, all also engaged in by the instructor of the course in order to examine the outcomes of student learning across modalities. This was done in order to provide for more individual and individualized interactions with students. I also did not wish to engage in “telling” but “doing” the work with them. To a certain degree, this breaks down the hierarchy which is often present in a course in which the teacher only assigns and corrects the work of students, rather than working along with them. Hewett and Ehmann (2004) encourage such a practice because:

The conditions underpinning these practices—both traditional and online—is that if knowledge is not some static entity to be deposited in the student, as described in Paulo Freire’s well-known banking metaphor, then instructors cannot teach students to write simply by telling them how to do it. It follows that teachers cannot approach writing pedagogy as if they are keepers of the secret to developing good writing. Further, students must become active in the process by teaching one another (p. 36).

Moreover, by communicating, students become active social participants in the learning process. In online courses, communicating takes place via the use of e-mail, discussion boards, conferencing, chatting, and blogging, providing the class with feedback similar to that which they receive in face-to-face courses, even though it may be in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. Therefore, as the instructor of the course, I was able to work with students and provide them with similar feedback in both the online and the face-to-face versions of the course. Furthermore, as a researcher, I was able to take note of the similarities and/or differences across these modalities, while providing both groups of students with such feedback.

Methodology

As discussed in Chapter I, this study employed the qualitative research methodology of *classroom* action research. As defined by Nunan (1992), classroom action research is carried out by the practitioner rather than outside researchers; it is collaborative and aims to understand, explore and evaluate teaching practices while considering new approaches to teaching, within the

classroom setting. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) define classroom action research as that which involves “qualitative interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection by teachers with a view to teachers making judgments about how to improve their own practices” (p. 561).

Classroom action research, however, not only serves the purpose of improving personal teaching practices. It is also an approach to changing educational practices overall, within an established curriculum and learning from the repercussions that emerge from the change, such as the change in modalities from a traditional face-to-face composition course to one conducted online.

Moreover, Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) describe classroom action research as a “small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention” (p. 297). In the case of this study, the intervention consists of a different modality—that of an online environment, to which the students are not accustomed to in the context of a first year composition course for SLLs in the UPRM. As the instructor of the course, I inquired into the outcomes of this small scale intervention, in order to improve personal teaching practices. Overall, however, my close examination of the effects of this intervention may serve to guide instructors of future composition courses for SLLs that are carried out using online forums as their venue.

As asserted by Glesne (2006), classroom action research is now more popular in educational studies, providing a means of understanding and evaluating teaching practices by researching, planning, implementing and evaluating class materials, modalities and methodologies. In such cases then, classroom action research is used as a critical praxis, because it has an *emancipatory* agenda, “which is political as it is educational” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 302). In the case of this study, as explained earlier, English and its use in the educational settings in Puerto Rico is inherently political due to the history of U.S. colonization

and the imposition of the language on the island. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) argue that classroom action research may be emancipatory when “it not only aims at technical and practical improvement and the participant’s better understanding, along with transformation and change, but also at changing the system itself or [the] conditions which impede desired improvement in the system/organization” (p. 302). This study, then, also represents an attempt to actively address the current aims of the institution in which it takes place, which as described earlier, emphasize the implementation of online and digital technology learning initiatives in order to be at the “vanguard of technology”. It is necessary though, to distinguish that this is an institutional goal, rather than a student goal, due to the fact that, as previously highlighted, students are already highly engaged with digital technology in their everyday literacy practices. Still, I will evaluate the usefulness of this institutional aim, in relation to this particular study.

It is crucial to clarify that the classroom action research agenda of this study aims to consider the possibilities of improving personal teaching practices in relation to the writing process in the INGL 3103 course, but also the institution unit at large. It may be used as an investigatory building block that explores the online modality as an option for teaching this course specifically, but it also adds to the ongoing initiative of introducing DL to the UPRM. While my overall approach to this study falls under the umbrella of action research, the particular focus on my own teaching and role of instructor of a writing course conducted in two modalities, distinguishes it as practitioner research. Cockley (1993) defines practitioner research as that which is done by the teacher, or, in this case, instructor, of a specific course, group of students, or teaching practices, because the context is well known. Furthermore, further understanding, exploration and evaluation is sought in relation to the usefulness of the online teaching modality. This research was therefore carried out in order to yield richer information about the course as it

is taught in two distinct modalities in a previously known context. In sum, according to Anderson, Herr & Nihlen (1994), practitioner research aims to “adapt, refine, and build upon “traditional” approaches” (p.107). Likewise, as previously mentioned, this research focused on understanding how current approaches used at the UPRM for teaching writing might be applied to an online setting. Finally, to reiterate, this study was conducted in a second language learning context with specific implications for teaching English as a second language in the island, particularly in relation to teaching the writing process through face-to-face and online modalities.

In summary, classroom action research has a practical emphasis “on the interpretations that teachers and students are making” and the actions taken when teachers and students are confronted with specific educational situations, such as two distinct modalities of instruction—face-to-face and online, in a second language learning context (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 2005, p.561). Classroom action research also suggests an evaluation of the results of such research, to improve practice at both the individual and institutional level.

Research Site and Time Frame

As mentioned before, WebCT in both DL and the traditional classroom is a component of educational programming at the UPRM. After offering a traditional face-to-face intermediate writing course for the second time in 2007, I believed this would prove a useful venue in which I might conduct research in order to experiment with different teaching practices and to consider the outcomes for doing so. On the Mayagüez campus, online teaching initiatives were gaining popularity at the time. Both the research site and the research itself then, stemmed from previous experience teaching this course in this context.

The study and data collection process began on January 9th, 2008, and concluded on May 1st, 2008. During this time, there were three phases of data collection. The first phase was

comprised of the written assignments, responses, e-mails and all written communication for the initial unit of the course, which focused on the writing process. This occurred from January 9th to February 19th, 2008. The second phase comprised two sets of writing conferences. In the first, students' experiences and perspectives on their first essay for the class were recorded. The main focus of this first writing conference was on the specifics of the writing process and delved in the students' understanding of the writing process as taught in the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course. For the second writing conference, students discussed more in-depth aspects of their writing based on their research paper assignment. The students' comments during the second writing conference were the result of explicitly discussing the writing process and occurred after their second essay assignment, due at the end of March. The third phase comprised a focus group interview, conducted with students from both the face-to-face and the online sections. The focus group interview will be described in detail below.

Participants. The participants for this research were selected based on convenience sampling. Convenience sampling, also referred to as "opportunity sampling," is when the researcher chooses the most accessible sample at the time (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). As one of the dimensions of classroom action research, this study found me drawing on my own students for the given semester to serve as my potential research participants. The participants therefore consisted of two groups of 26 first year students in their second or subsequent semester¹¹ at the UPRM. In order to explore my research questions with this group, I chose students who enrolled in both face-to-face and online modalities of the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course, for which I served as instructor during the spring semester of 2008.

¹¹ Students may enroll in this course in subsequent semesters as well.

Methods

A socio-demographic, self administered questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the course. A socio-demographic questionnaire,¹² as defined by Anderson, Herr & Nihlen (1994), is a type of structured interview that is based on a set of questions in which the answers are delimited to a pre-determined set. In the case of this study, the socio-demographic questionnaire was used to obtain a general picture of the student population and their backgrounds in education, language and online courses.

Data collection also included written assignments submitted by the students while the writing process was being taught and any other assignments completed over the course of the semester. In addition, it extended to all forms of communication such as e-mails or logs written about office hour visits. Diverse methods were utilized to collect and compile the data in order to address the research questions posed by this study. First, to examine and reflect upon the student's written work and their development as writers, a standard assessment for both the face-to-face and the online course was created. This took the form of rubrics, which were used to evaluate each assignment. Each rubric was created specifically for the assignment at hand, except in the case of journals. The rubric for journals was also applicable to essays and written assignments, more generally. Rubrics intended for freewriting exercises and reflections on class material were based on more qualitative concerns such as the integration of more than one perspective and the consideration of different points of view. I also engaged in a constant process of reflexivity, which, as defined by Cohen, Manison and Morrison (2007), "recognizes that the researcher [is] inescapably part of the social world" (p. 171) that is being studied. I was aware that "participants behave in particular ways in [the researcher's] presence" (p. 171), thus, I made constant annotations of my personal observations for both the face-to-face and online courses,

¹² See Appendix D

conceptualizing aspects of the class such as student participation, their written work, on-line and face-to-face discussions, how students responded to class material, and the results of their written assignments in order to later compare these with findings from the writing conferences and focus groups.

Writing conferences provided me with a particularly useful strategy for analyzing my data. Via these individual discussions, students expressed their strengths and weaknesses in their writing, and voiced their concerns about how they might improve them. Kamler (2001) defines a writing conference as a form of interview in which the “teacher asks questions about the writing to understand how students are attempting to solve writing problems and to support them in their efforts” (p. 63). Moreover, writing conferences as well as focus groups go hand in hand with Vygotskian social-constructivist theories that argue that learning takes place through social interaction, much like that which occurs between instructors and students.

A set of questions¹³ was provided to each student prior to the writing conferences, so that they might reflect on their writing in advance, and identify aspects of their writing they wanted to address. Writing conferences were conducted individually with each of the students in both versions of the course, whether they opted to participate in the research or not. For research participants, however, these conferences were audio-taped and transcribed in order to refer to them later with greater ease. There were two sets of writing conferences. One took place immediately after the first essay assignment was submitted and evaluated. Similarly, the second took place after their second essay assignment. For each modality of the course, the writing conferences were held during both class and office hours. Thus, although some of the data-gathering and class activities were done synchronously and face-to-face with students enrolled in

¹³ See Appendix E

the online course, all other class-related work was done online, which comprised approximately 90% of all class activity.

The final data collection method used for this study was the ethnographic interview in order to gather specific insight on how the students went about their writing practices and overall involvement in the course. According to Anderson, Herr & Nihlen (1994), the ethnographic interview, better known as the open-ended interview, is constructed in order to allow participants to talk about their experiences and to build their own narrative or story of what occurred. For this study specifically, I chose focus groups because these are used to obtain information from a small number of people at the same time. “They offer the opportunity to obtain greater depth and breadth in responses [...] and they provide facilitators the immediate advantage of being able to double—and cross—check their interpretations of participant’s responses” (Miller, 2007, p.1) Morgan (1998) also states that through exchanges which occur in the dynamic of a focus group, the “give-and-take” of the discussion provides a context as to why, in this case, the students feel one way rather than the other (p.8). It is a process of sharing and comparing between the students, about their experiences.

Therefore, the students narrated their experiences during the semester in either the face-to-face or online course. This was done through a focus group interview session¹⁴ which took place at the end of the semester, and which consisted of six students from both the face-to-face and the online versions of the course, who were selected using maximal variation, and who agreed to participate. Maximal variation sampling, as defined by Seale, Gobo, Gubrium and Silverman (2004), is used “to obtain information about the significance of various circumstances for case process and outcomes” and are very different in dimension in terms of their classroom practices (p. 426). In both versions of the course, there were students who constantly and

¹⁴ See Appendix F

voluntarily participated in class, students who participated only when asked to, and one student who did not participate in class activities. A student with each of these specifications was selected from each section to participate in the focus group. Focus group participants were thus selected through purposeful sampling of maximal variation, which helps to illustrate characteristics of particular subgroups of interest and facilitates comparison between the different groups.

In this meeting, participants discussed their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards both versions of the course. Also, they considered their learning processes, and if their understandings and applications of their performance in the course coincided with my own views and understanding of how they performed. This allowed the students, as well as the instructor, to identify similarities and differences across the two modalities of the course and our unique or overlapping perceptions of these. The focus group was audio-tape recorded and students referred to each other using a given pseudonym to maintain anonymity at all times.

I believe the focus group method was specifically suited to this study because, as Krueger (1988) argues, focus groups can improve the design and planning of the issue being treated, in this case the online modality of the course. This served the classroom action research agenda, because different aspects of the course were discussed during the focus groups, in order to identify which activities done in both modalities could be changed or improved, and how it might be possible to develop a more efficient course agenda. Focus groups can also provide insight into how online courses can be evaluated and compared to already existing course offerings, such as the face-to-face modality. Another reason, as social-constructivist theory points out, is that we are a product of our environment, and of our social interactions, and as Watson (2001) observes, we are necessarily shaped by these interaction. Students may need to

listen to different opinions in order to shape or re-form their own. As the researcher, when analyzing the data, I thus paid close attention to these changes in opinion, to see when and why they occurred, and what influencing factors contributed to them.

