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## Inviting Entry-Level Composition Students to Interact with Their Instructor outside of the Classroom: Influences, Trends, and New Perspectives

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**INVITING ENTRY-LEVEL COMPOSITION STUDENTS TO INTERACT WITH  
THEIR INSTRUCTOR OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM:  
INFLUENCES, TRENDS, AND NEW PERSPECTIVES**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science, Education

By

Alyssa Knight

December 2020

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# **INVITING ENTRY-LEVEL COMPOSITION STUDENTS TO INTERACT WITH THEIR INSTRUCTOR OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM: INFLUENCES, TRENDS, AND NEW PERSPECTIVES**

English

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Master of Science

Alyssa Knight

## **ABSTRACT**

This study enters the discourse surrounding student-faculty interaction through an investigation of out-of-class interactions within an entry-level composition course. Empirical studies have found students and instructors in undergraduate courses often communicate infrequently, but most studies gathered quantitative data on interactions through student reporting. This study investigated influences on undergraduate students' desire to interact with the course instructor outside of the classroom through the lens of both the instructor and the students. This study addressed the potential differences between students' perceptions and the course instructor's observations and found that the instructors' demeanor, course content, and instructional delivery impact the number of interactions. Course-related interactions are most frequently initiated by students in entry-level composition courses, and intentional behaviors and curriculum choices can influence the number of interactions. This study corroborates past research that determined that student dispositions influence interactions outside of the classroom, but also asserts students' self-perceptions of independent success and academic autonomy influence their desire to initiate interactions outside of the classroom. As the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic likely influenced this study, implications for future research include the impact of course specific instructional methods and interaction modalities on student interaction preferences. Additionally, future studies may investigate how contemporary student values of independence can be utilized to reconstruct invitations to interaction and collaboration opportunities.

**KEYWORDS:** undergraduate, composition, approachability, COVID-19, independence, self-perceptions, student-faculty interaction, student, instructor, collaboration

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December 2020

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to Becca. Your first conversation with me inspired this study. I hope you have found your voice and created new relationships with your current professors.

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## INTRODUCTION

Student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom are traditionally understood to have positive correlational effects on undergraduate student satisfaction, motivation, and academic outcomes, but research has yet to discover how students manage and perceive out-of-class interactions in courses focused on writing. To some extent, researchers involved in the discourse of student-faculty interaction have identified the potential for writing assignments to affect contact frequency; however, a multitude of other factors explored in the literature review also impact the number of interactions that take place between students and instructors. This study will aim to determine what influences undergraduate student interaction with a course instructor, what effects students may perceive as a result of interactions, and what qualities students prefer in interactions outside of the classroom within an entry-level writing course.

In the past year, unprecedented changes and shifts to classroom environments and course delivery have significantly impacted student-instructor interaction in general. The response to COVID-19 has brought interaction into focus once again as educators everywhere debate the costs and benefits of conducting course activities in an online setting. Research is still unclear as to how the response to the pandemic will affect course delivery and student outcomes in the long term, but a relevant distinction for this study exists in how interaction outside of a “typical” classroom setting might support students who do not have regular synchronous interaction with the instructor. Those interactions outside of the normal course environment may still produce positive results for students even though interaction outside of the classroom now often takes place in a virtual setting.

While email communication was initially a primary focus for the study, other modes of synchronous and asynchronous virtual interaction were necessitated by the shifts to the classroom environment. Email communication, while supportive, lacks the potential benefits provided by body language, facial expression, and vocal inflections. Despite this, many students prefer to use emails to interact with their professors outside of the classroom, because emails provide a convenient means to request additional support. With part-time and full-time jobs and heavy course loads, as well as the added influence of social distancing recommendations, undergraduate students may now utilize email communication more frequently to extend the classroom environment and seek individualized instruction from the instructor.

Drawing upon previous empirical research, this study hypothesizes that out-of-class contact in a composition course can positively influence students' perceptions of success in the course as well as perceptions of the instructor, and also that instrumental, or course-related, dialogues between students and instructors in a writing course are among the most common. This study builds from practices offered by past empirical research to encourage interaction outside of the classroom but presents the course environment as well as the instructor's behaviors as critical influences on the frequency and perceived need for out-of-class interactions. The influence of the writing classroom and the structure of the course cannot be ignored; thus, this study posits in an entry-level writing classroom, students will perceive frequent interaction outside of classroom as beneficial to their development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Decades of research in higher education laud the benefits of student-faculty interaction beyond classroom spaces, but no researcher seems able to ascertain a direct causal relationship between interaction levels and student outcomes. Early undergraduate research assessing the impact of interaction on student academic outcomes suggests partial correlations between interactions outside of the classroom and achievement (e.g., Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). Chickering and Gamson (1987) even heralded student-faculty interaction as “the most important factor in student motivation and involvement” in their seminal publication *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (p. 3).

Early researchers found correlations between the frequency of communication and students’ motivation, as well as students’ satisfaction with faculty (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hibel, 1978; Wilson, Wood, & Gaff, 1974; Wilson & Wood, 1972). Wilson and Wood (1972) noted students with higher levels of out-of-class contact were more likely to report significant academic gains and be more satisfied with their experience in higher education, and Astin (1993) reported positive correlations existing between student-faculty interaction and “every academic attainment outcome,” including GPA and degree completion (p. 383). With early empirical research asserting positive connections between student-instructor communication and student outcomes, researchers have continued to define and characterize the relationship; however, assessing the effects of interaction proves difficult given the diverse variables of students and instructors.

Influenced by student characteristics and dispositions, collegiate achievement and success could never be directly attributed to higher levels of interaction with faculty, but student-faculty

interaction was noted to present more nuanced positive effects on college students. Early researchers found positive correlations between the frequency of communication and students' motivation, as well as students' satisfaction with faculty (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella et al., 1978; Wilson et al., 1974; Wilson & Wood, 1972). While higher levels of student satisfaction and motivation are potential benefits, this does not inherently confirm interactions outside of the classroom as a major influence on student success (e.g., Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1978; Trolian, Jach, Hanson, & Pascarella, 2016). The potential benefits of student-faculty interaction give credence to the belief out-of-class communication correlates positively with students' academic success, and also lends weight to the discussion that the frequency of student-faculty contact beyond the classroom is one of many variables influencing student academic outcomes.

### **A Causality Dilemma in the Discourse**

Two early longitudinal studies controlled student pre-enrollment characteristics to investigate a possible causal relationship between student achievement and student faculty out-of-class communication (e.g., Pascarella et al., 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). The findings appeared inconclusive as significant indicators of causality did not appear, but Pascarella, Terenzini, and Hibel (1978) determined clear associations between the frequency of course-related and career-oriented “informal interactions” and academic performance as they noted “students with frequent interactions... tended to perform academically better than predicted from their pre-enrollment characteristics” (p. 460). Researchers noted the association between frequent interaction with instructors and positive academic outcomes throughout the early literature, but never confirmed causality between higher interaction levels and undergraduate students' success in college. Many of these early studies presented data gathered through voluntary surveys from

student and faculty, but, too many variables, including students and faculty themselves, dissuaded researchers from true causal interpretations of results in past longitudinal studies.

Early researchers found students' correspondence levels were influenced by instructor approachability and availability, classroom practice and procedure, student attitudes and perceptions, even academic performance and aptitude (e.g., Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Snow, 1973; Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavvry, 1975; Wilson et al., 1974). Problematically, those were also variables of the college experience noted to impact achievement (e.g., Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella et al., 1978;). Kuh and Hu (2001) noted "students who are better prepared academically and who devoted more time to their studies interacted more frequently with faculty members," and "students who interacted more frequently were more likely to be satisfied and reported higher gains" (p. 327). More contemporary research continued to indicate positive correlations but found student outcomes could not be simply attributed to student-faculty contact.

### **Poor and Infrequent Interactions**

Low quantities of out-of-class interactions are consistently observed over decades of research and have been attributed to both student and faculty dispositions (e.g., Boyer, 1987; Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Cox, Lutovsky Quaye, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2010; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Romsa, Bremer, & Lewis, 2017; Snow, 1973; Wilson et al., 1975;). Among the first early researchers who attempted to identify faculty practices that increase student-faculty contact, Snow (1973) determined faculty members who exhibited an "interactionist style" demonstrated higher-levels of contact with students beyond the classroom (p. 494). Indicators of an

interactionist style included faculty members' ability to focus on issues directly affecting students' growth and their willingness to discuss a broader range of issues with students, including non-course-related matters (Snow, 1973, p. 494). Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavvry (1975) added to this discussion in concluding that faculty members who appeared available both in attitude and approach garnered higher levels of communication with students. Both early and contemporary empirical research also indicated the physical availability of the instructor influences the frequency of out-of-class communication (e.g., Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Cox et al., 2010; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Snow, 1973; Wilson et al., 1974). In the current state of schools, where educators must remain physically distant from their students, physical availability may take on a new definition. With the implementation of new means for interacting synchronously –through video conferencing software- physical availability may be a less relevant influence than the amount of time an instructor spends *being* available to students with the intention of interacting.

While the number of interactions should not be viewed as a direct cause of student satisfaction, there is indication that the relative quantity of interactions can be attributed to the behavior of the faculty. Low communication levels between students and faculty were historically attributed to the behaviors and orientation of the faculty, and often research oriented faculty exhibited infrequent student contact outside of class and lower-levels of student satisfaction (e.g., Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987). As past research also denoted instructor attitudes and treatment of students during conversation influenced student satisfaction, Boyer (1987) found nearly half of the undergraduate students surveyed felt they were “treated like numbers in a book” (p. 54). The researchers asserted these perceptions should not be readily applied to every university, but this finding does represent a pessimistic reality of the many students who feel

their professors and institutions do not take personal interest in their individual academic outcomes. This lack of personal interest could be attributed to the research responsibilities of the faculty but also the faculty's direct and indirect behaviors towards students (e.g., Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987). More contemporary research from Cox, Lutosky Quaye, McIntosh, Reason, and Terenzini (2010) indicated that part-time faculty saw less interactions from undergraduate students, and they reasoned "indeed, part-time faculty interact less frequently with students, but they do so precisely because they are *part-time* employees" (p. 785). The amount of time an instructor spent being available to students as well as their treatment of individual students appeared to play an equal role in the quantity and frequency of interaction with students in a given semester.

### **Students' Perceptions of Interactions**

Early research shaped the faculty side of the interaction equation, but as Cox et al. (2010) asserted in their more recent study "faculty behaviors are not the biggest predictors of their likelihood to engage students outside of class... it may be that the student side of the faculty-student interaction equation is actually the driving force" (p. 786); students' dispositions maintain a significant role in out-of-class communications. As noted above, early studies controlled student pre-enrollment characteristics in an attempt to determine causality between frequent student-faculty out-of-class communication and positive student outcomes (e.g., Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977), but in controlling student characteristics, researchers reinforce the idea that students themselves influence the frequency of out-of-class dialogue. Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavvry (1975) claimed a "major barrier to interaction with faculty" was students' "inability or unwillingness" to interact with teachers, and students deemed



“low-interactor[s]” demonstrated less accountability for their education (p. 157). Pascarella and Terenzini’s subsequent research established that “students who interact with faculty frequently beyond the classroom tend to do so because they are performing well” (1977, p. 189). Kuh and Hu (2001) confirmed those earlier findings as they also found academically motivated students were significantly more likely to interact with instructors outside of the classroom. These correlations exemplify the dilemma instructors face; students who need the most assistance may communicate the least with their instructors.

Students seem to also be influenced by their perceptions, or lack thereof, of potential benefits of interacting with professors. One could be safe in surmising students often initiate conversations with instructors out of necessity, given quantitative research indicating students most often correspond with faculty for instrumental reasons such as clarification of coursework or seeking assistance with an assignment (e.g., Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Cox et al., 2010; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1978). Cotten and Wilson (2006) found, however, freshman and sophomore students in particular interacted with faculty less frequently because they are either “unaware of the potential benefits” or they “fail to recognize a need to [interact with faculty]” (p. 497). Given that Cotten and Wilson concluded interactions for instrumental reasons occur most frequently, reason would denote freshman and sophomores may often be uninformed or ignorant of the assistance faculty can provide in academic matters. Students may also be concerned with the increased responsibility and accountability placed upon them through direct contact with faculty (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). A potential workload increase is not the most disheartening barrier for students; Cotten and Wilson (2006) reported students “sometimes feel intimidated by faculty” (p. 501). This intimidation could be born from the innate authority instructors hold over

their students as the determiners of their success in the course, but also in instructors' higher levels of competence in the subject matter of study.

