

## CHAPTER 10.

# CREATING CULTURAL AWARENESS, BUILDING COMMUNITY: ENCOURAGING STUDENT WRITER IDENTITY THROUGH PURPOSEFUL ASSIGNMENT DESIGN

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*In this chapter, the authors describe culturally sustaining blog and discussion boards used in online, any time learning, focusing on a three-week assignment sequence aimed at helping students to break away from focusing on homogeneous community practices that tend to value singular ways of knowing, writing, and reading to instead allow students to explore multimodal composing while appealing to a diverse audience of peers and other readers. Specifically, the authors mention that using these modes of writing help raise awareness of the global nature of writing among student writers. In describing their “better practice,” this chapter addresses the themes of accessibility and inclusivity and practices adapted from classic composition strategies.*

## FRAMEWORKS AND PRINCIPLES IN THIS CHAPTER

- **PARS Online Writing Instruction, Personal:** Building community and fostering connections.
- **PARS Online Writing Instruction, Accessible:** Taking advantage of the affordances of a digital learning environment.
- **GSOLE Principle 1.1:** “All stakeholders and students should be aware

of and be able to engage the unique literacy features of communicating, teaching, and learning in a primarily digital environment.”

- **GSOLE Principle 3.5:** “Instructors and tutors should research, develop, theorize, and apply appropriate reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition theories to their OLI environment(s).”
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Openness:** the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Engagement:** a sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Creativity:** the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Metacognition:** the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Knowledge of Conventions:** the formal and informal guidelines that define what is considered to be correct and appropriate, or incorrect and inappropriate, in a piece of writing.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BEGIN READING

- What is the benefit of exploring community and heritage practices with students in writing classes?
- What transferable skills do working in multimodal texts and the blogging genre teach students as writers?
- How can instructors encourage students to write about topics they are interested in while inviting more ownership over and connection to their own writing?

## INTRODUCTION

When we first decided to write this chapter, we met to talk about our own teaching contexts and student demographics. We found that we had shared struggles as writing teachers that were aligned in some specific areas, despite our different contexts. We both experienced challenges with students accessing course content and with getting our students to view themselves as writers who could be empowered with choices. Our combined experience told us that students are often fed a number of myths from high school, popular discourse, previous learning experience, and beyond about college writing before we ever see them

in our classrooms. Some have been told that writing is always strict and formal, based on rigid templates or essay structures. Or, they believe that writing is assessed solely based on grammar and correctness. What we found exceptionally troubling is that many come to us believing that their personal experiences and lives are not relevant topics or sources of information. They're sure no one cares what they think or experience in their lives—not really anyway.

We wanted to tackle this challenge of writerly identity and belonging a bit more directly, and one success Jennifer had previously had students write about a family or community practice on personal blogs. When students hear that they should write about themselves and their heritages, use their experiences and observations as sources of evidence, and put these experiences in conversation with scholarly texts, there's a solid amount of skepticism on their parts. "Shouldn't I argue against global warming?" they ask. "Won't it be too informal to talk about my family?" they worry. Their questions highlight the difficulty our students experience in exploring a line of inquiry born of personal experience, rather than starting with a thesis they attempt to prove. It also conveys how hard it is for them to see their lives as foci of academic inquiry, despite the ways in which we see their breadth of identities as valuable and necessary components of the classroom. This disconnect is also exasperated by the distance between student and instructor inherent in online writing instruction.

We wanted our students to connect with each other, to gain more confidence in their ability to make choices as the authors of their texts, to have more practice writing outside of a rigid structure (i.e., the five-paragraph essay), and to see more chances to value their identities/communities in academic spaces. By the end of our conversation, we aimed to craft an assignment sequence to break some of these student writing cycles and to build an identity-sustaining, community-building practice in our online courses. To do this, we started with Jennifer's blog assignment and began crafting a three-week assignment sequence that focused on inclusivity.

Because we both knew of our diverse student audiences—for Jennifer, 65 percent of student arrives with a high school GPA of 4.0, 55 percent of students are STEM majors, 17 percent come from international contexts, and 28 percent are from under-represented minoritized identities, and, for Jessie, at an institution where 67 percent are over age 20 (non-traditional age college students), and 36 percent of students are from under-represented minoritized identities—we felt we could create an assignment sequence to meet their needs but also to encourage them to use their own voices and make their own choices in their writing.

While this collection utilizes shared language for online course modalities and defines asynchronous online courses under this term, we aim to be clear and reiterate to our readers that our courses only somewhat fall into the definition

of “online, any time learning” as defined by this collection. For us, this definition is somewhat limiting because both of our courses do have expectations for interaction and attendance and are not self-paced; both of us interact with our students frequently and provide instruction through the announcements, emails, and discussion areas. That said, we do not meet in real time with a whole class via web conferencing software like Zoom, so our particular better practice is focused on an “online, any time” learning; however, we do feel that readers who teach primarily face-to-face or hybrid/blended could replicate this practice with some minor adjustments.