After all data was gathered, analysis and interpretation of data commenced using the students' written assignments, responses, and reactions to readings, as well as my evaluations of these assignments, the recordings of my writing conferences with students and the recordings of our focus group session. Only the demographic data gathered was quantified. This was used to identify specific characteristics of the student population.

The data gathering methods mentioned above were tools which facilitated interactions among the students and myself as the instructor, thus providing opportunities which as mentioned earlier, according to social constructivist paradigms, are necessary for learning to take place. In addition, the online environment in which data was collected offered more opportunities for written communication and thus, more writing practice for students.

In order to address each of my research questions, student narratives from the focus group interview were transcribed and categorized into themes that pertained to each of the questions. Recordings of the writing conferences were re-played and the students' questions were noted. These notes were compared within the specific context (online or face-to-face) as well as against the data that came out of the focus group interview as a form of double-checking and cross-referencing my findings. Finally, the quotes used for the results and discussion chapter were selected based on their pertinence and significance in relation to each research question.

Validity

The validity of a study, as defined by Nunan (1992), is "the extent to which a piece of research actually investigates what the researcher purports to investigate" (p. 140), and is

considered with both internal and external measures. Internal validity is the extent to which the distinct data gathering methods can be incorporated into the same study, and arrived at similar conclusions (Nunan, 1992). The internal validity was secured by the use of three different data gathering methods which also served to triangulate the data. Methodological triangulation, is achieved “using different methods on the same object of study” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 142), and was comprised of a combination of my observations, the evaluation of students’ work, and student’s individual and personal views of their writing gathered by means of writing conferences. In addition, I gathered general perspectives on both the face-to-face and online courses by means of group discussion in the focus group interview. Both the writing conference and the focus group interview were used as methods of validation, in order to compare them with my observations as a teacher-researcher.

External validity, as identified by Nunan (1992), is the extent to which other researchers can generalize beyond the study and the participants of the investigation, to a wider population. In the context of this research however, even if triangulation was ensured using three different methods of data collection, it is important to point out that it is only valuable for internal validity, not external. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue, the concept of triangulation and external validity are methods that although largely used and referred to, should be replaced for the concept of *crystallization*. This concept refers to how data is only valuable under specific methodological circumstances, though it is nevertheless malleable for future researchers to use. This is because qualitative research focuses on a specific place at a specific time, and no context, regardless of the methods and methodologies used and applied, will achieve similar results. Therefore, as qualitative researchers, it is not our job to either prove or disprove a theory. Rather, our task as interpreters of data that is based on our personal research is to report and crystallize

this data in a way that it may shed light on theoretical and practical understandings for those who later read the work and decide to adapt it to other specific and local contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Some of the primary concerns expressed by researchers in the field emphasize the consideration of three features that particularly underscore online writing instruction: student participation, accessibility of information and teacher feedback. The first relates to whether or not the required technology is available to students in order to enable them to participate actively and effectively in an online course. At the UPRM, there is guaranteed access to institutionally available technology. There are several computer centers available to students with an established schedule of routine hours. Students who voluntarily enrolled in the online version of the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course were provided with a list of the computer centers in the institution that specified the times during which they were available for use, and the requirements for admission such as a student ID. It was the responsibility of the student to carry out their coursework within these hours, unless they had access to a computer and internet at their homes. This was one of the factors that students had to consider before enrolling in the course. Their access to technology on and off campus, maximally validated the online course option, but as explained earlier, the technological infrastructure of the island is a problematic one, which can impact students' participation in DL on campus and in Puerto Rico more generally.

An additional concern for the proposed study was to gauge to what extent the enrolled students had previously acquired, in their personal as well as academic lives, the technological skills necessary to enroll and engage in an online course. Technology is a component of many courses at the UPRM, and while the technological equipment necessary for students to take part

in an online course is available to them, there are off course limitations to this, such as time constraints and availability of the facilities, as mentioned above. Regardless, these are considerations students should reflect on before enrolling in a course which is completely online.

Students may not be accustomed to taking online courses that involve material they can access in a face-to-face course, or that involves a second language which may or may not be mastered. In the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, there have been several proposed and approved measures to integrate technology and English as a second language into the curricula of our schools. According to the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act, legislation that is applied in the educational context of Puerto Rico, technology should be used to enhance learning and connect students to the outside world, the one which is beyond the school (NCLB, 2007). This legislation also states that “effective research-based technology integration can enhance student learning in language arts... English as a second language and technology literacy” (NCLB, 2007). The NCLB act thus requires the integration of technology in the curriculum so that every student is technology literate before they reach the eighth grade. Regardless of whether this is a realistic goal in the public schools of Puerto Rico due to the lack of technological resources, funding to support these, and inequitable distribution of such resources, they are nevertheless becoming a central focus for K-12 teachers. This means that by the time Puerto Rican students reach the university level, they should have at least mastered basic skills required to successfully perform in an online course, and that technology should have been a main component of their overall education. This is crucial to the proposed study, because students who have not mastered these basic computer skills may not feel encouraged to take an online course or to work on classroom tasks that involve the use of technology.

A second concern for scholars in the field is students' access to an unlimited amount of information, which could result in acts of academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism. In the case of the INGL 3103-Intermediate English I course, both sections were provided with information regarding the use of additional sources in their written works and how to cite these properly. Also, in the class syllabus, a list of internet resources that support teachers in identifying plagiarism was provided, so that students were aware of the ways in which plagiarism is tracked. In terms of written assignments, these were assigned with specific guiding questions and a description of expected materials to be included. Providing such clarification and guidelines for preventing plagiarism is thought to minimize the possibility of its occurrence in student writing.

Finally, a third major concern of scholars in the field is that of teacher feedback and enabling students to participate in meaningful ways. As the instructor of the course, I aimed to provide feedback to students within a 24 hour period, and frequently gave feedback in class discussions in order to guide these, as well as to promote further consideration of the statements, questions, and ideas posed by students. Students also had personal access to my office hours when they felt they needed to discuss any aspect of the course. I am optimistic that all of the above listed strategies provided my students with a socially engaging atmosphere, which resonated with the social constructivist paradigm that theoretically frames this study.

Aside from these scholarly concerns, an ethical concern was that of providing the information about the study to students. Since the participants of this study were students enrolled in both sections of the course, all students were given a consent form.¹⁵ They were familiarized with the study in this way, and informed of their rights pertaining to their role as participants in the research. Students were each assigned a pseudonym, which was uniformly used to refer to them and their work. If participating students did not want me to include

¹⁵ See Appendix E

particular components of their work for the course as data in the on-going analysis, or to tape-record them, these requests were honored, and the related data does not appear in this document or elsewhere.

In the proceeding chapter, I will discuss how I used narrative inquiry to analyze my data. I will present the results of my study and these by narrating my students' responses, as well as my own perceptions, misconceptions and the ways in which I worked with distinct situations that arose as we engaged in the course-based assignments and activities.

Chapter IV. Data Analysis and Results

“Writing is presumably of most value, when the writer—the student—is personally engaged in making and sharing meaning.”

(Gilbert, 1991, p.31)

Data Analysis

Narrative is everywhere, and it is narrative from which our daily lives, actions and practices are shaped. How the story is told, and how readers and researchers interpret these stories, is how they make sense of the world or a specific phenomenon. Chase (2005) defines narrative, and how researchers use narrative, as retrospection for making meaning. “Narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and other’s actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 656). Richardson (2002) defines narrative as “the primary ways through which humans organize their experience into temporally meaningful episodes” (p. 200), and how the role of the participants in the episode fit into a comprehensible whole. Richardson (2002) also classifies narrative as sociological texts, but argues that when telling a story, participants provide a narrative explanation, rather than one which may be classified as logico-scientific (p.210). This is particularly significant due to the fact that I do not wish to prescribe how the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course be taught, but rather describe if and how changes of modality might affect student outcomes, as well as personal teaching practices. In this sense, as the researcher, I constructed students’ stories of what happened, rather than provide definitive logico-scientific explanations as to why they made certain decisions throughout the duration of the course.

Narratives of what occurred in both versions of the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course were thus created using my participants’ voices, and I compared these to my own perceptions in order to re-construct the class setting and the interactions that occurred. Re-

constructing the setting and defining classroom situations was useful as I explored my decisions as the instructor of the course, how my students responded to these, and how those decisions affected the outcomes of their interactions with me, with each other and the writing process. By reconstructing these student responses, I was able to “construct a meaningful whole” (Chase, 2005, p.656).

It is imperative to reiterate once again that this research and the related narratives in my analysis of the data are based on the specific context of the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course as taught in two modalities. As the researcher, I apply Chase’s (1995) definition of narrative, as one that is a “socially situated interactive performance” as produced in the particular setting of the UPRM, for particular participants. These were students enrolled in the spring semester of 2008, in the social, infrastructural, educational, and web-based and classroom settings described earlier, who were interacting in the settings in which the course took place.

To reiterate, I adopted classroom action research to methodologically frame my study. For the particular context of this study, returning to Nunan’s (1992) definition, classroom action research served the purpose of understanding, exploring and evaluating my personal teaching practices with a goal of improvement in the classroom, given an already established curriculum. In this study, the understanding, exploration and evaluation of such practices, arose from the repercussions that emerged from the change in modalities from a traditional face-to-face classroom to one conducted online, while following the master syllabus.

In order to examine and interpret these repercussions, narrative inquiry was adopted as a framework for analyzing data because, as Clandinin & Connelly (2000) remark, “experience happens narratively” (p.19), meaning, that as we experience situations, we not only talk about them but also re-tell them overtime. Therefore, it seemed pertinent that this “educational

experience should be studied narratively” (p.19). Using the voices of the students who went through the experience of taking the online course, and who were taking the course for the second or subsequent time, I was were able to draw similarities and differences of the online modality versus the traditional, face-to-face mode of instruction. For this study, I therefore adopted narrative inquiry to present the repercussions of change in instructional modality, due to technological innovations in the curricula in comparison to traditional modes of instruction. For instance, a particular area of change that captured my attention in this regard was the potential of the online modality to contribute to new and hybrid modes of data collection and analysis. Chase (2005) for example, notes:

Although it is hard to imagine narrative researchers giving up the domain of face-to-face interviewing and on-site gathering of naturally occurring conversations, some researchers have already moved into the domain of virtual research and many others will follow in their footsteps. How are e-mail, chat groups, online support groups, and instant messaging changing the meaning of “naturally occurring conversations?” How are they creating new arenas for narrating the self and constructing identities, realities, relationship, and communities? (p. 670)

As a researcher, I did not however forsake face-to-face for online interviewing for various reasons. First, although there are digital tools available which could have been used to conduct the writing conferences and the focus group interview online, I might have the last data gathered, as mentioned earlier, because of poor technology infrastructure¹⁶. Secondly, although the course was carried out in an online forum, in this particular setting students are physically on campus for their other courses, therefore, they were more often on campus than online. These interviews were therefore done, in Chase’s (2005) terminology, “on-site”.

Moreover, in relation to Chase’s considerations of “naturally occurring conversations” as those which occur during “on-site” interviewing, I do believe there are certain gaps in e-mail,

¹⁶ Indeed, some data was lost when the university unexpectedly adopted a new version of WebCT between the Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 semester.

chat group, online support group, and classroom considerations in general—this is why I chose to conduct interviews and writing conferences personally, rather than online where silences or gaps in conversations may lead to the misinterpretation of the results. Nevertheless, as Chase (1995) implies, I agree that online practices do, in fact, change the meaning of “naturally occurring conversations.” In my study, conversations with and across students primarily took place synchronously or asynchronously online, and did indeed serve to re-define this concept. We necessarily had naturally occurring conversations both face-to-face and in virtual forums, all of which contributed significantly to this research. For instance, students sent their work through e-mail for me to correct, along with explanations of their concerns in relation to their writing, as well as questions on how they could develop or improve their work. Because students in the online version of the course did not experience as much peer interaction as the ones from the face-to-face section (a finding I will discuss later on in this chapter), I assigned small groups of three to four students to individual chat rooms, so that they might have their own forum for discussing class materials. I also called for an “on-site” meeting in order to establish these groups, as well as for them to determine the logistics of days and times they would meet.