Of additional note is the lack of research to provide measures for assessing the relative quality of interactions with students or further, to determine if the quality of communication has a significant correlation to student outcomes. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) contended that "meaningful interactions" were "essential to high-quality learning experiences" (p. 207). In this assertion, Kuh et al. (2005) noted conversations which facilitated students' individual and academic growth at the university were the most influential for undergraduate students. There is less clarity, however, in how students perceive those course-related interactions which facilitate their development as a student and learner.

Because researchers like Trolan, Jach, Hanson, & Pascarella (2016) noted "the quality of students' [out-of-class] interactions with faculty may be most influential," there is a need to assess the quality of interaction between students and faculty, and, further, to assess what students perceive within those interactions as truly beneficial (p. 822). The potential effects on students much later in their academic careers were confirmed by researchers (e.g., Astin, 1993; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977), but the trouble becomes identifying measures for assessing the quality of dialogues between students and faculty. In their research attempting to determine the influence of student-faculty contact on students' academic motivation, Trolan et al. (2016) utilized a quality measure for student-faculty contact which included scales for faculty interest in personal growth, academic growth, career goals, close relationships, and student satisfaction with the interaction. These measures were useful to determine the quality of contact and presented the most significant correlations to student motivation; however, these researchers themselves determined what constituted quality. The

constitution of “quality” or “meaningful” interactions can vary between students and faculty; that dilemma requires investigation of what undergraduate students perceive as desirable traits of interactions with instructors.

### **Contemporary Research on Interactions**

Some of the most recent trends identified in student-faculty interaction, result from Romsa, Bremer, and Lewis’ evaluation of NSSE data in 2017. Problematically, the results of their study arose from data collected on “millennial” students “from a randomly selected pool of first-year students enrolled in 2009” (Romsa et al., 2017, p. 88). Their research, though more contemporary than past interaction studies, cannot be presumed to apply readily to the current generation of first-year college students. Romsa et al. (2017) found the frequency of communication between millennial college students and their instructors produced negligible effects on student retention and satisfaction, which appeared to refute previous research; however, Romsa et al. (2017) measured the “amount of students’ course-related interactions and out-of-class interactions with faculty” (p. 89). This again gives credence to the importance of the “quality” of conversations with faculty, as significant statistical correlations between the frequency of out-of-class contact and undergraduate student outcomes are few and far between.

The “Gen-Z” students who participated in this current study might share many traits with the past “millennial” or “Gen-Y” students in Romsa, Bremer, and Lewis’ study. A shared trait between these two generations might be the “preference for instant feedback from faculty with grades, emails, and other feedback or communications” (Romsa et al., 2017, p. 92); however, Generation Z students do not have educational experiences identical to the preceding generation. The oldest millennials could have earned their high school and college degrees with very little

technological integration within their courses, whereas students of Generation Z are unlikely to find a course that does not involve technology within the curriculum. Generation Z students have moved through education in a time when technology became readily used within the classroom (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). These generational differences provide an opportunity to modernize the discourse on student-instructor interaction for this new generation of students –particularly where interaction takes place within a digital sphere.

For this discussion, email communication should be noted as a popular, modern means of interacting with professors, and researchers found this mode of interaction primarily used for instrumental reasons as well (Sheer & Fung, 2007). Romsa, Bremer, and Lewis (2017) suggested that newer generations of students, with the influence of technology ever present in their lives, may well seek out electronic communications with faculty as a means for interacting outside of the classroom more often than other modalities. Through email, students can communicate with instructors in a comfortable environment, one where they might not perceive as many “costs” as in interacting (e.g., Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Kuh et al., 2005). While empirical evidence supports the value of email, beyond face-to-face conversations, Sheer and Fung’s research also indicated that students still prefer “face-to-face” interactions (Sheer & Fung, 2007, p. 10). Additionally, Seemiller and Grace (2016) noted Generation Z “view emails... as a communication method that takes too much time between responses” and “associate e-mail with adults” (“Whether You Like It...”). Assessing the preference and usage of email communication among contemporary college students may help clarify this discrepancy between the views of email interaction presented in the research of Romsa et al. and Seemiller and Grace.

Previous research on interactions can be clarified here with the terms “synchronous” and “asynchronous” interaction. In past studies, students appeared to prefer synchronous interactions

where they communicated with the instructor in real time. Even as the instructor presented email as an asynchronous modality for students, an assumption for this study was that face-to-face interaction in shared physical spaces would be available as a primary means for communicating with students. More recent developments in education –following the global outbreak of COVID-19— serve as a reminder that face-to-face need not always occur in a shared physical space. Synchronous interactions can now take place on a variety of platforms, with new tools and software regularly developed and improved for instructional use. The popularity and now common use of synchronous, video-conferencing tools provide an additional avenue to explore more contemporary trends in interactions outside of the classroom.

## **METHODS**

### **Primary Research Interest**

This study investigates out-of-class interaction trends in two entry-level composition courses. An initial review of literature and empirical research revealed positive correlations between interaction levels and student achievement measures, but low levels of student-instructor communication outside of the classroom often occur in undergraduate courses. Additionally, while the literature review focused on student-instructor interaction research from large, varied populations of undergraduate students, this research focuses upon a specific undergraduate course. Some of the previous research in student-instructor interaction indicated that writing assignments could affect interaction outside of the classroom, so this study will attempt to determine if interaction preferences and effects vary in a writing-focused course. The value of communication outside of the classroom may affect the data gathered; however, this research could elucidate interaction trends specific to entry-level composition courses and contemporary undergraduate students. The study investigated the following primary research questions with consideration of the various influences on student teacher interaction:

- What factors influence entry-level college composition students' proclivity to engage in dialogues with the course instructor outside of the classroom?
- What, if any, differences exist between students' perceptions of interactions and the observations of the course instructor?

### **Sub-Question Development**

Despite the small scale of the study, the researcher –myself, the primary study contact and course instructor— sought a more well-rounded understanding of contemporary

undergraduate interaction behaviors was sought through the development of several sub-questions. The sub-questions attempt to differentiate between the variable traits of, influences on, and effects of student-instructor interaction outside of the classroom. The literature review revealed general trends across undergraduate student populations, but, the modality preferences, frequency of interactions, and subject matters of discussion, varied between course type and student experience. Given the small scale and specific scope of the study, the following sub-questions addressed the modality, frequency, and subject matter of out-of-class interactions.

- How does the recorded number of interactions differ from the number of interactions reported by the student?
- What form of communication do students use most?
- What do students discuss with the instructor most often?

These questions might reveal more contemporary interaction trends in entry-level writing courses. Differences between students' perceptions and actual behavior may appear through the quantitative and qualitative data collection designed for the previous sub-questions.

While the impact of interactions on students has a long history in empirical studies, the discourse surrounding student-faculty contact often neglected participants' perceptions of interaction quality. This study attempts to address previous gaps noted in the literature concerned with the quality of student-faculty interaction. Three additional sub-questions addressed students' perceptions of the interaction quality, teacher influence, and impact of interactions outside of the classroom:

- What do students seek and expect from out-of-class interactions?
- What, if any, teacher behaviors do students find to influence their desire to interact?
- What influences students' perceptions of success and enjoyment in the course?

These questions more specifically address students' views to cultivate a more modern and nuanced understanding of interaction quality. Participants' perceptions of interaction quality may reveal new concerns for professional development as well as instructor behavior.

## **Participants and Study Context**

Conducted at a public post-secondary institution in the Midwest, this study examined a small sample population of undergraduate, entry-level, writing students and received IRB approval (IRB-FY2020-130) on November 3, 2019. Additional information on this study's approval is provided in Appendix A. Participants were students taught by the same course instructor—myself, the primary study contact and researcher—in either a fall or spring section of English 110 (Writing I). In these semesters, students needed to meet one of two qualifications to enroll in Writing I: an ACT score on the English section of 18 or higher, or a passing grade in English 100 (Introduction to College Composition).

Although nearly 95% of the students were either in their freshman or sophomore year of college, participants ranged in collegiate experience; many had either taken dual-credit course or were in their second year of study at the university. Despite the variety in student experience in the entry-level writing courses, the researcher sought participation from all students enrolled in the courses in both fall and spring semesters. In total, there were 38 students across two semesters, and 30 students consented to participate in the study: 13 from the fall semester and 17 from the spring semester. Of these 30 participants, 1 was a junior, 8 were sophomores, and 21 were freshman at the university.

The English 110 courses described in this study were originally scheduled three times a week, and the instructor held office hours directly after the scheduled class meetings. In the fall



semester, data collection began after IRB approval for the study in early November. Data for the fall included roughly six weeks of field notes and classroom observations as well as the participants' survey responses on the survey developed for this study. In the second semester of data collection, field notes and classroom observations began with the start of the semester.

The two primary strategies employed both semesters to encourage interaction outside of the classroom were described in Joe Cuseo's recent publication "Student-Faculty Engagement" from the journal *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. Cuseo suggested (2018) instructors should "call attention in class to [availability]" and "encourage students to take advantage of [office hours]" (p. 89). The instructor provided her office location, available hours, and email address in the first class meeting; this information was reiterated verbally at least once a week. The physical location of office hours was not a private space; multiple instructors shared the same office. While students were in class, the instructor commonly used cue statements such as "email me if you have questions or concerns," and "come visit me during my office hours if you need help." Blackboard Announcements and class emails almost always included language and statements in a similar vein:

- as always, feel free to email me if you have any questions or concerns.
- if you need more assistance, I am happy to help.
- if you have any issues viewing the document or have any questions about my feedback, please send me an email.

The students could locate the instructor's availability and email address throughout both semesters via the course Blackboard site. If the instructor made any changes to her availability, an in-class and Blackboard announcement alerted students of the update. The most consistent

and intentional behavior used to motivate students to interact with the instructor outside of class was regular invitations to interact outside of the classroom.

Cuseo (2018) also recommended “assigning an office visit or personal conference” to increase student-faculty engagement outside of the classroom (p. 89). Although Cuseo may have referenced more intentional instructor choice in arranging meetings with students, the use of this strategy was unavoidable in the context of the courses studied. One-to-one conferences were a curriculum requirement set by the composition program to promote best practice among the graduate assistants who taught English 110; all participants in this study were required to attend three writing one-to-one conferences as part of their English 110 coursework. The writing conferences could influence the participants’ responses to the survey; however, the required writing conferences did not influence the recorded number of interactions. Field notes only accounted for the out-of-class interactions initiated by students; interactions initiated -or scheduled- by the instructor were not included in field notes. Scheduling meetings with students was not a strategy chosen for this study, but rather one required by the department curriculum; however, the primary researcher considered the results with the implementation of this strategy in mind.

### **Accounting for the Effects of the Shift in Course Delivery**

While Fall 2019 participants experienced a “typical” semester-long, seated course held on campus, university wide action taken to slow the community spread of the COVID-19 pandemic required significant changes to Spring 2020 participants’ course experience. Spring break in 2020 began early, with classes canceled on the Friday before the scheduled break. The university extended the scheduled spring break for one week to provide instructors with additional time to

modify and prepare their courses for online delivery. Per university mandate, participants were no longer allowed or expected to attend courses on campus after the extended break. The researcher could not ignore the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on this study, as interactions outside of the classroom became limited to an online format. With all coursework and interaction moved to online delivery, the research saw the opportunity to investigate additional influences on interaction, particularly when concerned with the variances between a seated course and a quickly developed online course.

After thorough consideration of the changes to course delivery and consultation with the principal investigators, the data collected in Spring 2020 was further classified by timeframe: before the shift online and after the shift online. The more detailed classification did not require any modification to the primary research questions. Rather, the intended changes to data collection and study methods merely reflect more specificity in the sub-questions designed to characterize trends in out-of-class interactions and student course experience. Given the uncertainty of participation in this study after such a significant shift to the course environment, The researcher –the acting course instructor— contacted Spring 2020 participants and clarified the slight modifications to the study (Appendix C-1). The primary concern was the collection of survey data. In the fall semester, this data was collected via a survey distributed in-class by the graduate faculty member who advised and guided this study, the Principal Investigator and Thesis Committee Chair. Given social distancing requirements and the shift in the course environment, the spring semester survey could not be conducted in the same manner. All 17 original participants in the spring semester consented to continue participating, and access to the survey was sent to participants via email by the Principal Investigator (Appendix C-2).

