ONLINE COURSE CRITIQUE

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IT 532 Dr. Yamagata-Lynch

Introduction:

The focus of this online course critique is ENGL 1010: Composition 1. The course is offered at a local community college and serves as an introduction to expository writing. In ENGL 1010, students work on developing critical thinking, argumentation, and research skills while learning how to effectively communicate in a variety of modes. I chose this course to critique for two very specific reasons; I want to teach college level writing courses and I want to teach online courses. My goal is to do both effectively. The online course critique will allow me the opportunity to observe, participate, and reflect on effective (or ineffective) course design.

After requesting permission, I was granted access to the hybrid course by the instructor, Professor X*[1] and Dr. Y*, Director of Academic Technology. Per my request, I was granted access as a student to the course management system Desire to Learn, or D2L, and as such received all forms of class communication.

Participant Experience:

I learned upon enrollment that ENGL 1010 was a blended course. What does "blended course" mean? According to Conrad and Donaldson (2012), blended refers to "educational settings that include both an online and a face-to-face component". In this particular case, all course documents (assignments, etc.) are located strictly online as is all course information and grades. While students do complete the majority of their work online, they are required to attend a face-to-face meeting once every four weeks. During my observation, I learned that the majority of the work is individualized writing assignments and activities with one peer review session, one conference, and five discussion board requirements.

As I began my observation two weeks after the spring semester began, students had already begun their coursework. I decided, since I was starting late, to begin by exploring the D2L course page. The first thing I noticed about the course page was the efficient organization. Everything was well laid out, and clearly and consistently labeled with similar font and color use. The font was easy for me to read, but could possibly require enlargement to accommodate

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[1] *Names have been changed to protect privacy.

special needs. I also found the availability of the course calendar to be a potentially useful, if underutilized, tool (see picture below):
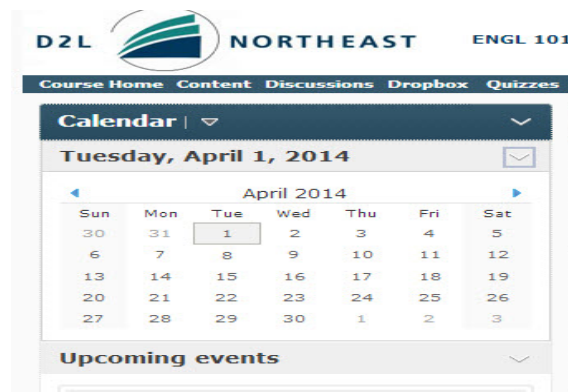
The course calendar tool could be used as a visual representation of the semester schedule and is featured prominently on the course page. The links to each section of the course management system are in a fixed location near the top of the course page and provide direction for students who are looking to locate the areas required for use in class; in this particular class, students interact most with the following areas of D2L: Home, Content, Discussions, Dropbox, and Grades. Students find all course material posted in the content section. Students complete required posts in the Discussions area and submit assigned work to the Dropbox. The Dropbox provides students with immediate feedback on successful work submission and provides instructors with the option to install a plagiarism detection feature. As both a student and an instructor, I would say these are invaluable features.

To fully understand both the course management system features and the effectiveness of the course structure and activities, I completed two individual assignments and two group activities. The first individual assignment, *Formatting and Email Exercise* (Appendix A), was an exercise designed to familiarize students with the use of Word and Dropbox as well as provide the instructor with a personal introduction to each student. The assignment was posted online and was to be submitted online. The second individual assignment, *Paraphrasing, Summarizing, and Quoting Exercise* (Appendix B), was an exercise designed to familiarize students with the use of outside sources in the writing classroom. The assignment was delivered during one of the courses scheduled face-to-face meetings and was completed and submitted during the scheduled

meeting time. The two group activities I completed were discussion assignments posted in the Discussions section of D2L (see pictures below):

The discussion assignments had two parts: response and comment. Students were required to respond to each post and comment on at least two classmates' postings. The discussion assignments were designed to encourage student interaction and encourage self-reflection.

Elements that Work:

Exploring the course and the course management system was a very beneficial experience. I was able to participate and observe in most aspects of the course which gave me a unique perspective of the successful elements of the course. To me, the most successful elements of the course were the organization of the course page and accessibility of the course material and the frequent correspondence of the instructor.