In addition, even though the course materials were provided online and assignments were also completed in this forum, students participating in the online modality of the course also had “on site” encounters with me, which made the online modality a hybrid one. This *hybridity* was specifically presented when students discussed their work with me during my office hours, as well as when I conducted writing conferences with them. In addition, even though there was only a representation of the class participating, not all of the students participated in the focus group interviews; these were also conducted in the physical space of a classroom on campus, as opposed to the virtual space of the online environment.

Considering then, the hybrid ways in which conversations and interactions took place, specifically in the online modality, in the specific case of this study, I wanted to study and analyze how the social and educational contexts of the classroom changed when a writing course was taken from page to screen, meaning when the course was taught via a new modality and when course-related interactions took place through the medium of this new mode. As a researcher and instructor of the course, I wanted to represent this through the voices of my student participants, as well as my own, to see how we both told and reconstructed our stories. This was done by having students analyze their own actions and my own. I also explored the repercussions of the change in modality by layering the narratives of my students to create a meaningful whole of the outcomes of this study. To reiterate, all data gathered was used to answer the research questions which frame this study, which were specifically focused on student's engagement with the writing process, teacher-student interactions, and peer interactions across a traditional face-to-face modality and an online modality.

For the purpose of analysis, I will address each of these questions separately to consider them in detail. The outcomes for each question of these three areas were rather similar in both the face-to-face and the online modalities of the course, except for the distinct features I will highlight below.

Overall Outcomes across Modalities

Retention Rates. No student from the online modality of the course had taken online courses prior to the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course. However, as discussed earlier, the WebCT platform is commonly used in this course, and because all but one student had already taken the course before, they had all already worked with WebCT, including the student taking the course for the first time. Overall, student retention rates in both the online and face-to-face

modality were similar. It is important to reiterate that as explained in previous chapters, all students were repeating the course for the second or third time, with the exception of one. In these two sections of the course, regardless of the modality in which they were taught, a high number of students dropped the course. Initially, each section had a total of 25 students. At the end of the semester, there were 15 students in the face-to-face section, out of which one had to finish the course using additional modes of digital technology and distance learning outside of WebCT. There were a total of 14 students in the online section.

Attendance. There were a high number of student absences in the face-to-face course, even if the students did the work, turned it in on time and followed the guidelines for such assignments. While absences in an online course cannot be accounted for in the same way they are in a face-to-face course, I measured these by the number of discussion topics students did not participate in. Overall, students did participate in the discussion topics, with some exceptions which can be thought of as absences. Thus, in both versions of the course, there were students who participated and students who were absent, and participation in class discussions was relatively parallel.

Excuse Rates. In relation to the written assignments students had to submit, there was a higher number of excuses in the face-to-face modality than in the online modality. Students from the face-to-face modality often conveyed to me that they were not able to turn in their work by the deadline, mostly because of printing problems—they had no ink, the computer centers were closed, etc.—and often handed in their work late. However, in the online modality, students complied with the deadlines and frequently turned in their work ahead of time. This occurred even though students were able to submit their assignments up to twelve hours after the deadline.

Grades. Grade averages were similar across modalities, demonstrating that while the process, development, activities, responses and interactions varied across the face-to-face course and those occurring online, the outcomes in relation to students' final grades remained the same.

Independence versus Dependence across Modalities

Communication. Students did not login to their discussion groups simultaneously in the online version of the course, an activity done to emulate class discussion, in relation to the texts read for the course. Students taking the course online were therefore independent in terms of completing their reading and assignments, but dependent on the instructor alone to discuss their work outside of the required forums. As an additional effort to achieve communication between students outside of the class discussion forums for the online section as mentioned above, I created individual private chat rooms with groups of three students per peer review, so they would login at a specific day and time to discuss class materials and work, as well as to chat about their written assignments. However, during my office hours, I was logged into the main chat room for the class, and students did login to ask questions and discuss their assignments with me. Additionally, this highlights, once again, the maintenance of a strict hierarchy between my students and myself as their instructor, rather than a leveling of hierarchy as indicated by Hewett and Ehmann (2004).

In the online modality, students had a total of two weeks to send their drafts to their partner, review their partner's work, and revise their work before turning it in. Only a few students, however, responded and were able to complete this process. Still, I observed with interest that some students who did not get their work reviewed by a partner, nevertheless applying the guidelines and questions for peer review to improve their own work, using these without the help of a partner. Revisions for the writing process in the online environment then,

may point to how second language learners taking a composition course online need a hybrid, rather than fully online modality, in order to be able to discuss their work with their peers and use peer responses to improve their writing.

Peer Reviews. In terms of the goals set for peer reviews, I do not consider these a failure, but in terms of evaluating how students respond to each other in an online environment, these again demonstrated that some students engaged in their work much more independently than others. Intriguingly, a few students from the online course came during office hours to go over the peer review sheet and discuss their work with me instead of with a partner. Some of the students who did this had already had their essays reviewed by a peer, but felt they needed more feedback on their content, rather than form. Their online peer review comments revealed that students did not engage as much in responding to their partner's content as they did in responding to the structure and form of their writing. On the other hand, peer reviews in the face-to-face setting took place during class hours and students were satisfied with the feedback they received. If there was an occasional doubt about any given suggestion, they would ask me to clarify or elaborate on it. While I know there may be many possible reasons why the students from the online version of the course were not satisfied with the peer feedback component, I will address two here. The first is because they were not knowledgeable about the subject at hand,¹⁷ and were not willing to engage in further research about their partner's work. The second is that their focus was necessarily geared to form because the guidelines for the research paper emphasized form rather than content. Also, engaging with the content and working to develop their research topics had a lot to do with the topics they ultimately chose, and the sources they had at hand.

¹⁷ This was an argumentative research paper of a particular topic of their choice.

In contrast, the peer review experience in the face-to-face modality was a gratifying one, as expressed by Martha during the focus group:

I enjoyed the peer reviews because I also learned from the mistakes that my classmates made, and later when doing my work, I was more aware of not making these mistakes again.

In the face-to-face version of the course, there was also a noticeable difference in that students counted on and were indeed dependent on their peers' discussions and revisions of their work rather than my own. Also, they reported benefiting from doing peer reviews for their written assignments. Martha for instance, commented that:

I do not think it would have been possible for me to do the research paper assignment. My peers had a lot of ideas I would never had thought of, and many areas which I needed help with. They taught me how to work with these areas while doing the work as a team.

Intriguingly, by conducting peer reviews in the face-to-face modality, students created audience awareness. As expressed by Martha, they wanted their work to be read and understood by others. Researchers, such as Hewett and Ehmann (2004) claim that online environment allows for this "computer-mediated communication [...] because teachers and students use electronic communication tools to share, critique, and comment on writing, as well as to generate and discuss ideas in a text-based group" (p.37). In this study however, such tools were only utilized to discuss the readings assigned for the class, not for the purpose of having students review the essay produced by their classmates. Also, working in groups sometimes created dilemmas inside the classroom, because not everybody worked at the same pace and had the same disposition to work with others. In the face-to-face modality, Pedro had a lot of trouble working with his classmates on the last writing assignment, which was done in groups of three for the face-to-face modality.

I changed my group three times! In the first group, I never got any response from my peers to do the work. I did some research on two topics, and they did not like my ideas, but they never looked for information they liked, so I changed. The second group had a problem with me joining them, because they had already started to do the work, and incorporating was difficult. My last attempt was a success because my partners quickly gave me things to do and information to look for, and we got along well. I know that I should learn to work with other people, but sometimes it is better to do the work alone because not everybody knows how to work with others.

I have typically had the same problems when my students do any type of work in or outside of class in groups. I usually ask my students to work out their differences for the time being, because they should learn how to work collaboratively. In the online environment, which obliged more independent work between peers in comparison to the written assignments and discussions maintained inside the face-to-face classroom, group work for this final assignment was not achieved. This, as explained above, was a result of the minimal responses in relation to the peer review activities, as well as the fact that all assignments could not be done equally in both sections because of the differences across modalities. For instance, journal assignments discussing the readings were done in the face-to-face course in order to monitor reading comprehension and application of the essay structures presented in such readings, whereas in the online modality, students only commented and responded to a classmate's posting concerning the same reading assignment. Another assignment which varied in relation to the guidelines was the final research paper assignment which was done in groups in the face-to-face course, and required a lengthier paper; whereas it was of shorter length and done individually in the online version of the course. Initially, the research paper assignment was meant to be done in groups in both venues, however, after noting the lack of peer interaction and responses within the online setting, outside of regular forums of discussion, the guidelines for this assignment were changed in order not to compromise students' grades.

Differences across Modalities

Students' Engagement with the Writing Process.

The writing drafts from the online version of the course were well developed and more thorough than essay drafts I received from students in the face-to-face environment. Their questions in the first writing conference were still about the same three areas—thesis statement, development and conclusion, but their drafts were lengthier than those submitted in the face-to-face section. Even though the writing process, as described earlier, has both scholarly proponents and detractors, in the specific context of this study, it appeared to benefit students. While teaching the course in both the online and the face-to-face modalities, I noticed that students had more doubts about how to structure their essays, rather than choosing a topic to write about, or problems with development of ideas. The concern for the three aspects of the writing process mentioned above surfaced throughout the course, regardless of the modality, and parallels Vernon's (2001) finding that the writing process supports second language learners in particular, due to the fact that it provides a formal structure for their written work. I believe that the most significant finding concerning the writing process as taught in the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course was the level of development from and to subsequent drafts. In the classroom setting, initial drafts were fairly short, and only presented general ideas on each of the topics to be discussed. Antonio, a student from the face-to-face section, commented on this, by saying:

I don't believe I had ever been taught about the writing process. Usually, they just told me "write a journal" or "write an essay" but never showed me how to do it. The writing process provided me with a structure, because I had a lot of trouble doing my work. Knowing how to write the essay and the elements it should have, such as the introduction, paragraphs, developing a topic and writing the conclusion, have helped me improve my writing. I had a lot of problems with organizing my ideas in English.¹⁸

¹⁸ All student quotes have been translated.

While other students from both modalities of the course agreed with Antonio, as the instructor, I noticed that students from the face-to-face modality frequently came to class with questions concerning how to construct thesis statements and how they should increase the length of their paragraphs. As a result of this, during the first writing conference with this group of students, I found myself repeatedly discussing the same areas of an essay—thesis statement, development and conclusion. In contrast, students’ development of drafts was much more complete, and achieved independently in the online environment.

In the concluding focus group interview, I asked once again participants to define the writing process for me¹⁹. Manuel, a student from the online section, responded:

For me, the writing process is one which I have to follow in order to write an essay. It is a format or a guide which we as students *must* follow.

Clearly, although I made it a point for students from both sections to understand that there is no “correct way” or “given formula” to write an essay. Manuel sounds like a warped record and numerous students echoed his response when discussing how the writing process is generally defined. As mentioned above, they felt the need to have a roadmap to complete their work, particularly because of the lack of experience they had in writing academic pieces. Prior to INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course, none of the students, regardless of the modality, had taken any other writing-based course at the institution. Later in the semester, they began to see the variations and flexibility of the writing process, but that there are key elements that a written piece should include. Ileana, a student from the online section, was able to express how she was able to go beyond the prescriptiveness of the writing process, and apply it to other types of written and oral work:

¹⁹ Students were asked to define the writing process three distinct times before the focus group interview: first, during the introduction of the course; second, in the first journal assignment titled “When Did I Learn to Write”; third, during subsequent discussion of the writing process as taught in the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course.

The writing process is an easy way to have an order; to organize our thoughts. It can help us in other forms and works, such as oral reports in other courses, and I felt it was necessary for me to understand the course, while I was able to use it for other assignments.

How these students expressed their need for guidance when it came to writing is yet another justification for the use of such a structured method for teaching undergraduate SLLs to write. Above, Ileana clearly notes that she would not have been able to complete the class assignment if it wasn't for the roadmap that the writing process provided for her. She clarifies that she had not previously included elements such as an introduction or a main idea in these assignments. Indeed, with explicit teaching of the writing process, she later on was also able to apply it to assignments for other courses she was taking.

Other students such as Pedro, who was part of the face-to-face section, highlighted their previous perceptions of writing, while comparing them to what was taught in the course:

Before, I just thought that writing was simply putting words on a paper, without specific meaning to them. I usually just started writing like crazy, and did not know how to make sense of it afterwards. English has always been very hard for me to speak, even more so to write.