## Data Collection

Across both semesters of data collection, the study utilized a mixed methods design. Like the embedded mixed method study design John W. Creswell (2012) described, quantitative data collection and qualitative data collection took place in tandem so the analysis would be further extended and validated by both types of data sets. The small scale of the study was particularly conducive to a qualitative analysis of participants' survey responses, but quantitative data collection provided a means to examine overarching trends in the number of interactions, the reasons for interacting, and the methods used to interact. Quantifying the thematic tendencies that arose in student-instructor interactions outside of the classroom produced a more objective representation of participants' preferences, but qualitative analysis of participants' survey responses provided a means to investigate participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experience. A graphic representation of the study design, including the thematic coding process used to quantify field notes and email data for quantitative analysis, appears in Figure 1.

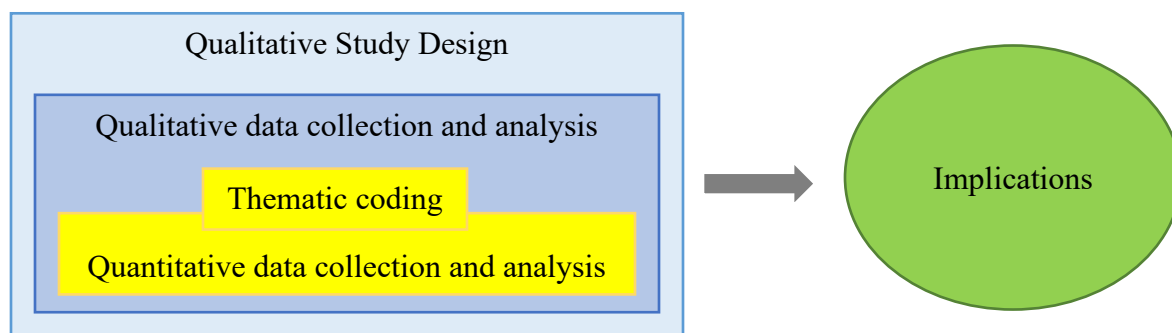


Figure 1. Graphic presentation of current study design adapted from John Creswell's "embedded study design"

**Instructor field notes.** This primary qualitative data set provided a means to gather quantifiable thematic data from interactions with participants outside of the classroom

environment. The instructor wrote a short reflection after each interaction with a participant to ensure accurate tracking of the number of interactions as well as the participant concerns which spurred those interactions for later quantitative analysis. The second semester of data collected was impacted by significant changes to the course and typical interaction environments, but field notes shifted to account for interactions in a virtual space. Additionally, given the course requirements of in-person conferences, field notes maintained a more accurate record of when students initiated contact, rather than simply when contact occurred. The coding system provided in Table 1 denotes the thematic coding system applied to assess the modality of in-person interactions as recorded through field notes.

Table 1. Modality coding and qualitative descriptions for interaction type.

Code Given	Description
Before Class	Student initiated interaction prior to start of seated class meeting.
After Class	Student initiated interaction after the conclusion of seated class.
Office Conference	Student attended an individualized meeting with the instructor.
Google Hangout (SP 20)	Student attended an individual meeting via Google Hangouts.
Open Classroom (SP 20)	Student attended a scheduled, group video conference.
Text (SP 20)	Student texted the phone number provided by the instructor.

In the first semester of this study, email was the only mode for participants to contact the instructor in an asynchronous manner outside of the classroom. Spring 2020 participants had

additional forms of communication; the instructor offered text messaging as a supplement to email communication in the second semester of the study. These potential data sets are disseminated in the results, and the subject and number of texts are accounted for within field notes as thematic participant observations.

**Email collection.** Maintained only for coding, qualitative email data underwent a thematic coding and quantification process like the field note data. When students initiated email contact, the instructor coded the subject matter of the email for later dissemination, utilizing the codes provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Subject matter coding and qualitative descriptions for interactions.

Code Given	Description
Attendance	Student reported missing a class and/or clarified their absenteeism.
Assignment Concern	Student asked a clarifying question about assignment requirements.
Seeking Feedback	Student sought the instructor's opinion about their written work.
Technology	Student reported Blackboard issues or inquired about technology.
Meeting Scheduling	Student requested an individualized meeting with the instructor.
Special Topics	Student discussed matters un-related to the ENG 110 course.
Grades	Student inquired about an assignment grade or course grade.

This primary qualitative data set correlates to past literature where email appeared as a common mode of interaction outside of the classroom, and this data set may help address contemporary trends in student-instructor interaction preferences. The subject matter codes additionally provided a means to quickly quantify thematic data from field notes on participants'

interaction; thus, the same subject matter coding system quantified email subject matters as well as the subject matters of interactions accounted for in field notes

**Participant surveys.** The original guided survey questions are presented in Table 3; these were the questions answered by consenting participants during the first data collection period.

Table 3. Original survey questions and answer types offered to participants in Fall 2019.

Questions	Answer Type
Q1. How many times did you communicate with the instructor outside of the classroom?	Numeric range offered: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+
Q2. Rate your level of engagement in the classroom and in the course.	Numeric range offered: 1-5; where “Totally Disengaged” = 1 and “Highly Engaged” = 5.
Q3. Did you enjoy this course? Why or why not?	Participants responded in a short answer form
Q4. Did you feel successful in the course? Why or why not?	Participants responded in a short answer form
Q5. What form[s] of communication did you use most often to communicate with the instructor?	Multiple options offered: Email, Office Conferences, Before Class, After Class
Q6. How often did you communicate with the instructor in the actual classroom?	Multiple options offered: Almost every class, At least once a week, Maybe once a month, never
Q7. Did you find the instructor approachable? Why or why not?	Participants responded in a short answer form

Aiming to validate the coding system developed to analyze subject matter and course environment themes, the researcher designed the guided survey questions so participants would self-report quantitative data on the frequency, subject matter, and mode of interactions outside of

the classroom. The researcher also designed the survey to collect further qualitative data to investigate the study's sub-questions, namely those concerned with the student perceptions of out-of-class interactions, the instructor's behavior, and the course environment. The short answers participants provided in response to survey questions made up the data set intended for qualitative analysis.

The original survey distinguished two variable question sets. Participants had to self-select a question set based on their personal interaction tendencies and would only answer one set or the other, but not both. In part, these questions aimed to further clarify student motivations for and perceptions of interactions outside of the classroom. The first question set required participants to identify as someone who communicated with the instructor outside of the classroom. If participants did self-identify, they were then prompted to answer the questions presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Self-directed survey questions and response types for students who did self-report interacting outside of the classroom

Questions	Answer Type
1. What prompted or encouraged you to communicate with the instructor?	Participants responded in a short answer form
2. What do you remember speaking with the instructor about?	Participants responded in a short answer form
3. What conversation topics were the most beneficial? Why?	Participants responded in a short answer form

Based on low quantities of participants initiating interaction outside of class interaction and course requirements, as well as corresponding evidence in the literature denoting a high possibility for negligent levels of interaction outside of the classroom, the survey needed to



provide an avenue for low-interacting participants to self-report motivations and perceptions of interactions. The short response questions displayed in Table 5 address the experiences of low- or non-interacting students. The questions sought additional data from those participants who did not interact frequently; however, the course environment and course requirements likely impacted the results from survey responses as students attended three conferences with the instructor. The instructor encouraged participants to omit the required course work from their survey responses. The data from the questions in Table 5, helped to further clarify the relationship between student dispositions, instructor behavior, and the number of interactions.

Table 5. Self-directed survey questions and response types for students who did not self-report interaction outside of the classroom

Questions	Answer Type
1. What prevented or discouraged you from communicating with the instructor?	Participants responded in a short answer form
2. What topics of conversation might have benefitted you?	Participants responded in a short answer form
3. How could the instructor better encourage communication outside of the classroom?	Participants responded in a short answer form

Participants in the Spring 2020 semester received a modified survey that considered the changes in the course delivery and the timeframe of interactions. The changes to the guided survey questions are represented in Table 6. The researcher segmented only the guided survey questions with the phrases “Before spring break” and “After spring break” to maintain consistency between the fall and spring semesters’ survey data. Where relevant, the modified answer options offered to participants reflect the changes to the delivery and instructional format.

Table 6. Modifications to survey questions and response types for Spring 2020.

Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Answer Type
Q1. How many times did you communicate with the instructor outside of the classroom?	Q1a. Before spring break, how many times did you communicate with the instructor outside of the classroom?	Numeric range offered: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+
	Q1b. After spring break, how many times did you communicate with the instructor outside of the classroom?	
Q2. Rate your level of engagement in the classroom and in the course.	Q2a. Rate your level of engagement in the classroom and in the course prior to spring break.	Numeric range offered: 1-5; where “Totally Disengaged” = 1 and “Highly Engaged” = 5.
	Q2b. Rate your level of engagement in the classroom and in the course post spring break.	
Q5. What form[s] of communication did you use most often to communicate with the instructor?	Q5a. Before spring break, what form[s] of communication did you use to communicate with the instructor?	Options offered: Email, Office Conferences, Before Class, After Class
	Q5b. After spring break, what form[s] of communication did you use to communicate with the instructor?	Options offered: Email, Text, Blackboard Collaborate, Google Hangouts
Q6. How often did you communicate with the instructor in the actual classroom?	Q6a. Before spring break, how often did you speak with the instructor within the actual classroom?	Options offered: Almost every class, At least once a week, Maybe once a month, never
	Q6b. After spring break, how often did you communicate with the instructor virtually?	

The Principal Investigator and the Co-Principal investigator reviewed the more specific answers and questions in Table 6 to ensure the survey adhered to the intent and goals originally approved by the IRB. Any potential variances caused by the additional options offered to Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 participants should not interfere with the significance of the trends discussed in the results and analysis. In fact, potential variances may help clarify the extent to which the course environment influenced participants' preferences for out-of-class interaction. The Principal Investigator distributed the anonymous surveys to consenting participants at the end of the fall data collection period. The distribution by the Principal Investigator helped to ensure no participants felt coerced into completing the survey by the instructor's inherent participation in the research and data collection of this study. Participants in both semesters understood that their responses to the survey were anonymous and in no way tied to their required course work or potential course grades.

Participants who originally consented to participate in the Spring 2020 semester received a request to re-verify their voluntary participation by completing the survey on April 24th, 2020 (Appendix C-1). The Principal Investigator sent the link to access the survey via email on April 27th, 2020 to participants who consented (Appendix C-2). The survey was open for responses from April 27, 2020 until May 18, 2020.

**Thematic coding and triangulation.** In the first semester of data collection, the researcher used an open coding system to assess trends in participant preferences for interactions outside of the classroom. Themes in both topic and situational context from participant emails and instructor field notes on out-of-class interactions shaped the coding system applied to spring semester interactions. The thematic codes then became a quantified data set for analyzing trends in the subject matter preferences and situational motivations for student-instructor interactions

outside of the classroom. Thematic coding of individual participants' interactions extended and contextualized the quantitative data collected via the survey, because the quantified codes served as a record of interactions initiated by the participant, rather than all interactions outside of the classroom.

The differences in course environment and interaction modality between the spring and fall semester required the separation of quantitative data sets between participant groups. Spring semester participants provided interaction data more specific to the semester schedule, but quantitative data was further complicated by the absence of synchronous, in person meetings and the addition of supplemental modes of virtual interaction. The survey provided additional qualitative data through short answer questions. Despite the changes to the course environment, the researcher chose to maintain the exact wording of the qualitative survey questions across semesters to obtain a larger sample of participant responses. A larger sample ensured more accurate reporting of thematic trends in participants' perceptions and reflections. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data provided an avenue to better explore the differences between participants' perceptions and actual interaction trends and preferences.