The organization of the course page and accessibility of the course material are extremely important in an online setting. If students aren't able to locate and access course material, the chance of students successfully completing the course is nonexistent. Professor X provided

students with a well-organized course page (see picture below) and ensured that all features were fully functioning.
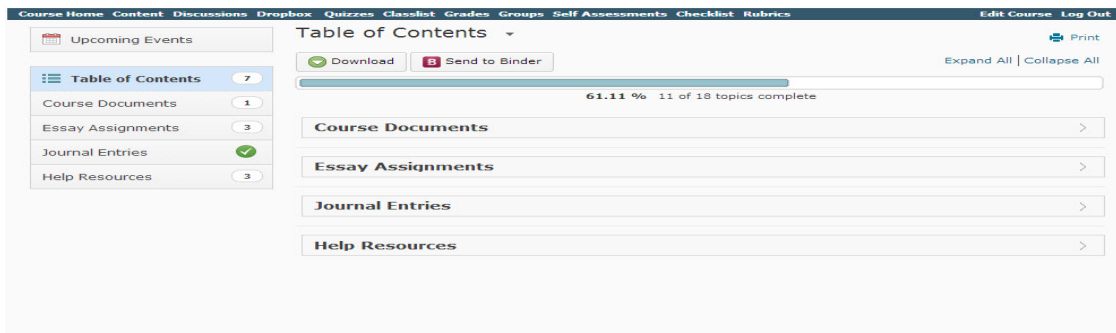
Another important aspect of online learning is maintaining an open line of communication. Professor X did an excellent job in this respect. He kept students up-to-date via D2L email (see picture below), provided timely feedback on writing assignments, posted grades in the Grades section of D2L, and posted his office hours for students who preferred face-to-face meetings.
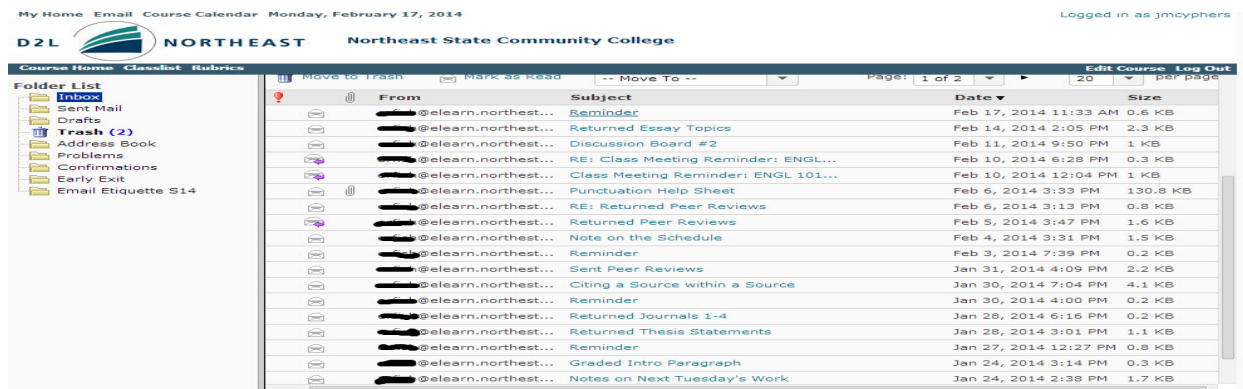
Elements that Need Work:

While there were several elements that worked in this online learning environment, there were also several elements that didn't. In my opinion, two elements of the course that needed work were the low levels of interaction between students and the limited use of Web 2.0 tools. While Professor X kept up a steady stream of communication between himself and the students, Conrad and Donaldson (2012) make a point of mentioning that engagement should also occur

"*among* the students within a course's learning community"(p. 6). Based on my online and classroom observations, there was not a high level of interaction between the students. The only visible interactions between students were the required responses to the discussion assignments. At the time of my observation, the posted assignments were primarily individualized with only one assignment requiring peer response or feedback.

As the course was delivered primarily online, the use of Web 2.0 tools could have gone a long way in promoting interaction among students as well as providing students with alternative means to achieve course objectives. As D2L offers multiple interactive features and makes it easy to embed or link outside tools, I was surprised to find that this course offered little of either. At the time of observation, there was no variety in available course material; everything posted for student access was in Word or PDF format.