In Pedro's narrative, he expressed how he had trouble communicating and particularly writing in English, both productive aspects of learning a second language considered more difficult in relation to receptive skills such as listening and reading (García, 2009). Students needed to have more structure when working in a language they do not master as well as their native language. Still, knowledge can be transferred from one language to another. Therefore, I believe this was related to a lack of writing practice, rather than English language practice in spoken form. With more practice, insecurities with speaking English, and writing in English, morphed into strong discussion and well written work submitted by the students towards the end of the course.

Students from both the face-to-face and the online modalities were able to improve their writing,

regardless of their mastery in speaking English, which to reiterate, is not a stated aim of this writing-based course. Nevertheless, there were students who did not master some of the elements of the writing process. For this reason a second writing conference took place, and was conducted in order to allow students a chance to discuss their work with me as their instructor once again. Damaris, a student from the online section, talked about how the writing conference helped her to better understand class assignments, as well as the elements of an essay in general:

Although the course was online, I believe that what helped me the most were the writing conferences because I had never received individual help in any of my courses. No one had ever sat down with me and explained to me the mistakes I was making, and how I could fix them.

Damaris' narrative above is an excellent example of how students were much more independent in terms of class discussion and responsibilities for the material assigned for the course in the online section, but were actually more dependent on me as their instructor as they discussed their written work in the writing conferences. In both the face-to-face and the online modalities, there was a distinct variation in the focus of students' conversations with me from the first to the second writing conference. In the first writing conference, as discussed above, questions were mostly about the structure of the essay. The main focus was on "how do I write a thesis statement?" or "how can I divide my paragraphs?" Students were more concerned about the form of their essay than the content.

In contrast, during the second set of writing conferences, questions were based more on content and were focused on organization, adaptation and explanation or sources. In both modalities, the drafts were closer to the final product, and exhibited more in-depth analysis and interpretations on the part of the students. Still, as mentioned above, students from the face-to-face section of the course had more questions about the form of their essay and were more dependent on me as their instructor to guide them through the process of writing their essay.

Conversly, students from the online section were more dependent on me in the editing stage of their writing.

A final reflection in terms of how students in the course engaged with the writing process is related to how students initially defined it for the first essay assignment, students had to write about what they remembered about learning how to write. This, as narrated by Julio, a student from the face-to-face section, was the hardest assignment he had to do, because for him, as well as other students, it was difficult to reflect on, and write about their own writing, rather than about a given topic. Julio stated that:

The hardest writing assignments were the ones we had to do in the classroom. For me, the most difficult writing assignment was the one in which we had to write about how we learned how to write. It was hard for me to remember when I actually learned how to put my ideas together and make paragraphs and written pieces. I always wrote isolated sentences.

This reaction was not limited, however, to students in the face-to-face modality. Manuel specifically came to my office to discuss this particular assignment, and why it was so difficult for him:

I saw the topic, and when I opened a blank page in word, it stayed as such. I still have the assignment, but it was very hard to reflect on my own writing.

As the instructor of the course, I gave this assignment specifically because I wanted to see if students were able to recognize patterns between, or similarities and differences among, their own writing habits and the elements and stages of the writing process. For the final essay, Manuel came to my office once again to discuss what he referred to as his “masterpiece”:

Since I have had writer’s block for every assignment, and have always had writers block when I have to write, I decided to do a research paper on how has “writer’s block” been defined, portrayed and discussed in the past. Also, some tips on how I overcame writers block when I faced the menace of the white page on screen.

It was especially revealing to read Manuel's work and to see how he had developed this idea. In this essay, he presented his experience in the course and his past experiences with writing; as he developed his topic, he not only defended his arguments about the usefulness of the guidelines the writing process provided him with, but also included sources from scholars and other students who had written about this topic.

Teacher and Student Responses.

I believe that the most significant finding that merged in relation to teacher to student responses was that students' dependence and independence varied significantly across modalities. Although Hewett and Ehmann (2004) argue, online platforms provide for more independent study, in the online venue of INGL 3103, students needed more explicit guidance in terms of instructions for their assignments. The hierarchical structures were not minimized; rather they were present to an even greater extent than in the face-to-face section of the course. This was due to the fact that because of lack of peer responses, I became students only resource to discuss their work. This maximized their dependence on me, thus elevating the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student in the course as a whole.

In online courses, communication takes place via the use of e-mail, discussion boards, conferencing, chatting, and blogging, providing the class with feedback similar to what they receive in face-to-face courses, even though it may be in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. As the instructor of the course, I was able to work with the students and provide feedback to the online section that was similar to that which the students received in the face-to-face section. As a researcher, I noted the similarities and/or differences across modalities while providing this feedback. I found that scholarly reports documenting the additional time and energy online courses demand from the instructor were corroborated by my research. The

communication taking place in both the face-to-face and the online modalities, recognize the value of Young's (2006) argument, who noted that teachers must be actively involved in the online setting, even to a greater extent than when teaching in traditional face-to-face modes of instruction.

When reflecting on the interactions which took place in the face-to-face modality, it is important to clarify that students' questions and doubts were expressed and discussed collectively. Therefore, while students demonstrated a certain dependence on me to answer their questions, they also depended on their classmates when it came to class discussions. In the online section, student doubts came separately and individually; their e-mails were at times overwhelming, and I was obliged to make corrections to their work on the screen. Despite my extensive planning, I found myself, as a researcher and as an educator, challenged at times, because it was very difficult to respond to all my students, as well as help them understand the material solely in the online venue. However, in the face-to-face venue, I had to repeat the same clarifications, therefore, the challenge was more related to the difficulty of producing multiple written responses, rather than on the actual clarifications I had to make. In order to minimize the amount of clarifications and responses in the online version of the course, I decided that whenever I had student inquire about the same subject, term, assignment or guidelines, I would send a clarification email to all students.

Nevertheless, I believe the additional time I was obliged to dedicate to responding to students in the online section was beneficial for both myself and the students. When the time came for me to conduct their writing conferences, I had never before been more aware of my students' doubts and needs since these were not simply mentioned in class, but explained to me

in a detailed form through numerous e-mails and discussion forums. For instance, Ileana commented on how the teacher-student dynamic took place:

Even if I was not physically present in the classroom, I knew that the instructor would always be available to help me. I wrote e-mails asking questions and it was as if the instructor had an alarm for the e-mails. They were answered in very little time. I could also make an appointment whenever I needed to discuss my work.

Still, Ileana's comment reveals that, in contrast to the claim of researchers such as Hewett and Ehmann (2004), students in online courses may be more rather than less dependent on their instructors; this may be particularly true for SLLs. Although, as mentioned above, the drafting of students' work in the online version was much more complete, these students relied on me much more for the editing process than their peers in the face-to-face section. This is very likely due to the fact that once students in the face-to-face modality had completed drafts of their essays; they had more opportunities to discuss their work with their peers. While I structured opportunities for students from the online version of the course to discuss their drafts with their peers, they opted not to do so. I speculate that the reasons for the lack of students' response to peer reviews done in the online modality are varied. First, because of the independence of working pace, students did not finish their assignments on time to have them reviewed by a peer, although deadlines were established on advance in the guidelines. Second, the WebCT platform itself did not provide tools which students considered accessible or student friendly to do so. Finally, students may not have felt capable of providing feedback to their peers—although they had a feedback answer sheet, they preferred to ignore this part of the assignment. When I inquired about this during the focus group interview, students simply responded that although they sent their work via email to their peers, their responses were very minimal, if any. Therefore, they preferred to visit me during office hours than to wait for their classmates' feedback.

The Physical Space. During the focus group interviews, students significantly noted the importance of having a physical, asynchronous space to express their opinions. This was considered fundamental to the discussion of pieces read in class. Students conveyed their understanding that, when it came to writing, they had to consider different points of views and not disregard any piece of information as worthless. The exchange of ideas that occurred between my students in both sections was especially evident when they made explicit references to their classmates' comments. Julio, a student from the face-to-face version of the course, noted the following during the focus group interview:

I liked how the discussions took place, because we listened to different opinions and at the end of the class we had different points of views to consider for our essays, about what we discussed in class.

This exchange was fruitful for the students in the face-to-face version of the course because they fed off of each other's comments. This created a dependence on their peers when it came to discussing and understanding class material, such as essays and articles read. In contrast, the discussions done in the online forum had thoroughly well-thought-out responses, but these were done in an asynchronous mode and as a course requirement. Therefore, these were done independently, and as required, rather than spontaneous responses to their classmates. Moreover, if students who received a response did not take the time to respond back to their peers (this was not required), then there was no actual conversational mode of learning taking place, but rather only an asynchronous response potentially given as part of a text discussion. In addition, initially some students may not have even read these peer responses for discussion topics.

Office Hours. During regular office hours, I was both at my office *and* online in a chat room provided by the WebCT platform. Students from the face-to-face version of the course visited me during office hours, but regularly asked questions or for further clarifications

immediately after class ended. Students from the online version logged-in to ask questions and talk about their work, much as they would have done if they were in my office. Others visited me during office hours, but this was most common when they printed their assignments, and wanted me to correct their work.

Student-to-Student Responses.

In the case of this study, the students' learning experience in the online modality engaged other students only through the class discussion forums and their visits to my office, both aspects of the course that were required. Student interactions in the online setting outside of the required responses, such as peer reviews and group chat rooms, were not as successful in the online environment. Therefore, students in the face-to-face version of the course were the ones who benefited from peer feedback to their written assignments. Within the online environment, it was much harder to get students to respond to one another, outside of class discussion forums on essays and articles read for the course. As the instructor of the course, I provided a series of activities in both modalities to explore how interactions between students occurred. By student-to-student interaction, I am referring to how students responded to each other in overall class discussions, as well as when they were engaged in responding to the writing of a peer. In order to provide time for students to discuss their writing with each other, I divided them into small groups of three, and gave them specific guidelines to support their revisions of their peers' work. Antonio commented on this activity done in the face-to-face modality of the course:

I was amazed by how much I got from the peer reviews. I thought my work was well done. Then, when we were in class, my two partners began to correct and discuss my work, and I noticed that it needed a lot more because I understood some parts because I wrote them, but these parts were not clear to them. I liked the opportunity of having classmate to discuss my work without giving me a grade.

Going back to the concepts of dependence and independence, although students in the face-to-face modality were more dependent on me for guiding class discussion and helping them while constructing their essays, they were less dependent on me while doing their peer reviews, relying more on their classmates for feedback and frequently reacting to each other's comments.

As mentioned earlier, within the online modality, students discussed class material in an asynchronous mode, by answering a discussion topic I posted for each of the assigned readings. Student to student interaction in the online environment was therefore very limited. In contrast to Hewett and Ehmann's (2004) claims of the hierarchical structures and how these are minimized and substituted for constant student interactions, the students from the online section were much more dependent on me to guide them through the process. I believe this was because the learning process was much more individualized, in contrast to the face-to-face interactions, in which there was immediate peer feedback. This in turn, created dependence on me as their instructor, as the only person with whom they could discuss their written work. Damaris, for instance, commented on her experience with her peers in the online modality:

I never really had a response from my peers. I know there are others who did, but I personally did not get any responses of my work; only from the instructor.

Damaris' comment demonstrates how peer reviews, as one of the activities in which there was a noticeable difference across modalities, were not as successful in the online course as they were in the face-to-face course. Her comment also reveals her dependence on me as her instructor, in order to be able to discuss her work. As Hewett and Ehmann (2004) explain, regardless of the modality, students engage in an exchange of ideas when discussions take place. Within online modalities, these may occur synchronously or asynchronously, but they provide a learning experience.

Anxiety. When Manuel conveyed his general opinions about the online version of the course; he described it as one which took away the anxieties that may be present in face-to-face classroom environments:

I had never taken an online course before. It was my first time and I really enjoyed it. It is not that it was easy for me, because it was harder than other courses I have taken before. For me it was the time to do the homework and assignments without the exigencies of the classroom. With the computer, I did not have people aware of what I did or said. What I liked most was that I did not have to go to the classroom under a schedule. Whenever I had a doubt I could write to the instructor and it would be answered, just as if I was in the classroom.