## **RESULTS**

To consider only the most relevant data and develop implications which extend the discourse on student-instructor interactions, the responses to two specific survey items were omitted from the results section. The responses to the survey item “How often did you communicate with the instructor in the actual classroom?” and “Rate your level of engagement with the course” did not produce any significant trends that could be correlated to interaction outside of the classroom. The researcher designed the survey items to connect classroom behavior to interaction quantity, but the anonymity of the survey and the discrepancies noted in participants’ reporting of interaction quantity remove the viable significance of thematic trends in these responses. As the researcher did not utilize that data to distinguish any trends in participant behavior, there should be no impact on the implications developed from the results of this study.

### **A Shifting Course Environment During the Study**

The spring semester began much like the fall semester, but out-of-class interaction was influenced by unprecedented course environment changes. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in America and the resulting action taken to combat the rising infection rate in mid-March forced all course activities and interactions to shift to a virtual environment. The instructor made an initial announcement detailing changes to our class via Blackboard and a mass email. The written content of the original Blackboard Announcement and email is included in Appendix B to provide clarity for the context of the Spring 2020 data collection period.

The composition program did not recommend instructors disclose their personal phone numbers to students, and initially, the instructor only provided students with the number for a

shared office phone. The shared office phone was not available given the building closures on campus that semester, and –being a landline— was not capable of receiving text messages. Most students already used email regularly to contact the instructor outside of class, and the shared office phone was never utilized for contact. After the composition program announced the overall shift to online coursework in Spring 2020, the instructor reevaluated how students could and would interact. The shortcomings of the shared office phone and the changes to campus ensured this initially offered mode of interaction was ineffective -not to mention simply unavailable.

As changes to the course environment were planned, the instructor wondered if students might not feel as comfortable using email to ask a quick question, so she chose to create and use a secondary cell phone number through the Google Voice app. The app forwarded any received text messages to both her personal number and email address; phone calls were forwarded during working hours (Monday through Friday, 7:00am to 5:00pm). Students had the option to leave voicemails if the instructor could not answer their phone call, and voicemails were also forwarded to my personal phone line during my working hours. The Google Voice app and all its features allowed the instructor to provide her students with a phone number they could text or call at any time, but also helped her protect her personal privacy. The instructor hoped the addition of a text-capable, phone number would provide students with a fast, familiar, and informal medium for contacting her –a means of interacting virtually more akin to quick conversations before and after class.

Subsequent emails and announcements listed both my email address and that phone number for students. As changes to students' living situations and work schedules created access and scheduling issues, students were not required to attend synchronous online meetings after the

course format modifications. Instead, the instructor gave students the option to attend “Open Classroom” meetings via the Blackboard video conferencing tool Collaborate Ultra. The instructor conducted the “Open Classroom” as a synchronous, virtual meeting session during the original class meeting times. These meetings primarily included direct instruction on upcoming coursework, but students could also ask clarifying questions, request assistance on specific coursework, or simply interact with their peers; participation varied from week to week. The instructor held office hours at the same original times and by appointment. For individual meetings, the instructor offered students a choice in modality: phone call, Collaborate Ultra, or Google Hangouts. Students received an announcement each week with the “Open Classroom” plans and upcoming course work deadlines, as well as availability and contact information reminders.

### **Number of Interactions**

Across both semesters of data collection, there existed a significant difference between the quantified field note codes and the participants’ survey responses to the question concerned with number of interactions. Figure 2 and Figure 3 represent this discrepancy in a visual form. The two figures, comparing the self-reported number and recorded number of interactions, do not necessarily represent the same participants in the ordering of the x-axis. A random number was assigned to each participant, but the “participant numbers” do not reflect the same participants between Figure 2 and Figure 3 –participant number 1 in Figure 2 may not be the same participant as participant number 1 in Figure 3. The anonymous nature of the survey prevented a direct comparison of participants’ survey responses to data from field notes. Instead,

the figures represent a more complete image to clearly denote how participants often underreported their number of interactions on the survey.

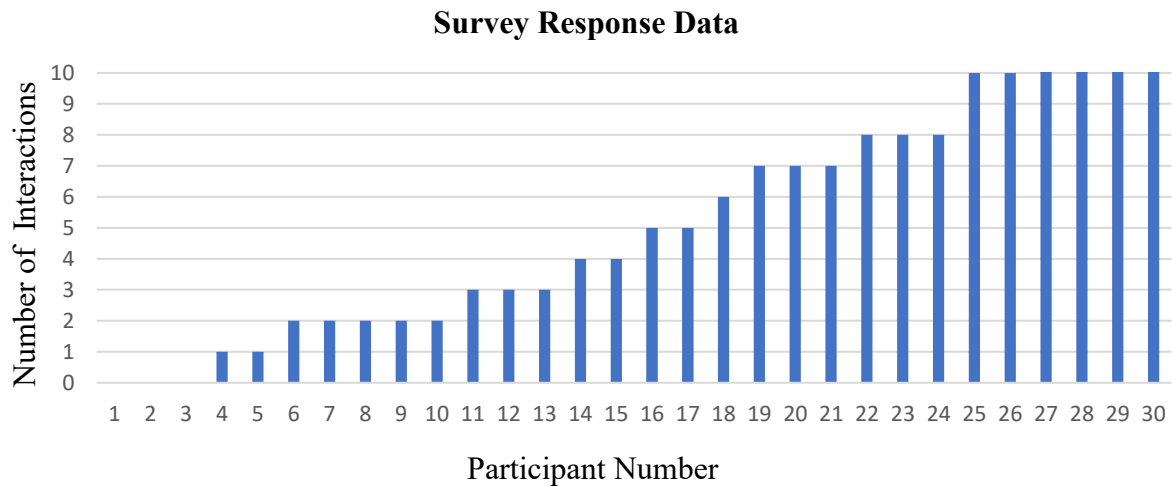


Figure 2. The number of interactions reported by participants on their anonymous surveys

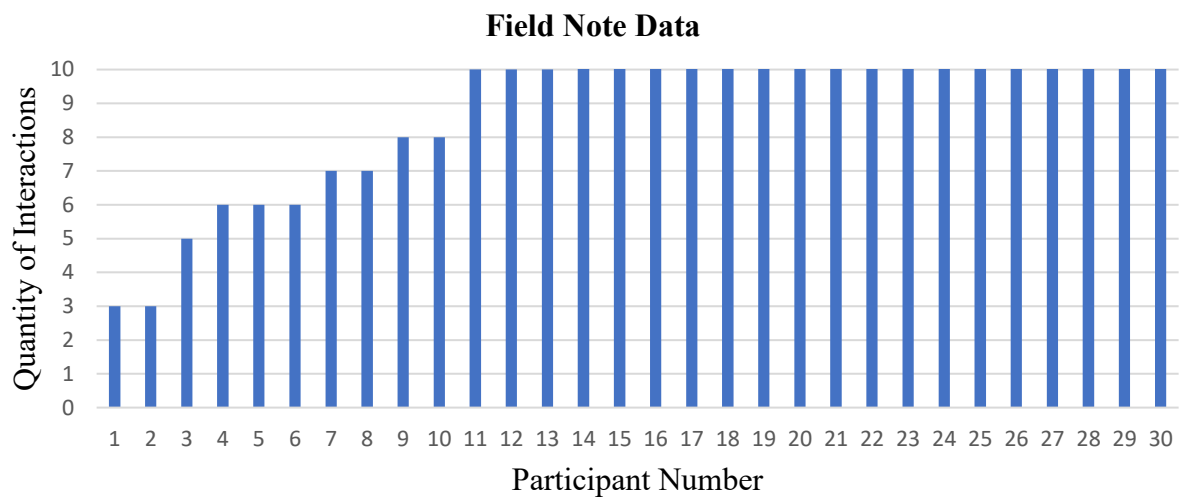


Figure 3. Field note data reflecting the number of interactions in a semester

Given the assumption of observation and coding accuracy, the participants' survey responses on the number of interactions outside of class reflect a much smaller number of



perceived interactions. In a more significant and direct comparison between the two data sets, the number of participants who interacted ten or more times nearly triples when looking solely at quantified observations rather than survey reports.

## **Modality Preferences**

Although the instructor offered new modalities in the spring semester following the course environment shift online, trends in student preferences can be gathered from the modality usage rates –calculated by percentage of the total quantity of interactions. Initially, the researcher planned to compare survey responses to quantified field note data; however, the researcher made an unintended modification to the language of the survey question concerned with interaction modality preferences. The survey question in the fall was “What forms of communication did you use *most often* to communicate with the instructor?,” while the primary wording of the adapted survey question for the spring was “What forms of communication did you use to communicate with the instructor?”. Given the inability to rectify the qualitative nature of the survey question between semesters, the data from the survey responses to that question set are omitted from this reporting.

Figures 4, 5, and 6 reveal that participants in seated courses prefer emails and interactions after class. Participants were most likely to interact with the instructor immediately following a class session when classes were in-person. Before class interaction rates were similar between the two separate periods of data collection, and office conferences were by far the least popular form of interaction in both semesters when the course was seated. Office conferences in the spring semester were less popular than in the fall. To clarify, before class, after class, and office conference interactions only occurred during the first half of the semester.

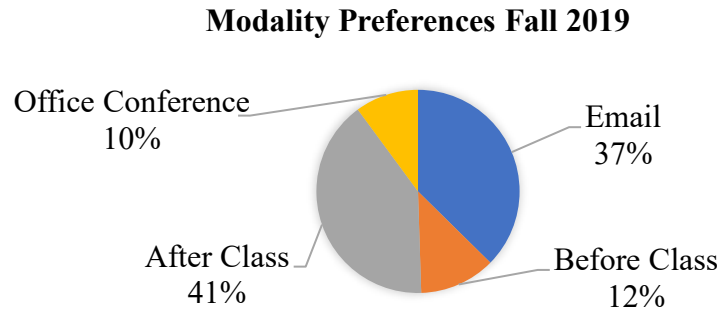


Figure 4. Participant modality use during the Fall 2019 data collection period

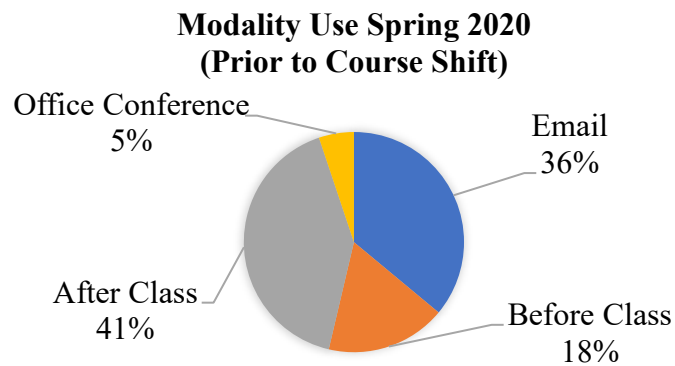


Figure 5. Participant modality use during the Spring 2020 data collection period, prior to the shift online in mid-March

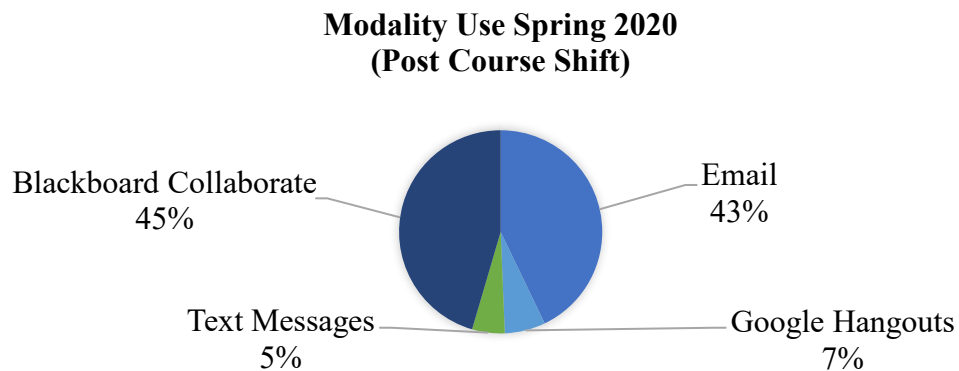


Figure 6. Participant modality use during the Spring 2020 data collection period, after the shift online in mid-March

These synchronous, face-to-face mediums were not available to participants in the second half of the spring semester due to campus closures and stay-at-home mandates. Following the course shift online, spring semester participants preferred using Blackboard Collaborate over email. The additional modalities of Text Messages and Google Hangouts were the least preferred modalities offered. Interestingly, the synchronous modalities –Blackboard Collaborate and Google Hangouts— were more often utilized than asynchronous interaction through Text or Email.