## **WHAT THEORIES, SCHOLARSHIP, AND PRINCIPLES INFORM THIS APPROACH TO OLI?**

Getting students to view themselves as active writers who don’t simply need to replicate dominant language and writing practices they have previously experienced at school is, in short, a challenge. The challenge of helping them establish a writerly identity is exacerbated when taking into account the nature of online courses and the diverse backgrounds of our online students. Online courses, which offer flexible access to students, often host diverse student cohorts from varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds; in turn, they prove even more challenging for meeting needs of community, connection, and writer autonomy. In order to meet calls to develop linguistically and culturally inclusive pedagogies in online writing instruction (OWI) contexts (Miller-Cochran, 2015; St.Amant & Rice, 2017) and maintain universal accessibility and inclusion (CCCC Position Statement on Globalization, 2017), this chapter will offer online writing instructors a specific approach to developing personal writing through dialogic discussion boards and blog assignments. Specifically, this chapter’s better practice includes a series of sequenced discussions that work with the blog assignment to accomplish two goals:

1. to break away from homogeneous community and heritage practices that tend to value singular ways of knowing, writing, and reading and
2. to allow students to explore multimodal composing while appealing to diverse reading audiences.

Particularly, our chapter provides strategies and assignments that can be used over a variety of institutional contexts to meet the needs of shifting student demographics and help instructors to provide online writing instruction that is inclusive, and follows the best practices outlined by Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle’s (2019) PARS (personal, accessible, responsive, strategic) approach to online writing instruction. Additionally, we feel that the teaching practices

outlined here may aid students in learning about and valuing the home and heritage practices. Finally, while students in online courses don't typically get to know much about each other's personal lives, this practice also provides students an opportunity to learn about each other and from each other, creating a stronger community in the online course.

For the purposes of our chapter and because we wanted to explore the option of a "better practice" using discussions, we chose to use an assignment that Jennifer had used previously in her hybrid course, an ongoing personal blog assignment aided by a series of discussion posts and responses. We used this assignment in our online, any time learning classes in the fall of 2021. In this chapter, we wanted to illustrate that:

- Participating in discussions can be effective at building community for online courses
- Engaging in discussions and blogging can contribute to the students' growth as writers
- Blogs and discussion boards can act as places where students can explore their familial and community backgrounds or discover new ones

This blog/discussion assignment sequence asks students to explore a community or family tradition or practice through their diverse social contexts and identities. In crafting our assignment to work for both courses, we worked to make it accessible to a variety of student demographics. We wanted the assignment to not only be accessible in its content and direction, but also in its use. Because of this, we extended access to consider language barriers (specifically including non-native English speakers), technology barriers (specifically for those who are unfamiliar with technology), and writing barriers (specifically personal writing as a way to access more academic genres). Because we were asking students to expand their ideas of audience and consider some of their own community practices, we looked to the Accessible component of the PARS framework (Borgman & McArdle, 2019; 2021; 2023) to ground our best practice.

Additionally, our best practice was also grounded in one element of the Frameworks for Success in Postsecondary Writing: "Knowledge of conventions—the formal and informal guidelines that define what is considered to be correct and appropriate, or incorrect and inappropriate," in a piece of writing, focusing the assignments on understanding writing for a blog and broad audience versus the technological components of the blog. Blogs are fairly easy to set up and don't take a lot of technological prowess to navigate, so we felt the blog as a technology would work well, especially for students who are not as comfortable with technology in general; the blogs, as a genre, then acted as space for students to explore personal topics, address public audiences, and experiment with

multimodal practices as a means of communication while learning the informal conventions often practiced by other bloggers.

Keeping access in mind, we also wanted to foreground culturally inclusive pedagogical practices. Building off of Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) work on culturally relevant pedagogies, Django Paris (2012) furthers an asset-oriented approach to literacy instruction by suggesting a culturally sustaining pedagogy. This approach rejects deficit-oriented pedagogical practices that only ask students to conform to dominant language practices and instead asks teachers to build classroom practices that sustain "the cultural and linguistic competence of their (student) communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Particularly, we orient the series of activities presented in this chapter around Paris and Samy Alim's (2014) terms of "community" and "heritage practices"; these terms work to avoid essentializing language practices as cultural practices and instead acknowledge the ever-shifting language and cultural practices of our students. In doing so, we seek to counter dominant narratives about language and cultural "appropriateness" (Rosa & Flores, 2015) that asks students to assimilate to largely White language and cultural practices. Instead, we pull in the concept of "Global Audiences" through Kirk St.Amant's (2020) student-facing text to begin exploring concepts of community and heritage practices where he notes that, "Globalized rhetoric involves understanding: The culture of the audience for which you are writing [and] the genre you are writing in when sharing information with that cultural audience" (p. 148). By asking students to draw on their community and heritage practices as a valuable line of inquiry, we hope to value the myriad of identities present in our classes, which we feel extends accessibility and inclusivity.

In the shared assignment sequence, students were asked to develop a personal blog topic and craft three different blog entries over the course of three weeks. For Jennifer's course, this assignment was part of an expanded series of blogs that students create throughout the class which lead to a larger research assignment. For Jessie's course, the students completed the personal blog assignment in isolation and focused on other patterns of writing as they worked up to a research assignment based on their degree of study.

## **WHAT NEEDS DOES THIS PRACTICE MEET?**

We believe that the assignments described here address a particular need in OWI: the intersection of asset-based pedagogies, community building practices, and digital literacy instruction. While there has been a great deal of work on connecting students in online courses, despite their physical distance, our

inclusion of culturally sustaining pedagogies highlights the need to build community among students from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Students, by focusing on their heritage or community practices—as both topics of conversation and as lines of inquiry—are using the online space to explore their identities and learn about differing perspectives.