Significantly, Manuel also clarified that his anxieties about expressing his ideas in a previous face-to-face INGL 3103 class, was one of his reasons for dropping the course the first time. This coincides with Hewett and Ehmann (2004), who suggest that anxieties created in face-to-face courses are diminished when facing a screen rather than an audience. This can also be associated with students' independence in relation to their peers and dependence on the screen in order to produce writing in English. Moreover, this finding is especially significant given that students in this study were SLLs and numerous studies in Puerto Rico have documented students' reluctance to speaking in English in front of their peers.

Speaking and listening are skills that, as mentioned earlier, are not part of the course objectives. Nevertheless, oral conversations are a way for students to generate thoughts and ideas, and therefore, consider what they believe is useful and discard what they believe is not. As Hewett and Ehmann (2004) claim, "perhaps that cross-disciplinarity is especially appealing when computer technology is employed [...] since human-to-human conversation envisioned by social constructivism seems to warm the "cold" and faceless interactions of cyberspace" (p.33). Therefore, interactions and conversations are necessary for learning to take place. Intriguingly, the online modality may thus contribute to SLLs learning in this regard, while detracting from it

in other ways. While Hewett and Ehmann (2004) also argue that in teaching and learning with online mediums of instruction, hierarchies are diminished or broken as students become collaborative communicators in the discussions taking place, in this study, that was not the case. As SLLs with no previous experience taking either fully online courses or composition courses prior to this one, they were in constant need of guidance when it came to working on their written pieces, as well as a constant need of instruction for every task assigned.

Options Offered by Distance Education

As proposed by Meléndez (2001), having alternative options for offering courses in general may make a difference between students being able to acquire an education or not. Lisa, a student from the face-to-face course, was diagnosed with a severe health condition in mid-semester, and wanted to know if there were any options for her to finish her coursework from home, because she knew she was expected to attend class and do well in the course. In this particular case, I offered her the option to complete the course online and our subsequent communication took place through e-mail. Lisa was thus able to finish the course from home.

Initially, as discussed in Chapter II, DE was historically created in order to cover educational needs for those who could not attend classes via traditional means of instructions, such as deaf students. In the context of this study, although Lisa did not participate in the online modality, digital technology nevertheless provided a different option for her to be able to receive course materials, complete the course assignments, and pass the course successfully. Still, as mentioned before, this required more work and preparation from me as the instructor. In fact, this student did not have access to the WebCT platform; I had to communicate with her via e-mail and instant messaging, sending and receiving all course materials through these digital venues instead. Lisa's case affirmed that providing students with a different venue to submit their work

can make a difference in extreme circumstances such as this one, allowing students to continue their coursework from home when they are not able to be physically present in a classroom. This, as the scholarly literature has argued, is a significant reason why distance education is making its mark in higher education and replacing traditional face-to-face modes of education.

In other cases, the online modality offered an option for students repeating the course. Moreover, offering an online version of the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I class while simultaneously offering a standard face-to-face version of the course was particularly important because:

Recent studies demonstrate that more students are choosing DL formats than ever before... and the demographics of distance learners are changing to reflect that of the typical college student. Results indicated that enjoyment has not been an important factor to students in choosing DL, but students may be less satisfied with their learning experience when they don't have a choice. (Martínez, 2007, p. 3)

Some of the specific advantages of offering this particular course online were, first of all, that it was a composition course and because of its online venue, it necessarily required students to routinely write and read in English, even more so than in a face-to-face version of the course due to the fact that all communication took place using these two skills—reading and writing. Hewett and Ehmann (2004) consider that written language requires a higher level of abstraction because it does not allow for an immediate reaction, therefore creating through writing a “deliberate act that must be accomplished on a conscious level because it is related more closely to inner speech than to verbal speech” (p. 34). Since student-teacher and interaction among students in an online environment necessarily takes place through writing, these two skills were strengthened in the online environment.

Resources and Vocabulary Use. Because students were continually reading my emails and discussion posts in English, they adopted some of the vocabulary that I used for the

assignments, as well as from their own readings for their written essays. This was due to more exposure to authentic texts, rather than spoken language, which is crucial in a composition course. An additional contribution for the students in the online modality was the advantage of having resources at hand when they were working on any assignments, such as online dictionaries, and to translate and revise their work, because they applied language strategies that would not be possible to apply in other face-to-face contexts.

In the last chapter of this study, I will discuss the repercussions of adapting the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course from a face-to-face to an online modality. I will also address the pedagogical implications of this adaptation in relation to the particular context of this study, and possible considerations for conducting future research. Finally, I will highlight the study's particular contributions to online teaching initiatives in the UPRM.

Chapter V. Pedagogical Implications

“The logocentrism of contemporary writing pedagogy shifts attention to “the voice” rather than “the text”, to creativity and inspiration rather than the labor of construction, and naturalness and honesty rather than textual ideology. Until pedagogy severs its attachment to the speaking subject and instead aligns itself with theories of textuality, it will continue to provide a misleading and confusing theoretical base for teaching of writing/reading.”

(Gilbert, 1991, p.45)

I found that giving this course online offered flexibility for students to work at their own pace; this created more independence among students in relation to accessing and engaging with class materials, yet more dependence when it was time to edit written work. Having an online modality also contributed to a more independent process of learning, but in contrast to claims by Hewett and Ehmann (2004), online writing instruction depended even more upon the traditional authority of the teacher and was less student-centered. While students in the online modality maintained a balance of power and communication in discussing class materials with their peers, they did so only when they were aware it was required or expected of them. Thus, although the online modality is considered more student-centered in much of the scholarly literature, in this context this was only true for the discussion forums. Moreover, when students were not required to engage in these, their participation was minimal and they depended on me as their instructor to push them forward.

Because there were few dynamic exchanges between students in the online section, social constructivist learning did not occur as it did in the face-to-face environment. However, there were other exchanges in which students participated in the online platform, which made up for the lack of synchronous interactions. In the WebCT-based class discussion topics to which students were required to respond, there were exchanges between students and myself as their instructor in relation to how they could use the material given and apply it to their written

assignments. In addition, after students read essays and articles, they were required to respond to these and to provide feedback to one of their classmates. Significantly, there were various occasions in which an ongoing discussion developed between students, because they had different opinions or differing points of view. Although this did not occur synchronously, students did indeed engage in conversations with their peers, and did so while writing in English; as such, this can be considered an added bonus and benefit for the students, considering the course goals, which are strictly focused on the development of academic writing in this language. Moreover, because of these exchanges with both me as their instructor and with their peers, or “likely thinking members” (Kuhn, in Hewett and Ehmann, 2004, p.35), social constructivist learning did occur, because students asynchronously negotiated the meaning of the material provided.

One of the strategies, as mentioned earlier, that I implemented in the online version of the course to make it more student-centered was to assign group chat rooms for students to engage in conversations about their class work. I hoped this would socially engage students in their class setting and learning without being dependent on me as their instructor to do so. Another strategy was to allow students to choose their own writing topics, based on their specific interests. This latter strategy worked in favor of the students and their essays were well written. On the other hand, chat room groups were not successful primarily because these required students to synchronously engage in conversation. Moreover, unlike the research essays, these chat rooms were not a class requirement. I reiterate that this also increased students’ dependence on me as their instructor, making the online modality a more teacher-centered environment than that of the face-to-face modality.

Nonetheless, this study confirmed that “online courses provide less anxiety among students in relation to class participation and discussion of text because they are not exposed to immediate peer feedback” (Hewett and Ehmann, 2004, p. 34). This was certainly the case, particularly in this context, where students are second language learners. In Puerto Rico, students go through twelve years of formal English education and are still not able to express themselves clearly, coherently and confidently in this language. This phenomenon and their anxiety, as mentioned earlier, is strongly linked to political and ideological views about the English language on the island and how it challenges beliefs about Puerto Rican identity. Still, because there is greater attention to grammatical structures and written expressions, in most educational contexts in Puerto Rico, students are more comfortable and accustomed to writing, rather than speaking in English. Therefore, the online environment proved beneficial for the students because, as mentioned earlier, all exchanges were written in English.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, teacher and student classroom interactions took place in similar ways despite the difference in modality, with the exception of the areas discussed and analyzed in Chapter IV. The online version of the course, for example, did not provide for exchanges in spoken communication between students, except for random follow-up meetings between the students and I—one to talk about the course, the modality and the material, and another to assign and discuss group chat rooms and the digital space available for it. This was due to the fact that in the online modality, students’ spoken exchanges for this particular course only took place during the writing conferences with me as their instructor. Still, speaking and listening, as mentioned earlier, were not included as either a skills or part of the objectives that had to be practiced over the duration of the semester, in relation to the master syllabus and the objectives for the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course.

Although listening and speaking skills were not practiced or enforced in the online environment, there were other elements of the course which balanced out this disadvantage. In the particular context of my study, students in the traditional venues of instruction tended to shift from English to Spanish. English is the language in which the course took place and in which students spoke to me as their instructor. However, once they were divided into small groups, they often lapsed into Spanish—either openly or covertly—for ease of communication because Spanish is the language in which students typically communicate with each other both inside and outside of the classroom, and is therefore the language in which they are best able to make themselves understood. This was not the case of the students in the online section. All communication within the online platform took place in English, and although it was not a requirement, the use of English transferred to visits during office hours and to the writing conferences. In contrast, once engaged in conversations with students from the face-to-face section for the focus group interview, students in the online section used Spanish.

After conducting this study, I concur with Melendez' (2001) assessment of D.L. In Puerto Rico, distance learning is an option chosen for comfort more than necessity. And because Puerto Ricans are SLLs, it requires careful planning and consideration before it can become a more popular and effective medium of instruction. In general, the online modality of this course offers the Department of English from the UPRM a new option to consider for giving the course due to the fact that it has not previously been offered online. Still, as a researcher, I would suggest further exploration and consideration of the areas discussed below, which were troublesome or did not yield the desired results, in relation to successful completion of the course and its objectives.

What would I have done differently?

As the instructor of the course, I believe a hybrid modality is more appropriate for SLLs learning the writing process rather than a fully-online version of the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course. At times, I found myself writing the same e-mail or explanation to several students. This was very time-consuming but also revealing, because I realized my instructions were not clear enough for students to complete assignments independently in the online setting. While students in the face-to-face versions of the course ask their peers for further and immediate clarification, this was not possible in the online modality. Scheduling a day and time for face-to-face meetings with the students every two weeks, so students would have a chance to discuss their work with other peers, as well as to discuss class material in general would likely be more effective for this student population and context. I believe face-to-face interaction would have mediated students' dependence on the instructor in this context. Additionally, creating modules for each unit or topic of discussion that incorporated relevant information— reading, discussion topic, writing strategies, writing assignment, etc. in a single document might mediate this problem. Instead, I sent clarifications of these out separately and repeatedly as individual doubts surfaced among the online student population. This then, supports Young's (2006) argument, because I indeed had to remain actively involved in the online environment, even to a greater extent than in the face-to-face environment. In the online venue, students developed a strong dependence on me to clarify their doubts.

Since I found that the excuse rates, use of the English language and draft development were a limitation in the face-to-face section, and peer response groups and lack of peer feedback were a problem in the online course, I recommend a hybrid modality as a solution to these issues. The hybrid modality would provide a space for students to communicate through writing, and to

do so in English. This format would also limit the excuse rate due to lack of paper and printing resources. Bi-weekly meetings with the students would additionally provide a space for students to meet and conduct peer reviews in a synchronous, face-to-face mode.

However, while I claim that the most appropriate option for offering this course would be hybrid one, if the course were to remain online, I believe the following possibilities could potentially improve the online version of the course, in relation to the areas which were not as successful as they were in the face-to-face modality. First, in order to carry-out peer reviews, I would assign similar guidelines for feedback, but require students to discuss such feedback using video chats. In this way, students could discuss their work and feedback for their peers in an environment of “naturally occurring conversation” (Chase 2005, p. 670), using a communication tool which enables such conversation at a distance.

In addition, designing a different logistic for peer reviews for students in the online version of the course appears necessary to enable them to benefit from the activity as much as face-to-face students reported they did. I believe that bi-weekly meetings with my students might have enabled this. The face-to-face writing conferences conducted across both modalities with all students, for instance, contributed significantly to students’ understanding of the course material, to improving their writing, and to passing the course successfully. As such, the implementations of video chats, as mentioned above, to enable conversations with students in the online version of the course, would facilitate the discussion of assignments and address doubts and concerns from a distance. I believe that video chats between both myself and the students, and between peer response groups, would create more student independence in the online modality, as well as minimize students’ dependence on me as the instructor of the course.