### **Subject Matter Preferences**

Data on the subject matter of interactions appear in both quantitative and qualitative form. The quantitative data from field notes across both semesters presented in Figure 7 provided a more accurate understanding of subject matter preferences among participants as a whole. Based on quantitative data, participants were most likely to speak with the instructor about assignment-specific concerns. Participants initiated nearly half of the interactions that took place across both periods of data collection because they had questions or concerns about course work. During the coding process, feedback requests were initially coded as assignment concerns; however, participants initiated a significant enough number of assignment concern interactions to seek feedback or instructor input on an assignment or coursework-related decision that the secondary code became necessary. The number of interactions initiated by participants seeking feedback made up the second largest subject matter category.

The third largest category displayed in Figure 7 was “Technology.” This became a primary code because a significant portion of interactions occurred when participants needed to report Blackboard submission errors, request additional details about Microsoft Word tools, or

inquire about the location of resources on the course Blackboard site. As the seated course did require attendance, some participants initiated interaction to report they would miss, or had missed, a scheduled class period. A small portion of the participants who initiated interaction for attendance also requested information about course activities or technology, but the portion of participants with these additional interactions was small enough to ignore for this study's reporting. Grade inquiries made up the second smallest subject category of interactions –grades were typically kept current and participants could view their running averages on Blackboard's "My Grades" tool. Because some interactions did not relate directly to the course, a need arose for a code to account for non-course related interactions. This category accounted for interactions where participants sought personal advice. To provide a few key examples, special topics included interaction initiated by participants to discuss university transfers, loan applications, personal or home life, as well as personal, non-course related interests.

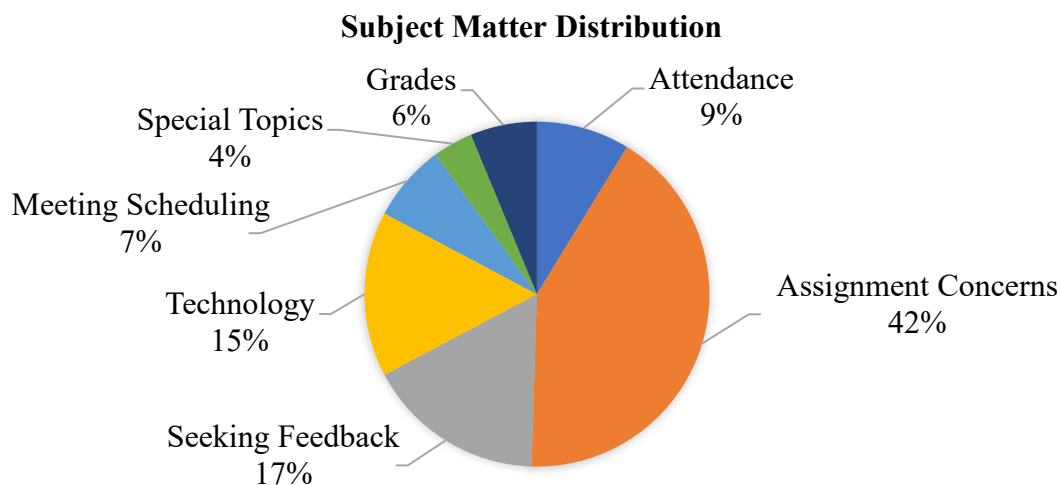


Figure 7. Subject matter distribution across data collection periods, Fall 2019 and Spring 2020

Qualitative data gathered via survey responses correlated to the quantified modality preferences gathered through the field notes and reflected a similar distribution of topics as the

quantitative data. Participants answered the survey items “what do you remember speaking with the instructor about?” and “what conversation topics were the most beneficial? Why?” in a short answer form. Participants’ focus on course-related interactions was immediately evident. Key example responses denote the participants’ focus on course-related concerns:

- Problems with assignments and blackboard
- My projects and how to further improve my writing skills
- Clarification on assignments

A majority of the participants wrote about writing assignments as discussion topics they remembered, but several of the short answer responses also indicate that a few participants remembered interactions with more personal focus:

- Most of it was about the projects, but occasionally it would be about how I was feeling and how I was doing
- Grades, class work, papers, everyday life, musicals, hobbies, and a positive mindset
- We spoke about the ideas I had prior to the meeting and my interests in general. We discussed my major. We also talked about my hometown.

These responses represent some participants’ memories discussing non-course-related matters, but this was overall a small minority of responses.

The short answer responses to survey items about the most beneficial topics produced a similar trend, with most participants noting course-related matters; however, an interesting divergence existed here where several participants referred to more personal and social topics as the most beneficial subjects in conversations. In another set of key examples, participants cited the more personalized focus of some interactions as beneficial in their responses:

- Talking about things other than work helped comfort me a little more that I could share my hobbies and other things with an instructor who would actually listen and become interested.
- Ms. Knight had lot of humble advice about how to have a fruitful college career. She had a lot of great advice about different subjects.
- The most beneficial topics were ones that could be applied to my entire college career.

Those responses would seem to denote that some participants did not feel as though course or assignment specific conversations were the most beneficial. The qualitative examples provided here indicate that participants might recall mostly course-related interactions, but not every participant viewed course-related interactions as the most beneficial.

### **Interaction and Behavioral Preferences**

Several survey items focused on participants' perceptions of interactions to create a qualitative data set that could exemplify students' preferences for instructor behavior during interaction. The survey items "describe a 'good' interaction with a professor" and "describe a 'bad' interaction with a professor" were intended to gather more general perceptions of interaction with instructors; however, many participants wrote about interactions specific to this study in their responses:

- I remember a time where I was looking for ways to improve my papers. I explained my problem to her and Ms. Knight recalled when she had this same issue, and reassured me that good writers are always looking to improve their papers. She then gave me great advice, methods, and tools to improve my work. It was one of the best pieces of advice I have gotten from a teacher in my college experience.
- She was open for any questions or suggestions and tried to make class better. She makes you think and gives great tips on how to improve writing.

The sample response provided here indicated a varying interpretation of this survey question, as other participants included more generalized descriptions of a “good interaction with a professor:”

- The student approaches a professor asking for clarification or feedback on something. The professor responds, perhaps with constructive criticism. The student accepts the response and thanks the professor.
- A situation in which the professor listens completely and offers good advice for the situation.

Whether about the specific course instructor or college instructors in general, the responses listed above denote participants’ concern for their course work, as well as the instructors’ ability to address a given concern to support the student in completing that work. Their responses reveal the priority placed on instructors’ ability to assist students’ in their work without insulting or demeaning their intellect. Participants noted frequently that having their questions answered during the interaction, as well as feeling respected, both personally and intellectually was important for positive perceptions of interactions:

- asking for help and not getting roasted by them
- I don’t feel stupid talking to them. I feel like I’m heard
- not feeling like I am asking dumb or stupid questions
- being able to answer all of my questions without making me feel stupid

In describing “bad” interactions, participants’ responses indicated that they wanted the instructor to be open to individual student concerns and issues outside of the class affecting their work. One participant noted “bad” interactions occurred when “you can tell by the way they talk

you're just another student rather than a person,” while another wrote, “they don’t help, say it’s your fault, or don’t listen to what your trying to tell them for why you can’t or are struggling.” Those examples indicate not only the power the instructors’ behavior holds over the relative positive or negative perception of interactions, but also how students’ perceptions of the instructors’ interest affect their interpretation of interactions.

Only three of the participant responses concerned with “bad” interactions appeared to directly reflect on their experience in the course studied -a similar interpretation as the participants who wrote about the instructor in the survey item about “good” interactions:

- One time she took more than 12 hours (my standard) to respond to an email. It was done in less than 24, but I remember that it halted one of my papers.
- I don't think I really had a bad interaction with my professor.
- Nothing has been a bad interaction, I would just say some classes felt like they were dragging on at times.

These responses seem to indicate that responsiveness in interactions outside of the classroom might be of some significance for enhancing student’s positive perceptions of interactions. The first sample response above indicates that while a 24 hour response rate was accepted, the participant expected to wait for a shorter period for the instructor’s response on an assignment related concern. One of the responses does appear to associate in-class activities with their perceptions of out-of-class communication, but this was not a significant trend in this qualitative data set.

There also existed some emphasis on autonomy in the survey responses. Participants noted desirable interactions included, “receiving help from a professor... without having the professor do the work for you,” and “leaving the conversation with the tools you need to succeed and a clear understanding.” While these types of responses made up a smaller majority, this data



still proves significant as participants indicated they not only desired assistance with their articulated concerns, but they desired assistance that in turn provided them with a sense of personal agency. One particular response about professors in general summed up the traits of a desirable interaction quite effectively:

A ‘good’ interaction is when the professor makes sure they understand your questions and they do their best to answer all of them without intimidating you or making you feel dumb. They let you talk through your problems and they give you extra advice on how to solve them. Also the instructor helps you work through things. They don’t just tell you how to fix them.

As the participants addressed so directly, students desire interactions with instructors in which they feel valued, independent, and respected. Although most of the participants wrote, in varying forms, they wanted to have their questions answered and concerns addressed, the desired traits of how they should *feel* during interactions appeared more significant than the traits of what they desired to *know* after an interaction had ended.

The responses to an additional survey item further clarify what participants felt in “good” interactions. While the survey item “how did you feel during and after conversations with the professor?” inquired more directly about participants’ feelings, their responses still exhibit the same desired traits of interaction as previously noted. Where participants responded they felt “good” about interactions, they also noted they felt “well respected,” “comfortable,” “safe,” “motivated,” and “encouraged.” Additionally, participants also noted they felt as if good interactions were “productive” and “like there was a level of mutual respect.” One participant who initially felt confusion noted they “got the help needed to be able to move on,” and another left an interaction feeling “relieved and like I had all I needed to order to do my best.” These responses again give notice to the participants’ desire for interactions where the instructor

provides course-related support, but also interactions where the instructor engages with the student collaboratively in a clear effort to promote their success.

### **Influences on Initiating Interaction**

In responding to the survey item “what prompted or encouraged you to communicate with the instructor?,” participants predominantly noted their own course related “questions” and feelings of confusion prompted them to interact with the instructor outside of the classroom.

Participants responded with short answers:

- I was confused about something going on in the class.
- I needed clarification on assignments.
- If I had any questions about something.
- My own questions that needed an answer.

Participants also frequently cited difficulties with writing assignments and writing related concerns as motivation to initiate communication outside of class:

- I needed help with the beginning steps of an essay or I got stuck with the ending parts of an essay.
- I needed a lot of help with my writing.
- I needed guidance on finding a topic for our final two projects.

A smaller portion of the participants noted instructor behavior with students encouraged them to interact outside of the classroom:

- She was very nice and open.
- Her happy positive attitude.
- She was easily approachable.

The descriptive terms used in the key samples above, “nice,” “open,” “happy,” “positive,” and “approachable,” indicate the instructor’s general demeanor around students impacted the likelihood participants’ would interact with the instructor. Notably, several participants also described their motivation to be spurred on by the reminders of availability:

- She preached about wanting to help us.
- Ms. Knight was very encouraging when it came to communicating.
- She always told us to email or come talk to her if we had questions.

The responses that cited verbal reminders would appear to indicate the utilization of Cuseo’s strategy had some positive impact on the number of interactions initiated by students as well as the participants’ perceptions of the instructor’s approachability.

Participants also indicated that it was initial interactions included in the course work – required conferences— that prompted later communication:

- the first conference really got me to know to trust her and actually want to confide in her
- once I had a meeting with her it opened my eyes to realizing she's easily approachable

The response citing previous interaction lends weight to a trend of initial positive interactions leading to later, more frequent interactions outside of the classroom, and correlates with Cuseo’s suggestion that initial required out of class interactions would encourage more students to initiate interactions outside of class. Initial interactions through the required course work helped some participants feel more comfortable with the instructor individually.