Conclusion:

While this course supplied students with all the required course material to help them achieve the objectives as listed in the course syllabus, it did very little to create a sense of community among students as was apparent in both face-to-face and online interactions. While the delivery method was primarily online, the structure was nearly identical to face-to-face delivery and felt more like a self-paced learning environment.

References

Conrad, R.M. & Donaldson, J.A. (2012). *Continuing to engage the online learner*. San
      Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Appendix A

All classes

FORMATTING AND D2L DROPBOX EXERCISE

Using the formatting sheet attached to this assignment and/or you're *A Writer's Reference* text regarding formatting MLA papers without a title page, write a short paragraph about yourself that contains the following information:

➢ Your full name
➢ The name you prefer to be called
➢ Your major
➢ What you want to be when (or if!) you grow up
➢ A contact phone number and non-D2L email address. The phone number and email is optional, but helpful.

Be sure to use complete sentences. The last page in the handout shows you how the paragraph should look.
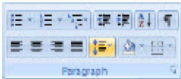
Once you complete the paragraph, email it to me as an attachment using the D2L dropbox.

To send me a document via D2L, you need the D2L dropbox and your Microsoft Word paragraph. Send the dropbox attachments as follows:
1. Save your document to a disc drive or the hard drive as a Word document or RTF document (if not using Word).
2. Enter D2L and go to the course home page.
3. Click on "Dropbox."
4. Click on the folder for the assignment you are submitting.
5. Click on "Add a file" and then "Upload" to find the document you are going to send. Double click on the document name. The document name should show in the file box under the "Upload" button in D2L.
6. Click on "Add."
7. Enter a message (if desired) in the "Comments" box. Please don't ask questions within the comment box (use email instead).
8. Click "Submit."
9. Check the results page to make sure you sent the correct document.
10. Click "Done."

All classes

FORMATTING ESSAYS USING WORD 2010

1) Create a header with your last name and the proper page number (the header should count your pages). This should be flush with the right margin.
   - Go to the "Insert" menu and click on "Page Number." You want "Top of Page" and then "Plain Number 3."
   - Type your last name in front of the number and hit the space key.
   - Click "Close Header and Footer."

2) Format your page so it will double-space.
   - On the **Home** tab, in the **Paragraph** group, click **Line Spacing**

   - Click **2**. Formatting for the entire document changes to double spacing (if this is done before typing). You can also highlight your document and change it to double-spacing using this tab.

3) Put the following information on the first page and the top left of the document:
   - Your full name
   - My name
   - The class and section number
   - The day, with the day then month then year (20 Jan. 2012)

4) Center your creative title:
   - Select the text that you want to center between the left and right margins.
   - On the **Home** tab, in the **Paragraph** group, click **Center**. Type in your text and hit "Enter."
   - Be sure to click back to align left before typing your essay

5) Hit "Tab" once on your keyboard to indent your paragraph and begin typing your paper!

Appendix B

Paraphrasing, Summarizing, and Quoting Exercise

1. **Short Quote:** Cite the passage below as you would for a short quote. Be sure to introduce the quote; quotes should not be sentences unto themselves. Quotes must be word-for-word.

2. **Long Quote:** Cite the passage below as you would for a long quote for a research paper. Long quotes should be 4 or more lines. Remember: quotes must be word-for-word unless you show changes with brackets or omissions with ellipses. Be sure to introduce your long quote with a complete sentence and a colon. Also, use one set of brackets and one set of ellipsis points in your long quote.

3. **Summarize** and cite the passage below as you would for a research paper. Condense (shorten) the passage using your own words and sentence structure. Be sure to credit the author for his ideas and work using MLA citations.

4. **Paraphrase** and cite the passage below as you would for a research paper. Avoid plagiarism. Use your own words, syntax (word order), and sentence structure; do **not** omit any of the author's main points; and do **not** add any interpretations of your own. Your paraphrase will most likely be as long or longer than the original passage.

Advertisers use weasel words to appear to be making a claim for a product when in fact they are making no claim at all. Weasel words get their name from the way weasels eat the eggs they find in the nests of other animals. A weasel will make a small hole in the egg, suck out the insides, then place the egg back in the nest. Only when an egg is examined closely is it found to be hollow. That's the way it is with weasel words in advertising: Examine weasel words closely and you'll find that they're as hollow as any egg sucked by a weasel. Weasel words appear to say one thing when in fact they say the opposite, or nothing at all.

Source: page 85 from
Lutz, William. *Doublespeak*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1990. Print.