When reflecting on the methodology for data gathering, in retrospect, I would have done the focus group interview twice and divided the students by course modality for the first focus group session, while keeping them together for the second. This was a topic I discussed at various intervals with members of my committee but ultimately decided that combining students in one focus group would enable me to compare and contrast the modality of the course then and there. Still, I believe that the focus group interview in general failed to address in detail specific strengths and limitations of each modality, which might have been explored further if there was an initial focus group conducted separately for each modality.

Despite the above mentioned limitations, the online modality and DL in general, may indeed facilitate the expansion of intermediate courses for our student population in general, which accounts for the highest enrollment of first year students. This is particularly significant given that scholarly literature indicates that “students may be less satisfied with their learning experience when they don’t have a choice” (Martínez, 2006-07, p. 3) between online education and face-to-face courses given the increasing demand of such courses at the higher education level in this technology driven era. Within the specific context this study took place, because the majority of the participants were repeating the course for the second or third time and had already had the experience of taking the course in the traditional face-to-face modality, this was certainly an alternative option for taking the course. However, because of the university’s enrollment system, there were some limitations to actual student choice in this matter. There were only two sections of this course taught in the semester overall, and if students wanted to enroll in the course, and the face-to-face section was full, then they had to do so in the section given online. Moreover, this was a limited option given that institutional policy only permits students to enroll in an online course during their second semester and thereafter. Because INGL

3103- Intermediate Writing I course is a first-year course, and is typically given during the first semester, only students who are repeating the course, or those who decided not to take English during their first year, enroll in the second semester option. This was the case for all of the participants in this study.

I believe that the main limitation of this study was that since the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course had not been offered fully online before, the course had to be adapted to the modality without previous examples or troubleshooting of situations which may have occurred. Even though there had been previous online components and the use of the WebCT platform as tools to complement the classroom teaching and learning process, these had not been subjected to formal inquiry prior to this study. Moreover, data was not gathered to explore the prior implementation of these online resources in relation to this course. Also, the fact that the course can only be offered to students in their second or subsequent semesters precludes having off-semester students as the *only* student population for the class. The percentage of students dropping the course is commonly high in the off semester and the online version of the course did not resolve this issue. I do not believe, however, that the online modality was a significant reason for students dropping the course, due to the fact that there was a similar amount of students who left the course in the face-to-face section. Rather, as mentioned above, it offered the students enrolled in the online course a different option for taking a course they had already taken and were repeating for the second or third time.

It is vital to understand that no study will ever yield similar results. The unique contextual characteristics of this study—second language learners, course repeaters and students with no prior writing courses, made it a challenging journey for me as both instructor and researcher. Below I state some areas researchers interested in replicating this study or aspects of this study

in the future might consider. These may also prove useful for those instructors who may wish to teach INGL 3103 in an online modality in the future.

First, it is very difficult to teach an intermediate writing course to students whose first language is not the same as the language in which they have to produce their written pieces. This is particularly true given that the Spanish language for most Puerto Ricans is considered a significant aspect of their identity while English is learned more for instrumental, professional purposes. Therefore, students are generally reluctant to communicating in English inside the classroom, due to the fact that they, as well as their peers, feel more comfortable when interacting in Spanish. I believe that the online modality offered a unique option for students anxious about speaking and expressing themselves in English in the presence of their classmates and peers. If the writing proficiency of students is sufficient to understand discussion forums, readings and texts, as well as general, everyday communication, then an online modality may pose an advantage to such students. This is particularly relevant because although developing oral communication is not included as one of the objectives of the course, nor is it a skill to be emphasized in the particular course studied, in the traditional face-to-face modality oral participation in class discussions of essays, articles and other written pieces, as well as peer revisions and oral presentations is key. This exchange may be more readily achieved in a hybrid modality. This proved fruitful in this study, in the case of the face-to-face modality, but further research needs to consider how similar results can be achieved via DL approaches.

Second, given that our students are accustomed to face-to-face modalities of teaching and learning, I believe that there should be a more leveled distribution of class time throughout the semester. That is, a hybrid, rather than a completely online course should be offered so that students benefit from the online environment, while receiving additional face-to-face support.

Face-to-face support should not be constituted by office hours and writing conferences alone, but by the addition of an ongoing exchange of ideas and encounters with their peers via the implementation of routine scheduled meetings.

Third, an activity which proved useful for all students, both in the face-to-face and the online modality, were the two sets of writing conferences. Students received the same materials and assignments in both modalities, and I believe that there were no significant differences in the outcomes of the adaptation of the course to one online, given that all students received the same amount of help and guidance from me, their instructor. However, I believe that peer revisions are also essential to achieve audience awareness, to enhance editing skills, and to improve overall writing ability. Peer revisions critically enable students to feed off of their peers work. This however, as discussed in Chapter IV, was not successful in the online environment and as both the researcher and the instructor of the course, I believe it was because of the independent learning environment that an online course creates for the students in relation to one another, and in contrast, the increased dependency on the instructor for editing and revising processes.

To conclude, this study uniquely contributes to the scholarly literature on second language learners in relation to online writing instruction because it portrays how the particular participants of this study engaged with the writing process in this modality and highlighted both strengths and limitations to this approach with this population in the context of Puerto Rico. In addition, although the writing process is highly criticized by some proponents, my research points to its usefulness in providing structure and guidelines for students who have no prior or extensive formal writing practice in English as their second language.

Furthermore, the way in which interactions took place, both between students and with me as their instructor, reveals how SLLs students in online writing courses may become more

independent in relation to their learning process concerning class materials in the online modality, but more dependent on their instructors when it comes to editing and revising their written work.

Pedagogical Considerations

One of the main contributions of my research is that it examines the implications of offering an online course to students whose second language is English, in the specific context of Puerto Rico. Although some students are reluctant to use English in any form—writing, speaking, reading or listening, they nevertheless spend a great amount of their time searching the web, and the vast majority of the resources they use for writing come from the internet and are in English. The online forum provided students with an environment that minimized the anxieties of interacting with other students in English in a SLLs context, and may potentially provide an option to those students who may have previously dropped the course for this reason. It is essential to clarify that those anxieties arise from student interactions and from having to speak in the classroom in English. Stapleton (2005) however, argues that the topics which are found the most on the internet are those of general interest. These unfortunately are more open and vulnerable to copying and plagiarism. Therefore, an online course should focus more on specific topics and comparisons, rather than on random and free topics. It is a time consuming and challenging task to provide students with assignments that are clearly and meticulously detailed in relation to an assigned topic so as to minimize plagiarism, but this was achieved for this course.

Locally, the narratives of my students during their focus group interview may potentially inform future conceptualizations of the INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I course. These yielded revealing data about possible techniques that may work well with second language

learners, as well as limitations that surfaced in both the face-to-face and the online modality. Also, this study demonstrates how, in the particular context in which it took place, the WebCT platform should be complemented with additional means of instruction in order to increase communication among students. Indeed, the narratives highlighted by students in the online environment might be used as examples of how composition courses might be enhanced or limited by digital technology. While online forums provide an environment in which writing is constantly produced not just for assignments, but for all communication and problem-solving, it is not sufficient to employ technology merely to maintain an institution at “the vanguard”. Rather, it serves to integrate students’ daily practices into their academic environments in order to enable them to learn using methods and tools that are both familiar to them and that captivate their attention, rather than outdated modes of instruction which do not spark their interest in learning. Nevertheless, this study may be considered as yet another initiative related to the institutional aim of developing digital and technological teaching-learning structures for the UPRM, as a resource for evaluating future online course offerings, and for further exploring how these may potentially be taught in the future.

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Appendix A

Face-to-face Course Syllabi



**University of Puerto Rico
Mayagüez Campus
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English**

I. Contact Information:

Instructor: Irmaris Rosas Nazario

Office: CH 305

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, from 2:30-4:00 pm or by appointment

Mailbox: CH 323-Department of English (UNDER MY NAME)

E-mail: irn16061@uprm.edu

II. General Information:¹

Course: INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I

Semester: Spring 2007-2008

Credit hours: 3 (LWV- 1:30-2:20 pm)

Room: CH 318

III. Catalogue Course Description²

English: Analysis of selected readings, such as essays, fiction, poetry or drama, and practice in writing compositions with attention given as needed to grammar and idiomatic expressions.

IV. Pre/Co-requisites and Other Requirements:

Intermediate English I (INGL 3103) is the **first** course of a sequence designed for entering students at the Mayagüez Campus of the University of Puerto Rico who have scored **570** or above on the College Board Entrance Examination, **but who have not qualified** for advanced placement in the Honors Program of the English Department by obtaining a score of 4 or 5 on the Advanced Placement Test. Those students who receive 3 on this test are enrolled in English 3103. Students who successfully pass INGL 3103 must pass INGL 3104 and six additional credit hours in the English department courses to satisfy University requirements. Students, who were enrolled in Basic English (INGL 3101 or 3102) in previous semesters, **CANNOT** take this course. Please see me if you have any doubts about your placement in this course.

V. Textbook, Supplies and Other Resources:

Required texts:

Muller, Gilbert. The New World Reader: Thinking and Writing about the Global Community. 2nd ed.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

Raimes, Ann. Keys for Writers. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

¹ This syllabus may be amended during the course of the semester in order to address students' interest, meet course objectives and correct unintended errors. Students will be notified of any changes ahead of time so they can plan accordingly.

² As it appears on the 2006-2007 Undergraduate Catalogue of the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus.

Selected materials and additional resources:

Additional articles and resources will be available at SAC (Student Aid Center). Students are required to purchase these copies and bring them to class on the day they are scheduled to be discussed.

Recommended Texts:

English Dictionary
Thesaurus

VI. Course Objectives:

After completing the course, the students should be able to:

- Apply of various stages of the writing process to his or her written work, including drafting, peer editing, and publishing.
- Utilization of one or more prewriting techniques.
- Narrowing a topic.
- State an author's purpose and intended audience.
- Write an effective thesis statement and recognize such statements when they are present in the texts encountered.
- Provide relevant supporting details for all general statements in an essay.
- Effectively organize the content of an essay and recognize the organizational structure of essays assigned for reading.
- Write a successful introductory, transitional and concluding paragraph.
- Recognize in the texts read, and utilize in the texts written, several of the traditional modes of development such as definition, classification, comparison/contrast, process, cause/effect.
- Analyze reading selections critically for understanding and potential application of rhetorical forms in own writing.
- Increase complexity and diversity of vocabulary production in written English.
- Carry out an elementary research project using the campus library and/or internet including the proper use of outside sources and the basic forms of documentation.
- Demonstrate correct usage of MLA documentation with general formatting, in-text citations, and the Works Cited page.

VII. Instructional Strategies:

- Film
- Workshops
- Group Work
- Class discussion
- Conference (peer and instructor)
- Research
- Practice
- Structured Reflective Journal Writing

VIII. Minimum or Required Resources Available:

Classroom, Blackboard, LCD Projector, Computer, Internet Access and other equipment, and physical facilities needed to fulfill the course objectives.

IX. Evaluation Strategies: While a final, graded exam is compulsory for all students registered in INGL 3103, this course is based primarily on writing essays, not on exams or quizzes.

Evaluation Criteria and Weight		Final Grade Curve
Essays (Research Paper)	300	90-100 % A
Final Essay Exam	100	80-89 % B
Reflective Journal Writing	70	
Oral Report	100	70-89 % C
Quizzes	50	65-69 % D
<u>Class Attendance and Participation</u>	<u>50</u>	0-64 % F
Total:	670 pts.	

X. Requirements:³

Assignments: You are responsible for all material assigned and/or covered in class. If you are absent, get the class notes from one of your classmates. You should turn in all homework on time, in person, in class, unless otherwise indicated. I am not responsible for anything left in my departmental mail box. Word process your homework on white paper. Do all your classroom work in black ink on standard (8-1/2" x 11") white paper; I will not accept any assignment that does not fulfill these requirements. Follow the MLA Format (name and page number, stapled, do NOT use folder or envelope). Make sure you have the following information in the upper left-hand corner of **all** your assignments.

1. your name
2. instructor's name
3. course codification and section
4. the date

Essays: These essays will be the result of a writing process of which you have to keep evidence. The essays are 500+ word papers written in the MLA format. Students will submit four essays, three following the rhetorical form assigned by the professor, and the final in the student's preferred rhetorical form.