Our better practice for constructing blogs helps meet the needs of more diverse learners because it acknowledges that students come from a variety of home and heritage practices and they may benefit from participating in multimodal composing practices using genres of writing (discussions/blogs) that focus more on personal writing, a form that is more accessible to developing writers; put another way, usually it's easier to write about yourself and we encourage them to do so. Additionally, we see this practice as one that is responding to critiques of discussion boards used in online writing instruction as one-dimensional forums for communication, as discussed by Beth Hewett (2015); instead, the discussion boards in our practice ask students to engage with each other recursively, further emphasizing personal connection between students. In general, students tend to be more engaged and connected because the topics are more personal and not typically associated with academic writing (e.g., *The Elf on the Shelf*, KPop Fandoms, Phillippinx Communities, etc.) as these topics can help to build community in online courses.

We feel the discussion and blog assignment that we explore here illustrates one way to build community through the medium of online instruction. Since both courses fall under the collection term “online, any time learning,” where synchronous interaction occurred online in the learning management system, Canvas, building community in digital space was even more important because the students rarely got the chance to interact in real time. Sharing these interests and practices through discussion and blog entries allowed students to learn more about each other and to explore diverse interests.

## WHAT DOES SUCCESSFUL LEARNING LOOK LIKE?

A goal of any assignment is to both develop and improve students' abilities to think critically *and* metacognition in order to convey exactly how they think critically. We felt students would be successful in this assignment by sharing what they learned. Therefore, success for us was demonstrated in the blog entries and the progression of the students' topics, as this showed they were thinking about their topics while, at the same time, they were thinking about the rhetorical situation for their posts. In implementing these sequenced blogs and discussion boards, we also intended to pay special attention to the heightened literacy load of online writing courses (Sibo, 2021) by including multimodal

elements and asking students to consider composing/designing in alternate formats/modalities such as blogging, screencasting, and visual analysis (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). Discussion assignments often pose challenges for students and instructors alike (de Lima, et al., 2019; Lieberman, 2019; Mintz, 2020). Some of the challenges include:

- Participation: Should instructors set participation requirements? If so, through a set number of posts? Or, through a more general requirement, such as “converse with your peers”?
- Forced/Transactional Interaction: Do students actually read the posts? Or do they cherry pick, responding to just the required number of posts/students? Does the instructor respond or does the instructor set a discussion moderator?
- Busy Work: Due to the above items—and often gleaned from their previous experience—some students don’t see the value in discussions and view them as busy work.

### **HOW DOES THIS REPRESENT A BEST PRACTICE IN OLI?**

Our assignment sequence illustrates one way to encourage students to think about heritage and home practices as well as approaches to different audiences. We also feel this assignment sequence encourages students to write in different genres (discussion posts/blog entries) and incorporate multimodal elements into their writing. For this project, the blog entries utilized student-selected topics combined with multimodal components of the student’s choice for a broad audience, while the discussion boards leveraged the academic community of the class for students to process ideas, strategies, topics, and so on. While this assignment sequence certainly touches on other principles and practices identified for successful OWI, we feel the ones below are the most pertinent:

Borgman and McArdle’s PARS framework (2015): specifically, letters (P) Personal (building community and fostering connections) and (A) Accessible (taking advantage of the affordances of a digital learning environment), though our better practice does align with the entire PARS framework.

GSOLE Principles:

- Online literacy instruction should be universally accessible and inclusive (GSOLE Principle 1).
- Instructors and tutors should commit to regular, iterative processes of course and instructional material design, development, assessment, and revision to ensure that online literacy instruction and student support reflect current effective practices (GSOLE Principle 3).



## COURSE CONTEXT

Jessie and Jennifer teach at different schools on different sides of the country. Jessie teaches online, any time learning courses at a community college. The course described in this chapter was an English 102 course (the second course in a two-course sequence). Jennifer teaches at a large four-year public research university in California. The course for this assignment was the university’s first-year composition (FYC) course. Both teach at schools where there are diverse student populations.

Despite the differing contexts, both of us used Canvas for housing course materials and discussion boards, and both utilized WordPress as our blogging platform because it is free and easy to use; however, other blog technologies (such as Blogger) could work, too. These shared tools allowed for specific shared instructions that for the most part were identical with one exception, Jessie’s course used this discussion/blog unit as a single assignment while Jennifer’s course used this discussion/blog unit as a connected longer course assignment that asks students to research a discourse community related to their blog topic.

## LESSON

We began by sketching out the assignment and the accompanying discussions, identifying why we wanted the students to complete certain steps and how these steps contributed to their learning in the larger project. For this assignment sequence, students wrote three blog entries and participated in three discussions that facilitated the blog assignments. Our initial brainstorming sketch for the series of assignments is explained in Table 10.1.