Where approachability was concerned on the survey item “did you find the instructor approachable? why or why not?,” participants used some similar descriptive terms as they did for

denoting instructor demeanor that encouraged or prompted interaction, but also addressed perceptions of the instructor's willingness to assist them:

- She's super nice and did the most she could to make us feel comfortable.
- She was very nice and ready to help and open.
- She's very nice and easy to talk to
- Because she was talkative and always said she wanted to help.
- She always had a smile with a positive attitude.
- She seemed open to questions and concerns.

A few different descriptors appeared for approachability as participants wrote descriptive terms such as “talkative” and “easy going.” One particularly descriptive respondent noted their perception of the instructor's availability, demeanor, and behavior:

She did a great job of making herself available to the class at all times. She would regularly recall times when she was our age and could relate to our stresses. She treated us as equals and if she was not my instructor, I feel that she could have been a friend that I had not yet met.

While the first point of that participant response reasserted the importance of students' perception of availability and demonstrated positive correlations with Cuseo's strategy again, the second portion of the participant's response would seem to indicate instructor behavior and demeanor around students still played a major role in encouraging and facilitating interaction. Other descriptive participants provided additional clarification for this trend:

- She always comes up to check on you and she is sincere. She made it not so scary to talk to a professor like some can make it out to be.
- Ms. Knight seemed very open to helping and offering assistance where she could. She consistently welcomes discussion and asks us to come to her if we need anything.

The most significant trend across the responses to the survey question concerned with perceptions of approachability was the participants' acknowledgement of the instructor's willingness to provide assistance. Though many previously listed responses demonstrate this trend, a few key examples further clarify the signification of this perception:

- Professor Knight was always sure to make me feel like if I needed any help at all she was there.
- I thought my teacher was approachable and was always doing whatever she could in order to help us anyway she could.
- Ms. Knight seemed very open to helping and offering assistance where she could.

### **Students' Perceptions of Success and Enjoyment**

While the survey questions, "Did you enjoy this course? Why or why not?," and "Did you feel successful in the course? Why or why not?," initially arose from mere curiosity, the data collected on participants' perceptions of enjoyment and success in the course are indicative of how students may attribute their success to their personal efforts and their course experience to the instructor's efforts. On the survey item concerned with enjoyment, participants in both semesters cited their instructor as the reason why they enjoyed the course:

- Ms. Knight was a good teacher and helped us with anything we needed which made completing the course easier
- The teacher was fantastic, she always helped whenever and took her time to focus and keep on it till I fully understood.
- This course challenged me a lot because writing is not a strong trait of mine, but she made it easier to get in tune with my writing. I enjoyed this course a lot.
- The teacher was always trying to make sure that I knew was going on and that I knew what to do next.
- Loved it, the teacher made this course fun to go to, and gave clear concise directions that made the projects easier.
- I did enjoy the course because Ms. Knight made it fun and easier to manage.
- Yes! Professor Knight was amazing

When participants wrote they did not enjoy the course, they often attributed their negative feelings to the coursework and assignment, rather than the instructor:

- The course was just too many essays and too fast.
- Overall I did not, this is mostly due to the material and in no way due to Ms. Knight or her teaching style.
- I just hate writing and I think the topics were difficult.

One participant did note that the instructor contributed to their lack of enjoyment, as they wrote the instructor would “make everything more complicated than it needed to be.” A correlation appeared in the number of interactions reported by those participants who did not enjoy the course: the participants who reported not enjoying the class frequently self-reported the lowest number of interactions. Of the six participants who responded they did not enjoy the course, only one reported interacting with the instructor outside of the classroom more than twice. An additional trend appeared in the remembered subject matters of interactions for these participants. For the same six participants who indicated they did not enjoy the course, half indicated they did not remember speaking with the instructor to seek assistance with assignments or to receive feedback on their written work:

- I emailed her to ask when things were due.
- I had questions about submission on blackboard mostly.
- I remember speaking with her about the fact that I would be missing class.

Of the participants who wrote they did not enjoy the course, only two noted they did not feel successful. Within perceptions of success, an even more evident trend emerged as participants were most likely to connect their feelings of success to their writing abilities:

- Although my grade doesn't show it because of my attendance, I felt successful because it feels like my writing has gotten better over the course.
- I feel like I grew a lot in my ability as a writer.
- I was successful in this course because of what I learned about certain writing techniques and styles.

Additionally, among the participants who felt less successful, they still attributed success to their perceptions of their work and writing abilities. One participant responded “I felt successful for the most part. There were some assignments I feel I could have done better on. However, that was my own doing,” and another wrote “I did not as I feel like the work in this class was often subpar on my part;” these responses demonstrate how perceptions of success were clearly connected to their work in the course. In another example response, one participant simply wrote, “No, all my papers were trash.” Those responses would still indicate participants attributed their feelings of success, or lack thereof, to their own effort and writing ability.

A few participants in each semester did connect their perceptions of success with the instructor, but this was not a significant trend. In fact, only three participants wrote anything about the instructor in their reasons for why they felt successful:

- Anytime I was having a problem I could always ask the teacher a question and get a clarified answer.
- I feel successful in this class because of the positive feedback I receive from Ms. Knight about my work.
- I was given enough distance from my instructor to make mistakes where I would, but she would always be there to point it out and show me how to fix it.

Those responses mark a significant minority of participants who attributed any perceptions of success to the actions of the instructor and appear to still confirm that participants in this study primarily attributed their feelings of success to their writing abilities.

## DISCUSSION

### Interaction Trends in Entry-Level Writing Courses

The format and curriculum of a writing course likely impacts the quantity and subject matter of interactions that take place between instructors and students. Cox, Lutovsky Quaye, McIntosh, Reason, and Terenzini (2010) wrote “a majority of faculty members scarcely have any substantive interaction with first-year students outside of class” (p. 784). High quantities of interaction may not be possible in every type of university course as the course size, course content, and course environment may not be conducive to high quantities of interaction outside of the class. In their analysis of participants’ interviews, Cotten and Wilson (2006) noted “class size is one factor that was noted [to affect interactions] quite often... large lecture hall classes hinder more interactions with faculty” (p. 505). Potential interactions in this study were not hindered by class size as there were fewer than 20 students in either of the entry-level writing courses studied. In fact, the smaller class population likely contributed to the relatively high number of interactions, and this is supported by the research of Cotten and Wilson.

There is a potential for all faculty to see relatively high quantities of interaction with first-year students, but they must encourage and facilitate those interactions both in and outside of the classroom. Cuseo (2018) made the suggestion that frequently reminding students of availability and requiring initial office visits would increase “student-faculty engagement outside of the classroom” (p. 89); the participants’ responses in this current study appear to support the beneficial impact of both of Cuseo’s strategies. While the first strategy –reminding students of availability— functioned as an intentional, pedagogical choice, as noted previously, the second strategy –requiring office visits— was a required practice for all English 110 instructors. Both



strategies, however, seemed to positively impact the number of interactions that took place outside of the classroom in the courses studied.

The course focus on writing provided more opportunity for substantive dialogues with students. With conferencing and collaboration frequently cited as best practices in modern writing pedagogy, these practices also played a central role in students' course experience during this study. The high number of interactions found in this study seems to correlate with the programmatic pedagogical choice to use conferences and collaboration to improve students' writing. Rather than frequently reporting late work or absences, participants were more likely to seek out interaction for assistance on their writing assignments. This also reflects a trend similar to Kuh and Hu's earlier research as they found students "struggling" with writing assignments were slightly more likely to converse with faculty members outside of the classroom (2001, p. 319). Among the participants in the Spring 2020 and Fall 2019 semesters, writing was the most frequent topic of conversation, and participants indicated that they generally held positive perceptions about conversations on writing. Kuh and Hu (2001) first noted the potential impact of writing on the perceptions and benefits of interaction: "talking with faculty member about writing came close to having a significant negative effect;" however, they also noted "at the same time, contact with faculty focused on writing improvement was positively related to the amount of time devoted to educationally purposeful college activities and gains" (p. 328). Fortunately, most participants in the current study reported positive associations with interactions concerned with writing. This may further indicate that the course focus and the environment of the classroom holds bearing over students' perceptions of interactions associated with writing. Additionally, as participants perceived those interactions concerned with writing as relatively positive experiences, perhaps in a writing classroom, students are more willing and open to

conduct writing focused interactions. The likely culprit of the differences between the positive perceptions in this study and the potential negative effects noted by Kuh and Hu may exist simply within the primary content and foci of the course. In a course focused on writing, students appeared most likely to consult their instructor about writing and perceived positive effects from writing focused interactions, especially those where instructor feedback was requested.

Within the scope of the writing course studied, students appeared to value interactions that ventured outside of writing as well. A significant number of participants indicated that beneficial topics of conversation included non-course related matters. Even the earliest research on student-instructor interaction denoted the importance of addressing students' individual and unique experiences as Snow (1973) confirmed that the instructors who saw the highest quantities of interactions were those who presented a "willingness to let the interaction take its own course" (p. 493). Therefore, the ability of the instructor to accept and respond to student concerns that were not directly related to course or course material likely contributed to the high quantity of interactions.

Of further note, "a reciprocal" relationship may have existed between course-related and non-course-related –substantive and casual— interactions in the entry-level writing courses studied (Cox et al., 2010, p. 777). Many participants indicated initial interactions helped encourage later interactions and noted the presence of both casual and substantive interactions throughout their responses; thus, there is some merit in considering that substantive and casual interactions mutually reinforce one another as Cox et al. (2010) presumed in their study. This indicates that every individual interaction –whether casual or substantive— could impact the number of future interactions with students. Quantitative research on the influence of casual classroom interactions on the relative quantity and frequency of substantive out-of-class

interactions –and vice versa— would further develop this implication for more wide-spread applicability in higher education.

### **Constructing “Approachability” and Encouraging Interaction**

While not every strategy recommended by Cuseo functioned within the courses studied, the intentional strategy used did appear to influence the students’ perceptions of instructor approachability, and, in turn, positively influenced the number of interactions that took place outside of the classroom. Participants in both semesters noted they perceived the instructor as available to them for assistance with coursework. Corroborating the positive impact of Cuseo’s strategy on the number of interactions outside of the classroom, participants also indicated that verbalized and written reminders of the instructors’ availability encouraged them to initiate interactions. The results appear to imply that an instructor who makes themselves available and frequently communicates their availability will see higher levels of interaction outside of the classroom; however, causality here cannot be fully confirmed. Several participants did indicate that verbal reminders of the instructor’s availability encouraged them to initiate interactions, but most tended to attribute their own motivations to succeed in the course as a more common cause for interaction. The instructors’ intentional reminders of availability impacted the participants’ willingness to initiate interaction and shaped their perception of the instructor’s approachability, but verbal reminders did not directly cause interaction. Instead, participants’ academic motivations and their coursework concerns played a more significant role in prompting them to interact with the instructor.

The results indicate more generally that instructors can positively influence the number of interactions to some degree with intentional behaviors. Cotten and Wilson (2006) drew this same

conclusion in their qualitative study, as they wrote “it is not enough to... post office hours and presume that student will use them;” instead, “students need active and constant encouragement in order to be reassured that their inquiries are welcome and that they will be taken seriously” (p. 508). While the participants in this study were consistently reminded of the availability of office hours, most still did not utilize office conferences outside of the ones required by the English 110 coursework. The shared nature of the instructor’s office space may have played a part in participants’ willingness to seek interactions during office hours as they were well-aware the instructor’s office was not a private space from their experience with required writing conferences early in the courses studied.

An important clarification arises in the importance of physical availability and face-to-face interactions; Spring 2020 participants did not have the benefit of in-person interactions or close physical proximity to the instructor for the second half of the semester, and yet the number of interactions did not significantly decrease. Wilson, Wood, and Gaff (1974) noted “the importance to which a faculty member attaches to personal interaction with student is probably a more important component of [their] accessibility than in sheer physical availability” (p. 82). Spring 2020 participants, unable to interact in a shared physical space for the latter half of the semester, provide a valuable example of the importance of this component of accessibility. The instructors’ approach to students and the utilization of Cuseo’s strategy remained constant; therefore, the results of the current study appear to support Wilson, Wood, and Gaff’s early suggestion.