In-class Cooperative Groups: Students will be expected to participate in small-group activities over the course of the semester. Instructions for these activities will be specified.

Reflective Journals: These provide a place for you to respond to texts in a freer and more personal way. These should be at least 250 words and you should use the proper vocabulary and concepts discussed in class. The entry must be a reflective analysis of the topic or reading under discussion. Superficial, short reflections will not be given full credit.

Oral Reports: The presentations will be 10-12 minutes long. The use of index cards is permitted as reference only; presentations given fully by reading will not be given any credit. You are expected to

³ Guidelines for all assignments will be distributed under separate cover.

come prepared on the selected topic. Be ready to answer questions from both your professor and your peers. Please remember that both your individual and group efforts will affect the final grade. Also, a formal dress code is required. The specifics of this presentation will be given during the semester.

Quizzes: These will be given unannounced and will include the readings assigned for the day or the concepts that have been covered up to date. Quizzes will not be repeated and there will be no make-up quizzes.

Attendance: You are expected to attend all classes with textbooks and other materials. Attendance will be taken daily; being late or leaving early will count as $\frac{1}{2}$ an absence. You will be allowed three hours of absence (excused or unexcused) without penalty. For every additional absence (excused or unexcused) your final grade will be dropped to the next lower grade (e.g. a final grade of B will drop to a C). Inform me (on time) of any problem that will interfere with your presence in the class. I will take **extraordinary** circumstances into account in terms of this policy. Please note that you are the one responsible for missed assignments. Late works will only be accepted with a reasonable excuse and under extreme circumstances. Missed assignments are to be turned in the next class period, and **all** late works will be penalized. If you are absent 7 times you will automatically receive an "F" for the course unless you withdraw before the deadline.

UNEXCUSED ABSENCES (OR EQUIVALENT)	MAXIMUM GRADE FOR COURSE
1-3	A
4	B
5	C
6	D
7+	F

Participation: You are required to participate actively in all class and group activities as well as the online portion of the class. You are also expected to speak English at all times in the classroom. Students are responsible for reading all assigned material before the start of class and being prepared to respond to questions presented by the professor and/or their peers.

Cell Phones and Electronic Devices: The use of any electronic device is strictly prohibited. (cell phones, laptops, I-pods, Bluetooth, hands free accessories, etc.). Turn off your cell phone before the start of class. Cell phone calls and conversations are not permitted in the classroom. If a cell phone rings in class or a student exits the room to answer a cell phone call, the student will be asked to leave the room and will not be allowed to return to the class for the remainder of the period. If you are caught making use of any electronic device during an examination or quiz you will receive an "F" or zero depending on the circumstance.

E-mail: The professor will utilize e-mail to communicate with students. Students' UPRM account will be the one officially used in the course. It is the responsibility of **the student** to routinely check his/her student e-mail account to stay informed about the course.

Incompletes: Refer to University policy in relation to incompletes. Incompletes will not be assigned in this course unless there is a valid and documented reason (i.e., medical problems). Poor work in the

course is not a valid reason. The grade **earned** by the student will be the grade s/he is assigned. There will be no extra-credit option in this course to improve grades.

Final Exam: The final examination will consist of a full-length composition based on a topic to be selected from a list approved by all members of the department who teach the course. If you miss this examination you will receive an “F”.

Academic Honesty:

As per Cert. 45, 2005-06, it is the institutional policy of the Mayagüez Campus to observe the highest standards of intellectual and scientific integrity and to pursue the prosecution of all violations. Violations include plagiarism (using the work, processes, ideas, and results of others without proper credit). Moreover, Article 14(A)(2) of the UPR General Regulations for Students identifies cheating as a punishable conduct.

As such, a professor *may* present a formal complaint to the Campus Disciplinary Board if she or he believes a student has committed plagiarism. If the professor pursues this line of action, Article 15 of the UPR General Regulations for Students stipulates that the repercussions may be the following:

- A written warning which will be included in the student’s official record
- Probation for a determined period of time
- Suspension for a determined period of time
- Administrative permanent withdrawal from the UPR system
- Other sanctions provided by special regulation

According to Law 51: All reasonable accommodations according to the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) will be coordinated with the Dean of Students (Prof. Teresita Cruz) and in accordance with the particular needs of the student. Any student needing such accommodations should contact the Office of the Dean of Students in the Decanato de Estudiantes building, Office DE-6 (in front of the José de Diego). For more information, please call (787) 265-3862 or (787) 832-4040, exts. 3258 or 3274. You may also email <tcruz@uprm.edu> or <m_rosado@uprm.edu>. Consult the *Servicios a Estudiantes con Impedimentos* website (<http://www.uprm.edu/sei/index2.htm>) for more details.

NB: The Dean of Students notifies the professor of accommodations that must be made for a student via a formal letter, however students’ disabilities are NOT disclosed to the professor.

XIII. Resources:

The Writing Center:

Students should take responsibility for obtaining help as needed. In addition to the instructor’s office hours, the **Arts and Sciences Writing Center**, located in Sanchez-Hidalgo, Room 109, is open Mondays-Fridays from 9:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. (2:00 on Friday). The Writing Center supports all reading and writing needs including the reading of texts, vocabulary development, pre-writing, drafting, content development, organization, and the preparation of final drafts.

Online Resources:

The Internet Detective

<<http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/>>

“a free online tutorial that will help you develop Internet research skills for your university and college work. The tutorial looks at the critical thinking required when using the Internet for research and offers practical advice on evaluating the quality of web sites.”

The Longman Guide to Contemporary English Online

<<http://www.ldoceonline.com/index.html>>

Search any word in an online version of the CD-ROM of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (updated edition). Includes “selected headwords pronounced in British and American English” as well as “selected example sentences pronounced, to help you improve your intonation.”

The Owl at Purdue

<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>>

“The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University...houses writing resources and instructional materials...Students, members of the community, and users worldwide will find information to assist them with many writing projects, during any stage of the writing process.”

Thesaurus.com

<<http://thesaurus.reference.com/>>

Roget’s New Millennium Thesaurus “includes a brief definition, synonyms, and antonyms (where appropriate)” for each entry. “Arranged in easy-to-use dictionary-style format, with more than 18,000 entries.”

Tomísimo

<<http://www.tomisimo.org/dictionary/>>

“Tomísimo™ is an English-Spanish, Spanish-English Dictionary that makes finding words easy by automatically searching in both languages. Tomísimo... aims to provide an unabridged, bilingual dictionary for the English and Spanish languages.”

Appendix B

Online Course Syllabi



**University of Puerto Rico
Mayagüez Campus
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English**

I. Contact Information:

Instructor: Irmaris Rosas Nazario

Office: CH 305

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, from 2:30-4:00 pm or by appointment

Mailbox: CH 323-Department of English (UNDER MY NAME)

E-mail: irn16061@uprm.edu

II. General Information:¹

Course: INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I

Semester: Spring 2007-2008

Credit hours: 3

III. Catalogue Course Description²

English: Analysis of selected readings, such as essays, fiction, poetry or drama, and practice in writing compositions with attention given as needed to grammar and idiomatic expressions.

IV. Pre/Co-requisites and Other Requirements:

Intermediate English I (INGL 3103) is the **first** course of a sequence designed for entering students at the Mayagüez Campus of the University of Puerto Rico who have scored **570** or above on the College Board Entrance Examination, **but who have not qualified** for advanced placement in the Honors Program of the English Department by obtaining a score of 4 or 5 on the Advanced Placement Test. Those students who receive 3 on this test are enrolled in English 3103. Students who successfully pass INGL 3103 must pass INGL 3104 and six additional credit hours in the English department courses to satisfy University requirements. Students, who were enrolled in Basic English (INGL 3101 or 3102) in previous semesters, **CANNOT** take this course. **It is important to note that this course, as a medium of instruction, will be facilitated predominantly online. No student in their first semester of studies at this institution may take this course; only students who are in their second or subsequent semesters, and who select their own roster of classes, may enroll in this online version of INGL 3103.** Please see me if you have any doubts about your placement in this course.

V. Textbook, Supplies and Other Resources:

Required texts:

Muller, Gilbert. The New World Reader: Thinking and Writing about the Global Community. 2nd ed.

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. (NWR)

¹ This syllabus may be amended during the course of the semester in order to address students' interest, meet course objectives and correct unintended errors. Students will be notified of any changes ahead of time so they can plan accordingly.

² As it appears on the 2006-2007 Undergraduate Catalogue of the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus.

Raimes, Ann. Keys for Writers. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. (**K4W**)

* **Initials in BOLD** appear as they will on the class schedule and calendar

Recommended Texts:

English Dictionary
Thesaurus

Access Requirements:

The University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus, is committed to providing students with a trustworthy online learning system. If you are not able to finish an assignment due to problems with the server, the time for the assignment will be extended to fit these needs. Students will have to inform the professor of any situation due to server problems through e-mail at <irn16061@uprm.edu>.

Technical Requirements:

Aside from the basic level of digital literacy, you must comply with the minimum technical requirement that follow:

Hardware:

1. Computer with internet access

Programs:

The following programs should be installed in your computer, to view additional materials for the purpose of this course.



RealPlayer – Used to view videos inside an electronic page. Can be downloaded for free at <<http://www.real.com/>>



Some of the movies which will be viewed are installed in WebCT by using this program. Can be downloaded for free at

<<http://www.apple.com/es/quicktime/download/>>



Shockwave – Lectures, quizzes and tests may include interactive components which are built using Shockwave. Can be downloaded for free at <<http://sdc.shockwave.com/software/shockwaveplayer/download/>>

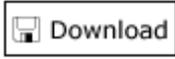


Flash – Flash is another program used for the creation of animations and interactive activities. Can be downloaded for free at <<http://sdc.shockwave.com/software/flashplayer/>>



Acrobat Reader – PDF Format documents will be used for all additional information, articles and sources. Can be downloaded for free at

<<http://www.adobe.es/products/acrobat/readermain.html>>



Sun Microsystems Java Plug-in: <http://www.java.com>



Windows Media Player

VI. Course Access and Navigation

This course is created using the WebCT online teaching platform.

The following is a link to this platform <webct.uprm.edu>

If you've had previous access to WebCT, your course will automatically appear in your “myWebCT” home page.

If you have not accessed WebCT before:

To access the course, click on “Log in to”

Your **WebCT ID** is your complete student number, without leaving any spaces.

Ex. 802000000

Your **Password** is, again, your full student number.

If you have any questions, or are not able to log in, please contact me at <irn16061@uprm.edu>

VII. Communication

WebCT had various tools which make communication a lot easier. These are the “Mail” options, as well as the class discussion, in which there is a section for class doubts and concerns. Student Interaction can also take place in through these tools. However, it is important to note that these have to be respectful and related to the class at all times. We will have chat room conversations as well. The specific instructions for these will be given individually.

VIII. Course Objectives:

After completing the course, the students should be able to:

- Apply of various stages of the writing process to his or her written work, including drafting, peer editing, and publishing.
- Utilization of one or more prewriting techniques.
- Narrowing a topic.
- State an author's purpose and intended audience.
- Write an effective thesis statement and recognize such statements when they are present in the texts encountered.
- Provide relevant supporting details for all general statements in an essay.
- Effectively organize the content of an essay and recognize the organizational structure of essays assigned for reading.
- Write a successful introductory, transitional and concluding paragraph.
- Recognize in the texts read, and utilize in the texts written, several of the traditional modes of development such as definition, classification, comparison/contrast, process, cause/effect.
- Analyze reading selections critically for understanding and potential application of rhetorical forms in own writing.
- Increase complexity and diversity of vocabulary production in written English.
- Carry out an elementary research project using the campus library and/or internet including the proper use of outside sources and the basic forms of documentation.
- Demonstrate correct usage of MLA documentation with general formatting, in-text citations, and the Works Cited page.

IX. Instructional Strategies:

- Film
- Workshops
- Group Work
- Class discussion
- Conference (peer and instructor)
- Research
- Practice
- Structured Reflective Journal Writing

X. Minimum or Required Resources Available:

Campus computer center list will be posted on WebCT.