**Table 10.1. Sequence of Activities for the Discussion Board and Blog Entry Assignments**

Assignment	Activity	Goals
Discussion Board 1	<p>Students will . . .</p> <p>Use different academic texts &amp; student-produced blog examples to explore the genre of blogging.</p> <p>Begin responding to: What is blogging?; What does it look like? What are the characteristics of a blog entry?</p>	<p>Students . . .</p> <p>Explore the blog genre.</p> <p>Begin to understand conventions.</p> <p>Practice describing the writing process.</p>

Assignment	Activity	Goals
Blog Entry 1	<p>Students will . . .</p> <p>Identify a community/heritage practice that they are interested in or currently engage in.</p> <p>Find a blog example discussing that community/heritage practice.</p> <p>Write about the community/heritage practice they identified and the blog example they found.</p>	<p>Students . . .</p> <p>Start to think about their own traditions or cultural practices.</p> <p>Search online for blog examples and identify model texts.</p> <p>Practice &amp; develop awareness around the blog genre.</p>
Discussion 2	<p>Students will . . .</p> <p>Brainstorm 3 possible topics to blog.</p> <p>Begin researching these possible topics.</p>	<p>Students . . .</p> <p>Think about topics &amp; consider why they are interested in writing/blogging about specific topics.</p> <p>Garner peer feedback about these topics</p>
Blog Entry 2	<p>Students will . . .</p> <p>Select one of the three topics they proposed.</p> <p>Write/blog on that topic including multimodal elements such as hyperlinks and images.</p>	<p>Students . . .</p> <p>Narrow to one topic.</p> <p>Explore blog writing and working with multimodal elements.</p>
Discussion 3	<p>Students will . . .</p> <p>Find two blogs written by authors outside the classroom that present different perspectives.</p> <p>Create a screen capture comparing/contrasting these blogs and author perspectives in light of global audiences.</p>	<p>Students . . .</p> <p>Practice creating a multimodal response.</p> <p>Explore different perspectives from authors writing on a similar topic.</p> <p>Consider writing for global audiences.</p>
Blog Entry 3	<p>Students will . . .</p> <p>Write/blog in depth about the topic they wrote about in Blog Entry 2.</p>	<p>Students . . .</p> <p>Write/practice blogging more in depth about their blog topic.</p> <p>Get more practice incorporating multimodal elements.</p>

After we had a clear picture of what we wanted the students to do and why, we crafted the assignment instructions for the blog assignment. The discussion prompts can be found in Appendix C.

**Student-Facing Assignment Instructions (Blog Assignment):**

See Appendix A and Appendix B of both the blog and discussion assignments.

Also, please see the weekly units for both Jessie and Jennifer’s classes in the next section.

**Weekly Units**

Below are our weekly lessons for the three-week cycle. Due to differing schedules (Jennifer is on the quarters system/Jessie on a traditional 16-week semester system), Jennifer’s assignment was the first assignment that students completed in her course. Jessie’s assignment was the second major writing project and third assignment they completed for her course (the students complete a Start of Course Reflection as their first assignment in the course). The charts shown in Tables 10.2 and 10.3 detail the work we both did to scaffold and manage the labor of this assignment.

**Table 10.2. Jennifer’s Weekly Calendar**

<p><b>Week 1 Overview</b></p>	<p><b>Tasks for Week 1</b></p> <p>As a major assignment this quarter, you will choose a topic to blog about and investigate a discourse community around this topic. To build our project over the quarter, you’ll be writing three different blog assignments (one per week) over the next three weeks. You will also be completing three different discussion assignments (one per week) that are crafted to help you develop your blog topic. These blog and discussion assignments are connected and encourage you to think about your community and practices or traditions.</p> <p>Build your blog on WordPress:</p> <p>Review our resources page for links.</p> <p>Review Blogging &amp; Publish your first blog entry:</p> <p>First, review what you know about blogging in this discussion board: Blogging</p> <p>Next, read “Why Blog” (Reid, 2011) and “Writing in Global Contexts: Composing Usable Texts for Audiences from Different Cultures” (St.Amant, 2020).</p> <p>Then, post your first blog entry here: Blog Entry #1: Exploring Blogging</p> <p>Tips for submitting your first blog entry:</p> <p>Make sure your blog is active and publicly available, and make sure your blog entry is published, not just in draft form.</p> <p>Make sure the direct link to the individual post you are submitting is accessible to those not signed into your account. This usually means you have to click on “Preview” then “Visit Site” and then copy and paste the link from there. You can use Google Incognito to double check if this link works.</p>
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<p><b>Week 2 Overview</b></p>	<p>Tasks for Week 2</p> <p>Learn about the concept of Discourse Communities (DC) and discuss.</p> <p>First, Read “Understanding Discourse Communities” by Dan Melzer (<a href="https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/writingspaces3/melzer.pdf">https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/writingspaces3/melzer.pdf</a>)</p> <p>Then, listen to “This American Life” episode (<a href="https://www.thisamericanlife.org/573/status-update">https://www.thisamericanlife.org/573/status-update</a>) that provides a different way of understanding Discourse Communities</p> <p>Finally, discuss your Understanding of Discourse Communities with your peers in this discussion board: Discourse Communities</p> <p>Propose a Blog Topic!</p> <p>Review this graphic based on your Blogging Discussion.</p> <p>Before you begin your blog topic proposal post, you are also more than welcome to email me your blog topic idea and we can discuss it, but you are also going to discuss your ideas with your classmates in this discussion board: Blog Topic Ideas</p> <p>Then, finalize your topic in our second blog entry: Blog Entry #2: Blog Topic Proposal</p>
<p><b>Week 3 Overview</b></p>	<p>Tasks for Week 3</p> <p>Get to know each other’s blogs and topics and keep blogging about your topic.</p> <p>Now that you have begun your journey into your topic, you should see what your peers might be talking about via this discussion post: Blog Commenting, Round 1</p> <p>Dig deeper into your proposed blog topic in a new post: Blog Entry #3: Explore Blog Topic</p> <p>Keep blogging and start thinking through the Discourse Community (DC) that you might investigate.</p> <p>First, review/solidify the concept of a DC and see examples of DCs in this video.</p> <p>Then, propose a Discourse Community that is related to your topic that you might want to analyze for your paper in our next blog entry: Blog Entry #4: D.C. In-Depth</p>