The participants in this current study particularly noted how the instructor made them feel during interactions as a determinant of their overarching perception of the interaction, and past research supports the idea that the instructors’ demeanor impacts students’ desire to initiate

interactions. Wilson, Wood, and Gaff (1974) claimed “a teacher may be available to students without being truly ‘accessible’ to them in the sense of being willing and even eager to listen, to exchange ideas, and to help if [they] can” (p. 82). Their early research would denote the significant influence of the instructors’ attitudes and behaviors toward students –especially in interactions outside of the classroom- on students’ desire to interact with the instructor.

Participant responses from the current study support that claim as they appeared to place equal importance on their perception of the instructor’s receptiveness to student concerns and the instructor’s ability to provide assistance in course-related matters when initiating interaction.

Once the instructor proved herself capable and willing to aid students through out-of-class interactions, students were willing to initiate future interactions with the instructor –even when “sheer physical availability” moved to virtual and asynchronous modalities.

Participants across both semesters utilized email frequently, but the high rates of interaction taking place after class clearly denote a preference for face-to-face interactions. Sheer and Fung (2007) made a similar observation in their study as they found –even in courses where the instructor frequently used email to contact students— students still preferred “face-to-face” interactions (p. 10). While Sheer and Fung did not account for course delivery, the results from the current study appear to indicate the modality of the class does partially impact the interaction preferences of students. In Spring 2020, participants utilized email more after the course activities shifted to an online setting. Rather than contemporary students simply preferring electronic communications for interactions, as Romsa, Bremer, and Lewis (2017) suggested, perhaps the students’ choice in instructional delivery indicates their preference for interactions. Given the lower rate of email interaction in the first portion of the Spring 2020 semester, there is likely a correlation between students’ choice in course delivery and their preference in interaction

modality. In the seated courses studied, synchronous interactions held precedence. Perhaps in online courses, students prefer email interactions, because they can perceive fewer costs and more benefits from asynchronous interactions. Asynchronous interactions have the benefit of being flexible for students' varying schedules. As students often choose to take courses online because they need scheduling flexibility, the perceived flexible timing of email interaction is of more significance in online courses. This implication cannot be readily confirmed by this study, however, as the Spring 2020 semester marked an unprecedented reality for students.

Students experienced a drastic change to the course environment. Shifting from a seated course to an online course certainly changed the way any given student *could* interact with the instructor. Seemiller and Grace (2016) found "83 percent of Generation Z students prefer face-to-face communication," and this preference certainly appeared in the results of this study even after the shift online ("Face to Face...", para. 1). The sudden shift to online may have also contributed to participants' overall preference for synchronous, face-to-face interaction via video conferencing; students were already comfortable meeting with the instructor in-person for class, so the video conferences provided a similar environment to the interactions that took place previously in shared physical spaces.

The preference for synchronous interactions is an important finding in this study, because even as participants conducted course activities online, they still preferred to have synchronous interactions with the instructor. Blackboard Collaborate and Google Hangouts, were the two chosen video conferencing tools. The participants' preference for those modes of interaction speaks to the viability of video conferencing tools as a functional modality for interactions outside of the classroom. The results of this study denote that students utilized the conferencing tools made available at a similar rate as they interacted with the instructor after class.

As emails typically require a more extended period to solve a problem or conduct instruction, it also seems likely that participants who wanted immediate feedback and response used the scheduled “Open Classroom” sessions to address their nuanced concerns. Though not every participant attended virtual meetings regularly, as Cotten and Wilson (2006) noted “time constraints may play an increasingly important role in the way students interact” (p. 502); there is a possibility students viewed the synchronous video conferences as a convenient and time efficient means to interact with their instructor, and those who did not, simply did not have the time to dedicate to extended virtual meetings. Many participants reported taking on new responsibilities at home as well as new part-time jobs in the last months of the Spring 2020 semester.

The flexibility of the online meetings for students who wanted to meet with the instructor face-to-face likely contributed to the relatively high attendance in virtual group meetings through Blackboard Collaborate. The video conferencing sessions occurred three times a week, like the original seated class schedule. This helped students find a time that worked in their personal schedules, and likely increased attendance in virtual meetings overall, as students had more than one chance each week to attend an online meeting. During the latter half of the Spring 2020 semester, individual writing conferences were scheduled and still took place as part of the English 110 coursework; however, the required writing conferences were scheduled by the students, which also allowed them to choose a time that worked best with their personal availability. These instructional choices, along with the general admission of the flexible nature of the “Open Classroom” activities and discussions, contributed to the high number of participants who used that virtual meeting tool.

There is an important distinction here to make; the whole class, synchronous interactions through a video conferencing tool were offered, but not required during the study. Only one virtual meeting was required after the course shift online, and the students were provided flexibility in scheduling that required, individual meeting. At the university where this study took place, some instructors have recently added required virtual class meetings to their curriculum, and many have started presenting class in hybrid formats where students meet online for some classes and activities to supplement in-person class time. The current trend toward virtual class meetings may hold additional implications in participants' preference for virtual meetings in this study; the participants studied may have viewed the synchronous meetings as an *opportunity* to seek additional support, rather than a primary means of receiving instruction and conducting course activities. Students likely prefer to have a plethora of opportunities to attend synchronous meetings. Many hybrid and online courses may only offer a single scheduled meeting for the entire class; if an individual student cannot attend, they miss out on the benefits of that synchronous, face-to-face interaction. Though this study cannot directly confirm this implication, individual students may not utilize video conferencing tools to interact with the instructor if recurrent meeting times are not offered at varying points throughout the week.

The results of the current study support the notion that virtual, face-to-face interaction could be a viable solution to low-levels of interaction, especially among the newest generation of college students who experience more online courses. Given that current college students prefer face-to-face interactions –but many do not have the same physical access to instructors outside of the classroom— video conferences may be a suitable alternative for the same types of interactions in shared spaces that once took place synchronously outside of the classroom. Future studies will need to address the number of synchronous interactions compared to asynchronous



interactions outside of the classroom in specific course environments chosen by the students – online, seated, and hybrid. As classrooms continue to shift to accommodate the needs of students and public health concerns, instructors will address the question of what mediums students want to use to interact with educators in varying course formats. Future research should also assess students’ views of the way instructors in various courses utilize video conferencing tools to interact with their students. Specifically, as it pertains to interaction outside of the classroom, further qualitative and quantitative research could begin to develop an understanding of student preferences within these synchronous modes of virtual interaction between instructors and their students.

### **Motivations for Interaction**

Researchers have long entertained the assumption that interactions between student and instructors are influenced by a multitude of factors; students’ dispositions and perceptions are the most difficult to address with statistical significance given the diversity of student populations. Contemporary American students are the most diverse group to ever enter higher education. Their varying backgrounds, abilities, learning preferences, and motivations all influence their level of comfort and confidence in interacting with instructors. Interaction outside of the classroom with participants in this study seemed to be most influenced by their confidence in and their level of comfort with the instructor. Cotten and Wilson (2006) also found “when [students] feel comfortable with faculty inside the classroom, they are more likely to feel comfortable approaching them outside the classroom” (p. 505). This study cannot speak to the perception of comfort within the classroom, but it can point to the students’ level of comfort with the instructor. Most participants indicated it was the instructor’s demeanor and level of interest in

themselves as both students and individuals that they found the most influential in their perceptions of approachability; the students' perceptions of how the instructor made them feel "comfortable" and "respected" reinforced their desire to initiate interactions when they had course-related concerns.

The most significant factor for "why" students interacted with the instructor, was their level of confidence that the instructor could address their concern in an efficient and proactive manner. As previous studies indicate the "task-orientated" and "course-related" subject preferences for students initiating interactions, this study confirms those previous trends still exist in the contemporary, undergraduate classroom (e.g., Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Sheer & Fung, 2007). Seemiller and Grace (2016) presented some justification for the subject matter preferences and motivations for interacting. Students likely interacted with the instructor outside of the classroom because they were motivated by their desire to perform well in the course. Seemiller and Grace (2016) partially confirmed this as they reported "more than 70 percent of Generation Z students were motivated by not wanting to let others down... [and] having the opportunity for advancement and earning credit toward something" ("Motivators," para. 1). These same motivators, when applied to a university education, suggest that students initiated interactions when they perceived there was an extrinsic reward in the form of instructor satisfaction, better scores on assignments, or improvement in their course grade.

While the course-related nature of interactions was unsurprising, what was more interesting was the participants' reflections on these types of interactions. Participants asserted that instrumental interaction were not only beneficial, but those interactions inspired future dialogues as well. Though the assumption is not yet fully supported by research, this study indicates that students primarily seek interactions outside of the classroom for instrumental

reasons, but the instructor must prove their ability to manage students' concerns without damaging students' self-image. As Cotten and Wilson (2006) wrote, "to the extent that a significant number of students feel belittlement, rather than empathy from instructors, and non-responsiveness rather than immediacy, it is perhaps not surprising that many student do not seek out interactions with faculty" (p. 512); instructors must make the most of their initial opportunities to interact with students if they want to inspire future, beneficial interactions. As Cuseo suggested, initial required interactions create opportunities to build rapport with students that can inspire future interactions.

Despite the significant portion of participants who indicated they sought interaction given any concerns about the course, some participants indicated they approached the instructor about matters more personal to themselves. Personal subjects did not make up a great portion of the interactions and this may indicate that students do not often find themselves discussing topics of a personal nature with instructors. Seemiller and Grace (2016) noted "Generation Z students enjoy sharing about themselves, but they are protective about who they share with" ("Sharing Personal Information," para. 3). Their observation could explain the low number of interactions that concerned students' lives outside of the course. Students might not have felt comfortable sharing personal matters and did not typically interact with the intention to discuss topics unrelated to the class. Despite the preference for course-related topics of interaction, several participants in this study indicated the most beneficial conversations were those in which more personal matters were discussed. While participants viewed both kind of interactions as beneficial, undergraduate students may likely be more comfortable in initiating course-related interactions at first. Personal matters in discussion may reflect students' developing relationship with an instructor and their positive perceptions of the instructor's responsiveness.

The combined results conflict with a finding from the research of Cox et al., as they found “professors engage in casual interactions with students approximately twice as often as they engage in substantive interaction outside of class” (Cox et al. 2010, p. 778). Given their definition of substantive interactions including both course-related concerns and personal matters, there does appear some need to separate the subjects of discussion more precisely in future research. Although casual interactions initiated by the professor –greetings and casual conversation— were not explicitly quantified in this study, as the data focused on when students initiated contact, substantive interactions were certainly the most prominently initiated interactions and should be further studied qualitatively by students’ impressions of their motivations for interacting casually or substantively, as well as benefits they may perceive in each varying type of interaction. Additionally, as Cotten and Wilson (2006) found students who “report[ed] significant interactions with faculty share[d] a common characteristic: they tend to be involved in some special group or activity that brings them into directed and intense one-on-one contact with faculty outside of the classroom,” there is an additional need to assess whether course curriculum and assignments can independently influence the focus and number of interactions (p. 498). The qualitative results of this study indicate that initial substantive interactions, such as required writing conferences, typically contribute to students’ comfort and confidence in initiating later substantive interactions. Substantive interactions should be further studied with quantitative research that utilizes student participants and participant observation to assess more nuanced preferences in the topics of interaction between instructors and students.

## **Contradictions in Perceptions**

Previous research has all but confirmed that interactions outside of class occur infrequently, despite the potential benefits for students. In the English 110 courses studied, out-of-class interactions were relatively frequent for the participants involved, but this does not represent a reality for many college students. The programmatic decision to require conferences reflects an emphasis on collaboration and relationship building that may not be present in many courses or university programs. The composition program goal, “to create a community of writers,” appears in the English 110 syllabi, and is a common philosophical course goal among the instructors in the department. The overarching goals and parameters of the program positively influenced the number of interactions that took place throughout both semesters of data collection. Beyond the objective numbers, the subject matter of interactions indicates the influence of program philosophies and the language of instructors’ verbal availability reminders. Phrases such as, “you can always email me if you have questions or concerns” or “I’m available during my office hours if you need help,” aligned with Cuseo’s strategy, but also reflected the goals of the program. Those verbal reminders did help encourage students to initiate interaction, but the students’ themselves decided when and if they would interact outside of the established course requirements.