XI. Evaluation:

Evaluation Criteria and Weight		Final Grade Curve
Essays (Research Paper)	300	90-100 % A
Final Essay Exam	100	80-89 % B
Reflective Journal Writing	70	70-89 % C
Discussion Forum	100	65-69 % D
Quizzes	50	0-64 % F
<u>Class Attendance and Participation</u>	<u>50</u>	
Total:	670 pts.	

XII. Requirements:³

Assignments: Assignments will be turned in before the assigned day and time, under the “Assignments” link in the Home Page of the course. You will lose 10 pts., for every 12 hour period for which your assignment is late. Once the forum discussion topics are due, you will be able to go back to them, but you will not receive credit for your postings. Follow the MLA Format (name and page number, stapled, do NOT use folder or envelope). Make sure you have the following information in the upper left-hand corner of **all** your assignments.

1. your name
2. instructor’s name
3. course codification and section
4. date

Class Participation (Forum): Your participation in this course is a must! There will be discussion topics created each week according to the topic and reading for that week. Minimum of postings for each topic is 1 (one). However, you may participate as many times as you want, and I will not grade this based on quality but on quantity. You are also expected to give feedback to your classmates in peer reviews and research review.

Quizzes and tests online: There will be quizzes administered, but not exams. Your grades are based on the writing assignments and essays.

Essays: These essays will be the result of a writing process of which you have to keep evidence. The essays are 500+ word papers written in the MLA format. Students will submit four essays, three following the rhetorical form assigned by the professor, and the final in the student’s preferred rhetorical form.

Reflective Journals: These provide a place for you to respond to texts in a freer and more personal way. These should be at least 250 words and you should use the proper vocabulary and concepts discussed in class. The entry must be a reflective analysis of the topic or reading under discussion. Superficial, short reflections will not be given full credit.

Incompletes: Refer to University policy in relation to incompletes. Incompletes will not be assigned in this course unless there is a valid and documented reason (i.e., medical problems). Poor work in the course is not a valid reason. The grade **earned** by the student will be the grade s/he is assigned. There will be no extra-credit option in this course to improve grades.

Final Exam: The final examination will consist of a full-length composition based on a topic to be selected from a list approved by all members of the department who teach the course. If you miss this examination you will receive an “F”. The final exam will take place during the official departmental INGL 3103 final exam.

Academic Honesty: As per Cert. 45, 2005-06, it is the institutional policy of the Mayagüez Campus to observe the highest standards of intellectual and scientific integrity and to pursue the prosecution of all

³ Guidelines for all assignments will be distributed under separate cover.

violations. Violations include plagiarism (using the work, processes, ideas, and results of others without proper credit). Moreover, Article 14(A)(2) of the UPR General Regulations for Students identifies cheating as a punishable conduct.

As such, a professor *may* present a formal complaint to the Campus Disciplinary Board if she or he believes a student has committed plagiarism. If the professor pursues this line of action, Article 15 of the UPR General Regulations for Students stipulates that the repercussions may be the following:

- A written warning which will be included in the student's official record
- Probation for a determined period of time
- Suspension for a determined period of time
- Administrative permanent withdrawal from the UPR system
- Other sanctions provided by special regulation

According to Law 51: All reasonable accommodations according to the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) will be coordinated with the Dean of Students (Prof. Teresita Cruz) and in accordance with the particular needs of the student. Any student needing such accommodations should contact the Office of the Dean of Students in the Decanato de Estudiantes building, Office DE-6 (in front of the José de Diego). For more information, please call (787) 265-3862 or (787) 832-4040, exts. 3258 or 3274. You may also email <tcruz@uprm.edu> or <m_rosado@uprm.edu>. Consult the *Servicios a Estudiantes con Impedimentos* website (<http://www.uprm.edu/sei/index2.htm>) for more details.

NB: The Dean of Students notifies the professor of accommodations that must be made for a student via a formal letter, however students' disabilities are NOT disclosed to the professor.

XIII. Resources:

The Writing Center:

Students should take responsibility for obtaining help as needed. In addition to the instructor's office hours, the **Arts and Sciences Writing Center**, located in Sanchez-Hidalgo, Room 109, is open Mondays-Fridays from 9:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. (2:00 on Friday). The Writing Center supports all reading and writing needs including the reading of texts, vocabulary development, pre-writing, drafting, content development, organization, and the preparation of final drafts.

Online Resources:

The Internet Detective

<<http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/>>

“a free online tutorial that will help you develop Internet research skills for your university and college work. The tutorial looks at the critical thinking required when using the Internet for research and offers practical advice on evaluating the quality of web sites.”

The Longman Guide to Contemporary English Online

<<http://www.ldoceonline.com/index.html>>

Search any word in an online version of the CD-ROM of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (updated edition). Includes “selected headwords pronounced in British and American English” as well as “selected example sentences pronounced, to help you improve your intonation.”

The Owl at Purdue

<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>>

“The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University...houses writing resources and instructional materials....Students, members of the community, and users worldwide will find information to assist them with many writing projects, during any stage of the writing process.”

Thesaurus.com

<<http://thesaurus.reference.com/>>

Roget’s New Millennium Thesaurus “includes a brief definition, synonyms, and antonyms (where appropriate)” for each entry. “Arranged in easy-to-use dictionary-style format, with more than 18,000 entries.”

Tomísimo

<<http://www.tomisimo.org/dictionary/>>

“Tomísimo™ is an English-Spanish, Spanish-English Dictionary that makes finding words easy by automatically searching in both languages. Tomísimo... aims to provide an unabridged, bilingual dictionary for the English and Spanish languages.”

Appendix C

Student Consent Form

Irmaris Rosas Nazario
Master's Candidate
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
Master of Arts in English Education
Tel. 787-342-8618 or 787-832-4040 Ext. 3072
E-mail- irmaris.rosas@upr.edu

Research Description

As part of my program of studies at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus, I am working on a research project for my thesis which focuses on INGL 3103- Intermediate Writing I. I am requesting your voluntary participation in this research, as well as permission to reproduce your written work in all drafts of my thesis and my oral defense. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this research project. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I will ask you to do as a participant in the study, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'Informed Consent'. If you choose to participate, you may opt to withdraw from the research at any time with no penalty. Your grade for my course will not be affected if you decide not to participate, or if you choose to participate and later decide to withdraw your participation. I guarantee your confidentiality if you choose to volunteer, and will assign you a pseudonym with which I will identify you in all representations of the research (thesis, publication, presentations at professional conferences, etc).

In my research, I intend to explore possible variations in the teaching and learning of the writing process in INGL 3103, depending on if it is taught in a face-to-face or an online classroom. In both courses, the material and the assignments given will be the same, and similar resources will be used. The benefits for participating in this research may include opportunities for you as a student to consider the varying perceptions of your peers who are taking the course in a different modality—either face-to-face or online. Also, you may benefit from the analysis of, and reflection on learning in face-to-face and online courses, keeping in mind the technological advances that characterize our lives in the present, and which are often primary resources for instruction in this institution. The research has the same amount of risk students would encounter during a usual classroom activity and will consist of five parts. First, I will teach and revise the writing process, which is the principle way in which you will develop your academic writing abilities in this course. Second, I will be collecting course-related data from those students who agree to participate in this study. Data will include WebCT and blog entries, e-mails, course assignments, journals, and any other writing samples that may be produced while discussing the writing process. All of this data will be presented and discussed in my thesis; however, pseudonyms (as described above) will be used to maintain strict confidentiality of all participating students' work. Third, a writing conference, which is obligatory for all students taking the course, will be held in which you will meet one-on-one with me during office hours to

discuss doubts and concerns about your writing. Fourth, a small number of volunteer participants from both the face-to-face and online versions of this course will take part in a focus group in which we will discuss how your reflections on the writing process in face-to-face and online classes are both similar and different from my own. Finally, I will analyze and interpret all of the above-mentioned data for my thesis.

In the first two parts of the study, I may follow up on your assignments and responses in class or via e-mail to gather any additional information I may need. The fourth part mentioned above will involve only those who are volunteers or randomly selected, and agree to do this exercise. This exercise will be tape-recorded, will not exceed two hours, and will take place in a location which is within the university premises. All data collected will be locked and protected at all times, and no one but I will have access to it. I will identify you in the audio-tape with your pseudonym only. Your time involvement in this research will vary depending on the number of times we communicate by means of e-mail and individual meetings during my office hours, as well as your potential participation in the focus group. I anticipate that your participation will not exceed 5 hours in total. There will be no payment for your participation.

I intend to use this study for my thesis research; hence the results may be published or presented at professional conferences. Once again, I assure you that I will maintain your confidentiality at all times.

Participant Rights

Principal Investigator: **Irmaris Rosas Nazario**

Research Title: **Exploring the Writing Process across Modalities:
Learning in Face-to-Face and Online Classrooms**

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to future medical care, employment, student status or other entitlements.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at any given point.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information develops, which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, Irmaris Rosas Nazario, who will answer my questions. The

investigator's cellular number is 787-342-8618 and her email address is irmaris.rosas@upr.edu.

- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the University of Puerto Rico's, Mayagüez Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB) office. Their extensions are 3674 and 3829.
- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.
- If audiotaping is part of this research, I () consent to be audiotaped. I () do **NOT** consent to being audiotaped. The written and/or audio taped materials will be viewed only by the principal investigator and members of the research team.
- Written materials () may be viewed in an educational setting outside the research () may **NOT** be viewed in an educational setting outside the research.
- My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Subject's signature: _____

Name: _____

Appendix D

Socio-demographic Questionnaire

The following questionnaire is completely anonymous and will be used solely for the purpose of gathering demographic data specifically about the INGL 3103-Intermediate Writing I course, sections 070 and 001D, being offered on the spring semester of 2007-2008. The information provided will be specifically utilized for the Thesis Research of T.A. Irmaris Rosas Nazario. Thank you for your participation and cooperation. ☺

1. Section: 070 001D
2. Sex: F M
3. Town and country of origin: _____
4. Faculty: Arts and Sciences Business Administration
 Agriculture Engineering
5. Department: _____
6. Taking the INGL 3103 course for the: 1st time 2nd time
7. Writing classes besides INGL 3103: Yes No
8. Native Language: Spanish English
9. Aspects of writing you would like to improve:
 grammar and vocabulary development of paragraphs
 thesis statement selecting and developing a topic
 pre-writing techniques revising and editing
10. Have you taken online courses at any academic level?
 Yes No

If your answer is yes, please specify at which grade level and the course you were taking:

Appendix E

Writing Conference Question Sheet

University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus

Ingl 3103-Intermediate Writing I

T.A. Irmaris Rosas Nazario

Writing Conference Question Sheet

Week of February 11th to February 15th, 2008

Instructions: On your day and time for the Writing Conference, please bring the following questions answered as sincerely as possible. These have to be answered in full sentences **and it would be useful if you gave examples of your own previous class work.**

1. Name three aspects of the writing process, you believe you master as a student. This means:

What have you proven to be good at?

-
-
-

2. Name three aspects of the writing process you believe you need to develop more, need help with, or you have simply not learned up to this moment.

-
-
-

3. If any, what do you consider have been three main aspects about writing you have learned up to the moment?

-
-
-

4. Is there anything you would have done differently in this first essay to make it better?

Appendix F

Focus Group Questions

Demographic Information (this section will not be recorded):

- Name (to facilitate focus group process only) and pseudonym assigned
- Age of Participant
- Taking the course for the first or second time?
- Modality of the class in which they are registered.

Definitions and Meaning of the Writing Process:

- What is the writing process?
- What did you know about writing and the writing process before taking this course?
- Do you believe your writing has changed in any way after taking this course? If so, then, how?
- Which parts of the writing process do you believe are your strong areas?
- Which do you believe you need more practice or help in?
- Do you have any concerns about the final exam?

Medium:

- Which version of the course were you registered in?
- Describe your experience in this class with: writing assignments, readings, activities and essays.
- Describe a particular memory you have of **writing an essay** in this class. What comes to mind?

- Do you perceive that this course was different for students taking it face-to-face or online? If so, how?
- Why did you choose to take the online or face-to-face version of this class?
- If you could make the choice again, would you choose to take it the same way? Why or why not?
- What do you think about your peers and their response to your work or participation in class?
- What do you think about your peers and their response to your work done in groups?

Overall view of the course:

- What is your general opinion about this course?
- Which aspects of this course if any, did you enjoy or believe were useful for you?
- Which activities or assignments if any, would you have preferred to have done differently in this class?
- Which aspects of this course if any, did you dislike or believe were unhelpful for you?