**Table 10.3. Jessie’s Weekly Calendar**

<p><b>Module Overview</b></p>	<p>In this module, you’ll focus on Writing Assignment 2. In Writing Assignment 2 you’ll be asked to create a <b>blog</b> and post three <b>blog</b> entries on it. This module is three weeks long and in each week you will participate in a discussion and write a blog entry. At the end of the three weeks, you will submit the link to your blog with the three blog entries on it for grading. The discussions will be graded separately from your blog during each of the three weeks.</p> <p>You’ll also complete readings, activities, and grammar lessons in each week of the module:</p>
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<p><b>Week 4 Readings and Tasks</b></p>	<p>Reading: What is a blog?: <a href="https://firstsiteguide.com/what-is-blog/">https://firstsiteguide.com/what-is-blog/</a> Why Blog?: Reid's Text</p> <p>Tasks: Read the Writing Assignment 2 instructions completely. Note: This is a three-week project, and you will submit your completed at the end of it in week 6 Use WordPress (<a href="https://wordpress.com">https://wordpress.com</a>) to create a free blog How to setup a blog: Video: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mta6Y0o7yJk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mta6Y0o7yJk</a> Text Instructions: <a href="https://wordpress.com/support/five-step-blog-setup/">https://wordpress.com/support/five-step-blog-setup/</a> Personalize your blog! Write your first blog entry by following the Blog Entry 1 Instructions Note: you will not submit any of your blog entries in Canvas until week 6, but you should complete them as they are assigned in weeks 4, 5, and 6 Discussion Week: Answer the posted question by Wednesday by 11:59 p.m. EST Week 4 DQ Participation: respond to at least two of your peers or two of the instructor follow up questions, or one peer and one instructor follow up question by Saturday by 11:59 p.m. EST See the syllabus for more information on discussion participation and posting.</p>
<p><b>Week 5 Readings and Tasks</b></p>	<p>Reading: "Writing in Global Contexts: Composing Usable Texts for Audiences from Different Cultures" by Kirk St.Amant</p> <p>Tasks: Write your second blog entry by following the Blog Entry 2 Instructions Note: you will not submit any of your blog entries in Canvas until week 6, but you should complete them as they are assigned in weeks 4, 5, and 6 Discussion Week: Answer the posted question by Wednesday by 11:59 p.m. EST Week 5 DQ Participation: respond to at least two of your peers or two of the instructor follow up questions, or one peer and one instructor follow up question by Saturday by 11:59 p.m. EST See the syllabus for more information on discussion participation and posting.</p>

<p><b>Week 6 Readings and Tasks</b></p>	<p>Reading: No readings this week</p> <p>Tasks: Write your third blog entry by following the Blog Entry 3 Instructions Read through your blog and revise and edit as needed. Ensure you have links, images, and references (for any sources used). Submit the link to your blog by Saturday by 11:59 p.m. ET using the submission link in Writing Assignment 2</p> <p>Discussion Week: Answer the posted question by Wednesday by 11:59 p.m. EST Week 6 DQ Participation: respond to at least two of your peers or two of the instructor follow up questions, or one peer and one instructor follow up question by Saturday by 11:59 p.m. EST See the syllabus for more information on discussion participation and posting.</p>
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As a reminder, the specific assignment prompts for each of the blogs and the specific discussion prompts for each of the discussions can be found in the appendices.

**Assessment**

Teaching in the quarter system, Jennifer has ten weeks to get students through a major project. She uses blogs to help students develop a traditional introduction, methods, results, and discussion (IMRaD) style research paper that details some aspect of an online discourse community connected to their blog topic. Throughout the class, she also uses a labor-based grading contract to assess work using specific benchmarks for each assignment. These benchmarks are designed to de-emphasize the subjective grading students are used to with the exception of “Consider Blog Form and Genre,” which is a set of standards around blogging that the students create that are usually lists of defining blog features (images, hyperlinks, etc.). Students create this list of typical blog features from their analysis of the genre. Each assignment is marked as complete or incomplete, depending on how well they meet the guidelines. Students who receive an incomplete can revise throughout the quarter for a complete.

As mentioned previously, Jessie’s series of blog entries and discussions functioned as one major writing assignment in her course, Writing Assignment 2. Therefore, she had students submit all three blog entries at the end of the three-week cycle. The three blog entries were connected to the discussion activities so students were encouraged to complete one blog entry per week and couldn’t wait until the last minute to put the whole blog together. The three blog entries were assessed separately on a points scale of how well the student followed the

instructions for the individual post. The use of multimodal elements was its own grading category (multimodal elements were required in each blog). External sources was an individual category, as was spelling/grammar/mechanics as shown in Table 10.5 in the grading criteria table.

**Table 10.4. Jennifer’s Assessment Plan**

<p><b>Blog Entry 1</b></p>	<p>Contract Grading Guidelines. For Full credit your blog entry should:</p> <p>Be over 400 words</p> <p>Include at least three hyperlinks</p> <p>How to Add Hyperlinks (<a href="https://www.authormedia.com/how-to-add-a-hyperlink-to-wordpress/">https://www.authormedia.com/how-to-add-a-hyperlink-to-wordpress/</a>)</p> <p>Why add hyperlinks? (<a href="https://michellerafter.com/2011/05/18/8-essential-reasons-to-put-links-in-blog-posts/">https://michellerafter.com/2011/05/18/8-essential-reasons-to-put-links-in-blog-posts/</a>)</p> <p>Include at least two images</p> <p>How to Add Images (<a href="https://wordpress.com/support/classic-editor-guide/">https://wordpress.com/support/classic-editor-guide/</a>)</p> <p>How to give credit for images (<a href="https://wordpress.com/go/digital-marketing/sharing-is-caring-how-to-give-photo-credit-the-right-way/">https://wordpress.com/go/digital-marketing/sharing-is-caring-how-to-give-photo-credit-the-right-way/</a>)</p> <p>Consider the blog genre based on our class discussion</p>
<p><b>Blog Entry 2</b></p>	<p>Contract Grading Guidelines:</p> <p>Must be over 600 words</p> <p>Must include at least five hyperlinks</p> <p>Must include at least four images</p> <p>Must consider form and blog set up based on our class discussion</p>
<p><b>Blog Entry 3</b></p>	<p>Contract Grading Guidelines:</p> <p>Must be over 500 words</p> <p>Must include at least five hyperlinks</p> <p>Must include at least four images</p> <p>Must consider form and blog set up based on our class discussion</p>

**Table 10.5. Jessie’s Assessment Plan**

<p><b>Blog Entry 1</b></p>	<p>Instructions for Blog Entry 1 are followed. All requirements are met.</p>
<p><b>Blog Entry 2</b></p>	<p>Instructions for Blog Entry 2 are followed. All requirements are met.</p>
<p><b>Blog Entry 3</b></p>	<p>Instructions for Blog Entry 3 are followed. All requirements are met.</p>

<p><b>Incorporation of Multimodal Elements</b> (links, images, external sources, etc.)</p>	<p>Incorporation of multimodal elements is purposeful and adds visual interest and depth to the blog entr(y/ies).</p>
<p><b>Style/ Grammar/ Mechanics</b></p>	<p>Sentences are clear and varied in pattern, from simple to complex, with excellent use of punctuation. Strong use of grammar, spelling, syntax and punctuation.</p>

The grading practices shown here reflect the ways in which this series of assignments can be assessed differently, depending on instructor choice. We hope readers will notice how different grading philosophies can both facilitate a culturally-sustaining practice and encourage community in the online writing classrooms as is evident in the variety of topics students chose and their engagement in the topics we reflect on later. Success for this assignment sequence will look very different for everyone pending your students’ demographics and institutional context. We encourage instructors attempting to use this sequence to outline what they think success would look like for their students to cater to their specific contexts.

## REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

### JENNIFER’S REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

The inspiration for this combination of discussion boards and blogs comes from years of Jennifer’s own experimentation with a large-scale blogging project in her FYC classes. Through its development, the project has emphasized student choice regarding their blog topic and how this leads into a more formal research paper. In previous iterations, students had an open choice of the topic they selected, which was both fun and challenging, as some topics did not lend to the final project and analyzing a related discourse community as well as others. This specific version of the assignment allowed students a more structured and thoughtful process for picking a topic, which helped to avoid issues from previous iterations. Specifically, this version was more scaffolded to help students develop a thoughtful, personal topic.

The emphasis on community, heritage practices, and traditions also served to preemptively answer a recurring question from students in Jennifer’s past experience with this assignment: can I talk about myself? In this version of the assignment, students were led to a topic that naturally tied to their identity, they saw their identity as a valuable source and topic in academic writing, and they were given the opportunity to privilege this often-unseen part of themselves, while still



connecting to formal writing tasks and research. Previously, students would arrive at topics like this on their own, but in this version, it was abundantly clear to students that they could—and should—write about their lives and their families.

In previous versions of this assignment, instructor labor traditionally peaked around the time that students were selecting topics, which was typically managed through routine check-ins with students. This was not the case in this version. Instead, the labor seemed to peak when students were asked to consider more multimodal aspects in their blogging and needed assistance in understanding technology and the purpose of this kind of writing. In response, Jennifer typically adds more built-in resources for students in the assignments. This has resulted in a FAQ page on her Canvas site and list of applicable links and videos to help students navigate technology. In general, because the assignment so intentionally centered on heritage and communal practices, there were far fewer individual topic-related questions than before; this allowed for more time devoted to providing feedback on blog entries.

### **JESSIE REFLECTION ON PRACTICE**

In the early part of this chapter, we discussed how the discussion assignment in online courses can be fraught with issues, but that by creating more interactive prompts we can help alleviate some of the traditional challenges of discussions and encourage students to engage more. For example, requiring students to use multimodal elements or create a video screencast encourages them to be more creative than posting a text-based response to a discussion prompt. As noted above, we asked them to create a screencast as their response to Discussion 3. Jessie saw an increase in engagement firsthand in her courses because the students were learning something by reading each other's blog entries, they were personally interested in the content of their blogs, and they enjoyed the alternate way of presenting information in the discussion (screencast vs. text). In the three discussions, many students participated more than was required, which she assumed was due to the fact they were interested in each other's topics.

The design of this assignment facilitated a stacked, scaffolded learning, too. Students were building on the blog project in each week, in each discussion, and through each blog entry. Because of this stacked learning approach, the students were able to see the value of the project as a whole; they were able to see how it all worked together to create their final blog. Because the instructions for each blog were very clear and the requirements outlined, Jessie didn't have many questions on the assignment. The students knew what to do and what was required of them, which in turn made assessing the project a lot easier. Jessie didn't participate in the discussion forums, but she did read through them to ensure that the students were

understanding and completing the tasks appropriately. Because she read through all of the discussion responses each week, she became more familiar with the students' topics; the layered discussions also allowed Jessie to see the students' projects progress and develop, which made assessing their final blogs easier.

Additionally, we discussed earlier how examining a community tradition or family practice would aid in creating global awareness; that often we're writing for more diverse audiences and some audiences that are from other communities and heritage practices. Framing the idea of global awareness with St. Amant's (2020) article encouraged students to think more critically about audience in relation to the blogs they were viewing and the blogs they were creating. The influence of St. Amant's text and the heightened awareness of their reading audience showed in the students' work; they illustrated a stronger awareness of a global audience. Their blog entries provided contextualization for the community traditions or practices they were writing about. They introduced their topics, provided background information, and explored how the tradition or practice manifested in other countries/communities. Even the students who chose to write about very personal and specific family traditions were able to draw connections to other more known or popular traditions used in other communities.

This was Jessie's first time teaching this assignment, but it was not her first time using multimodal discussion posts and having her students compose in digital mediums. In reflecting on the assignment sequence after it was completed, Jessie was very excited by the quality of the student submissions and has continued to refine and use this assignment in her courses. The students really got into the assignment and were very creative with their topics (from *Elf on a Shelf*, to *The Christmas Pickle*, to the *Dia De Los Muertos*).

Because the students at Jessie's school tend to struggle with using technology and with access to technology, she was worried about the skill level, technical prowess, and available resources required to complete this assignment sequence (not all students have money for a computer or internet access at home). However, only four students out of the two sections had technical issues with properly submitting their blog URLs; this was easily remedied with a quick reiteration of guidance about how to publish a blog entry and make it publicly available.

As general guidance for the challenges that come with this assignment, Jessie advises readers to have some examples ready to share with students. Having the examples of mentor texts from one of Jennifer's previous iterations of this assignment really helped Jessie's students. Additionally, having a list of topics ready to share with students is valuable. Some of Jessie's students initially struggled to come up with a topic, so she encouraged them to consider something they were interested in learning more about (and that was not necessarily something that their family practiced). Lastly, readers who want to replicate this assignment should anticipate

a few technology challenges from the students. Creating videos and sharing the official WordPress tutorials will help cut down on technology woes from students.

## JOINT REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

We believe the above assignment is especially engaging and useful for diverse student populations across institutions. Jessie and Jennifer shared similar successes regarding their students' interests and engagement in the project. Both saw diverse and thoughtful topics from students and heard positive feedback from students on the ability to discuss and learn more about their community and heritage practices. Overall, students remained engaged and thoughtful throughout the series of assignments and, for Jennifer's course, this engagement carried through to the research paper.

However, the assignment was not completed without a few hiccups. Particularly, some of the students in both of our classes did not pick up on the fact that all three blog entries were supposed to be on the same community or heritage practice. Both of us had a handful of students who wrote on three different traditions or practices (one for each blog entry) instead. There also seemed to be some confusion in both of our classes about how to narrow their topic from Blog Entry 1 to Blog Entry 2; some simply wrote same thing in a more general way from Blog Entry 1 to Blog Entry 2 instead of narrowing focus and writing on something more detailed (on the same topic) in Blog Entry 2. In general, the process of narrowing scope is difficult for students, and we saw this assignment as a mostly effective means helping them, even though some more nuanced language in prompts might help them to delineate the different activities and purposes of these blogs more.

Additionally, we both had a few students that struggled with the blogging technology, WordPress, despite the tutorials that were offered. Each of us had two to three students that were not able to get their blogs posted and/or published and ended up having to submit their blog entries in an alternate format (a PDF or Word Doc.). While we found this challenging, we also learned that there is room for improvement in the tutorials; perhaps a short assignment or discussion where they practice publishing their blog earlier in the process would be useful and allow us as the instructors to step in and help prior to the full assignment being due.

Finally, we realize this series of assignments is only one step toward culturally sustaining practices in online learning environments. While we encouraged students to consider home and heritage practices while publishing for global audiences in broad and dynamic ways, it was difficult to get students to leave their perceptions of what was appropriate for school and, in turn, to truly explore the many topics at hand. This invitation to explore new ideas and genres beyond

the typical essay was not as clearly received by some as others. Additionally, we recognize that we need to pay more attention to home languages and non-dominant language practices; this is something that could be developed further in this thread of assignments in future iterations.

## CONCLUSION

There are many meaningful ways to do personal writing in an online course and many ways to raise awareness of nondominant perspectives and experiences and global audiences. As St.Amant (2020) says “Writing in greater global contexts can be complex. It involves understanding the rhetorical expectations of other cultures—and of groups within those cultures—to craft messages they can use to achieve an objective” (p. 158). While our students may not have a full grasp on this concept just yet, we feel this assignment sequence begins to raise awareness about audiences and global communities.

By allowing students to pick a meaningful topic and by scaffolding the work that students are doing, instructors can better engage students in their writing. Our better practice illustrates a way to build community, too, as this assignment sequence could be done earlier in a course to help students get to know one another and their community and familial practices and traditions. As we invite students from different backgrounds to participate, share their heritage practices, and acknowledge that writing is a global act, we continue to bring humanity to online learning and to support more relevant writing practices.

## MOVING BETTER PRACTICES ACROSS MODALITIES

- **In-Person, Real-Time Learning:** In practice, the discussion boards can become in-class discussions. If students have computers in front of them, we would suggest employing reflective writing and conversation to elicit understandings of blogging and for inventing topics. Additionally, blogs could be shared and discussed in person. Instructors could review and discuss the St.Amant article and additional global community resources, asking students to share blogs they found and discuss them in class.
- **Online, Real-Time Learning:** Similarly, discussions about the blog genre and readings could be had in a Zoom room using the chat function for writing-to-think moments. Additionally, blogs from both students and others could be shared and discussed in breakout rooms. Instructors could also use Google Docs to create shared understandings around readings (e.g., St.Amant & Rice, 2015) in synchronous class meetings or otherwise.

- **Hybrid Learning:** Hybrid learning could combine strategies from all of the above, depending on the balance of in-person and online instruction. We would suggest that discussions would still be held asynchronously in the learning management system, while analyzing blogs, discussions about audience, and discussion readings (e.g., St.Amant) could be done in face-to-face spaces.

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## APPENDIX A, CULTURALLY SUSTAINING BLOG PROJECT

This assignment design is based on the TILT model, which you can learn more about at <https://tilthighered.com>.

### PURPOSE

In this project, we are using blogs, a multimodal genre of writing, to investigate a community practice or family tradition that you are interested in learning about.

### SKILLS

The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course / in school / in this field / in professional

life beyond school:

- Understanding expectations in different writing genres.
- Delivering content in a variety of modalities.
- Synthesizing and evaluating sources and evidence to discuss a topic.
- Operationalizing personal experience and community connections in research.

## **KNOWLEDGE**

This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:

- How writing practices shift depending on genre and audience.
- The use of sources to support and explore lines of inquiry.

## **TASK**

1. You should read over the prompt and devise a plan.
2. Before writing, I suggest you do some preliminary research, collecting credible sources where authors are entering a conversation about a topic by citing/hyperlinking to other people that you can include your blog (see class resources for more information on finding credible sources/primary vs. secondary research).
3. As you draft your blog, you should consider how you can include 1) images, 2) hyperlinks, and 3) other multimedia elements.
4. You should also consider a strong title that will catch the reader's attention and organize your text in headers, subheadings, and so on that will aid in their understanding of your post.
5. Once you have a draft, you should revise, considering your audience and prompt.
6. Finally, you should edit your post for clarity and post your blog.

## **CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS:**

While a successful blog will meet the stated criteria in terms of word count and multimodal components, a good blog is much more than these criteria. Particularly, a successful blog works to engage and address a defined audience in your topic of choice through your tone, style/word choice, and use of multimodal elements. In general, blogs tend to be more informal pieces of writing than typical academic work. Excellent work in this genre will capture a tone that is appropriate for the topic and audience you are addressing and be thoughtful about organization and presentation of text, images, and hyperlinks.

## **APPENDIX B, DISCUSSION BOARDS**

This assignment design is based on the TILT model.

### **PURPOSE**

As a way to inform our blogging, we will use discussion boards throughout this project to workshop ideas and strategize our blog entries.

### **SKILLS**

The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course/in school/in this field/in professional life beyond school:

- Engage in pre-writing and collaborative writing practices.
- Provide constructive feedback to your classmates and peers.
- Vet sources and ideas.

### **KNOWLEDGE**

This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline: How writing practices shift depending on genre and audience.

### **TASK**

1. Read over the discussion board prompt.
2. Before writing, I suggest you do some preliminary research, collecting reliable sources that you can include your blog.
3. As you draft your blog, you should consider how you can include 1) images, 2) hyperlinks, and 3) other multimedia elements.
4. You should also consider a strong title that will catch the reader's attention and organize your text in headers, subheadings, and so on that will aid in their understanding of your post.
5. Once you have a draft, you should revise, considering your audience and prompt.
6. Finally, you should edit your post for clarity and post your blog.

### **CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS**

A successful discussion board interaction will meet the stated criteria in terms of word count and multimodal components; however, a successful discussion board post thoughtfully engages with your peers in a conversation by responding to the question prompts. Excellent work in discussion boards will thoughtfully respond to the questions prompted and engage with the peers in your class.