Much of the past research on student-instructor interaction utilized self-reported survey data. Participants’ memory is the biggest variable at play in surveys, and, as the results of this study indicated, participants may be predisposed to under-report the number of interactions they have with instructors. Though no previous research compared survey reported quantities with observation recorded quantities, results from this study indicate students may highly under-report their interactions with instructors. This trend might be explained by students’ preference for more

autonomy within interactions and their personal values of independence. As Seemiller and Grace (2016) noted, “intrapersonal learning is the one most preferred by Generation Z students” and those students “like being able to learn independently and at their own pace;” perhaps participants under-reported interactions not only because they prefer working independently, but also because they perceive collaborative interactions as less productive (“Learning Alone,” para. 1). In the language chosen to verbalize availability, much of the instructors’ phrasing revolved around the interest in “helping” students with their work, and this does not align with the learning preferences suggested by Seemiller and Grace. When the instructor offered “help” outside of class with assignments or requested students seek interaction when they had “questions or concerns,” this language might have implied students were not capable of completing the work independently if they did seek out those interactions. Participants may have perceived collaboration with the instructor to infringe on their autonomy as a student.

Personality profiling from Seemiller and Grace’s study supports the notion that contemporary college students may not actively seek interactions with instructors. In their discussion of Generations Z’s self-perceptions, Seemiller and Grace (2016) cited a key quote from a participant who described Generation Z students as “independent people” (“Responsible”). The self-perception of independence coupled with students’ desire to be autonomous may complicate student’ self-reporting of interaction behaviors. Perhaps contemporary students do understand the benefits of interacting with an instructor; however, their desire to be seen as independent, coupled with negative or neutral perceptions of collaboration, may cause them to downplay their personal help-seeking behaviors. In seeking the instructor’s help through interactions outside of the classroom, students must give up a bit of

their autonomy to initiate that interaction; they make the choice to communicate a difficulty and collaborate to find a solution.

The under-reporting of teacher interactions takes on further significance when considered with participants' perceptions of success and enjoyment in a class. The results indicate that students are more likely to attribute their success to their own work, independent of the instructor's behavior, further demonstrating some conflicting desires to be independent in a scenario where assistance and collaboration would benefit them. In the entry-level composition courses studied, where collaboration was not only emphasized but required, the instructor and the students sought to improve the written work they produced and develop the skills needed to craft future written products. Collaboration functioned as an integral part of their course experience; however, participants did not frequently cite collaboration as an influence on their feelings of success in the course. The majority of participants noted their feelings of success resulted from their independent performance with "certain writing techniques and styles" and the development they saw in their "ability as a writer."

Students were likely to attribute how much they enjoyed the course to the instructors' efforts. Those who did not enjoy the course indicated the instructor had little impact, but that the course work itself played the most influential role in the perception of an enjoyable class. The results from this study imply that students who interact more frequently with the instructor will be more likely to enjoy the course; however, enjoyment does not necessarily translate to success. While this may be the result of more individual focus and student-centered learning in out-of-class interactions, the finding still carries some significance as perhaps those students who felt the most enjoyment in the course are those who sought collaboration with the instructor. This does contradict what Seemiller and Grace noted as the learning preference of Generation Z

students, but perhaps that is exactly the dilemma students experienced as they weighed the decision to interact with the instructor.

Students did not believe their success in a course was driven by the instructor; instead, their feelings of success resulted from their perceptions of their own efforts and abilities. As many instructors view themselves as facilitators and collaborators in students' efforts to succeed, an opportunity is presented in students' attribution of their success to their personal efforts. If instructors recognize students want to be independent in their success, they can create better conferencing and interaction environments outside of the classroom. Rather than presenting out-of-class interactions as a means for students to seek help, instructors can emphasize their willingness to better understand students' writing styles and personal goals. When instructors use language to encourage interactions, students may be more inclined to interact if there is less focus on how instructors can "help" the students and more focus on how the students will progress independently if they collaborate.

Particularly in the sphere of the composition classroom, students may be more likely to interact if they feel collaboration is something they can enjoy at any point, rather than only when they are struggling. Perhaps writing conferences and collaboration opportunities need a different kind of pitch. To better sell modern students on the importance and benefits of interaction outside of the classroom, instructors can utilize required interactions initially to demonstrate the positive potential of collaboration. Those first interactions could become discussions of growth, personal goals, and independent success. Later interactions can be encouraged by replacing the focus on students' difficulties with focus on their progress: moving from collaborative, help-seeking requests like, "come see me if you are having any difficulties" or "let me know if I can help you," to more independent, growth-oriented appeals like, "come see me if you have any new



ideas” or “let me know what kind of progress you’re making.” A simple reframe of the invitational language used by instructors to encourage interactions could make all the difference for students who perceive their success as the result of their independent efforts.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The implications of this study and the study itself were limited by the small sample size of the population, but also by the anonymity of the survey. In future studies, the surveys should be designed so that participant specific responses can be associated with participant specific observation data. The anonymity of the survey might have increased the participants' willingness to be open and honest in their responses, but the inability to correlate survey responses to matching field notes on participant behavior was an unforeseen barrier to a more detailed case-study of participants –specifically those who did not perceive themselves as successful.

An additional limitation appeared as the data collection was significantly impacted by unpredictable changes to the course environment and instructional delivery. Participants' experience in Spring 2020 was unique to that semester; there may never be another semester where students experience such a sudden and unplanned change to the environment of a class. The changes to the course environment limit this study in the application of the results to other similar courses, but those changes did indicate several avenues for future research.

As interactions all took place in a digital environment in Spring 2020, future studies should begin to look more closely at the alternative, virtual mediums now utilized by instructors to facilitate interaction. Additionally, research might begin to assess how course delivery and course type impact those means of interacting. Further, given that the course curriculum likely impacted the interactions that took place outside of the classroom, future research could investigate out-of-class interactions by collecting separate data on various course types. Studying

the out-of-class interactions in entry-level courses varied by content area and course delivery would provide better indication of the relationship between the course itself and students' interaction behaviors and preferences.

## **Final Thoughts**

This study initially set out to determine how student-instructor interactions influence student success in an entry-level writing course and how the course instructor could influence students' desire to interact outside of the classroom. Instead, the most important finding resulted from the survey questions designed to provide a general understanding of interaction behaviors within the courses studied. Past research has indicated a slew of variable influences on interaction quantity and quality. With possible determinants ranging from the instructor's unconscious behavior to students' academic motivation, it seems no wonder this study can only confirm what influences students to interact with the instructor varies from student to student and from course to course.

While effective and charismatic instructors have long noted students do not seek out support in college courses –and even far less do so during the office hours offered specifically for individual support— perhaps it's neither the fault of the instructor or the student. Students' desire to interact is influenced by their perceptions of themselves as independent learners. Not only did students under-report the number of interactions that took place –which could easily be attributed to the variability of participant memory— most asserted that their perception of success resulted from what they achieved independently. Contemporary college students see academic and personal success as a result of their individual –rather than collaborative— efforts, and this significantly impacts how students report and approach interactions with instructors in

higher education. The way I positioned myself as a facilitator did not always match with the way students' value their independent and autonomous success, but now I can adapt my invitational language to better mesh with my students' expectations and self-perceptions.

Since students move through K-12 with current national education policy driven by summative, independently-taken tests, it should not be surprising that contemporary students enter college with a sense that they must be independent in their academic success; however, this does not alter my desire to change how I approach interactions with my students. I would submit that modification to the type of invitational language used with students would positively impact their desire to interact outside of the classroom. By moving away from how much I can "help" my students with their work, and instead, emphasizing how much I want to see their progress and celebrate their success, I may be able to influence how my students view interactions and collaboration. With a new approach to encouraging interaction and a new perspective on students' values, perhaps I can inspire a few more students to come join me in the "community of writers;" hopefully, I can show them they belong here, collaborating within this community.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: IRB Approval

#### IRB-FY2020-130 - Initial: Initial Approval

irb@missouristate.edu <irb@missouristate.edu>

Sun 11/3/2019 7:44 PM

To: English, Cathie <CathieEnglish@MissouriState.edu>; Knight, Alyssa K <Knight096@live.missouristate.edu>; Weaver, Margaret E <MargaretWeaver@MissouriState.edu>



**To:**

Catherine English  
English  
Margaret Weaver

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Study #:** IRB-FY2020-130

**Study Title:** Beyond Classroom Interactions: Influences and Trends in Communications Between Entry-Level Composition Students and the Course Instructor

**Decision:** Approved

**Approval Date:** November 2, 2019

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

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This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Catherine English

**Co-PI:** Margaret Weaver

**Primary Contact:** Alyssa Knight

**Other Investigators:**

## Appendix B: Spring 2020 Blackboard Announcement

Dear Class,

For the foreseeable future, our class will move to online coursework. All of your instructors are working to make sure we can still reach all our goals while conducting a class online. That probably means a certain amount of trial and error, so thank you for bearing with us. Please visit the Open Classroom link on Monday, March 30 at 12:20pm if you would like to discuss the changes to the course with me.

The following are the most major changes to the course:

- There is a new, updated Assignment Schedule linked on Blackboard. Please note the changes and let me know if you have concerns.
- During scheduled class time MWF 12:20-1:10 pm, I will be online in the Open Classroom. It is my intention to use the Open Classroom as a virtual tutoring space. While I will not require attendance, you can use this time to chat with me and peers, ask questions, and work in-real time on assignments.
- We will still have our final writing conferences, but rather than in-person these will take place on Blackboard Collaborate. More details about scheduling the required conference with me will be posted next week.
- If you have poor internet connection or low data, you can reach me via phone call or text at (417) 319-4947. This is my second line, but all messages are forwarded to my cell phone. Calls are forwarded Monday-Friday 7am to 5pm. You can leave a voicemail or text at any time.

I will be available every weekday for E-meetings; please email, text, or call to schedule. We can decide together what virtual tool we use for the meeting and arrange a time that works for both of us. I know online coursework can be difficult, and without face-to-face meetings, instructions can lack clarity. I will do my best to avoid this problem, but communication is key. If at any point you have questions, please contact me.

The main thing to remember is that you CAN do this, and I am still a resource to you. We are in this together. Check your e-mail and Blackboard EVERYDAY; more information is on the way, and I will let you know about any further changes as soon as I can.

Be responsible citizens and take care of those around you. Stay in touch with the people who support you. Stay safe; stay healthy.

Best wishes,

Ms. Knight



## Appendix C-1: Spring 2020 Email Notification of Changes to the Survey Distribution

Please help me with my research study!

Knight, Alyssa K <Knight096@live.missouristate.edu>

Fri 4/24/2020 11:02 AM

Hello!

I'm not sure if you remember, but very early in the semester I announced there was a research study being conducted within our English 110 class. Dr. Margaret Weaver and I collected consent, so if you are receiving this, **thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study!** This study (and the resulting paper) is part of my fulfillment of my graduate program requirements. I appreciate your participation so much!

As the semester draws to a close, I really need you to complete the anonymous survey; normally, we would simply do this in class on the same day as our course survey. Your responses to the survey will provide critical perspective, and I need as many responses as I can get!

The survey only requires 5-10 minutes of your time and may be completed at your convenience. The survey link will be sent next Monday, April 27, by Dr. Cathie English. Please look out for her email!

By completing the survey, you are reaffirming your participation in the study. Your participation does not hold any impact or bearing over the English 110 course itself; your course grade will not in any way be affected by your responses or lack thereof, but I may send you a reminder closer to the end of the semester.

Thank you in advance for your participation. Your responses will prove invaluable as I investigate communication trends between students and faculty. If you have any questions about the study or the data collected, please contact myself, Dr. Cathie English, or Dr. Margaret Weaver.

All the best,

Ms. Alyssa Knight

*Composition Instructor*

*Graduate Research Assistant*

English Department

Missouri State University

Virtual Office Hours: T/TH 3:00 - 5:00pm [via Google Hangouts](#)

***Confidentiality Notice:** This e-mail message, including attachments, is for the sole use of the intended recipient(s) and may contain confidential and privileged information. Any unauthorized review, use, disclosure or distribution is prohibited. If you are not the intended recipient, please contact the sender by reply e-mail and destroy all copies of the original message.*

## Appendix C-2: Spring 2020 Survey Distribution Email

### English 110 Survey for Ms. Knight

English, Cathie <CathieEnglish@MissouriState.edu>

Mon 4/27/2020 12:09 PM

To: English, Cathie <CathieEnglish@MissouriState.edu>

Cc: Knight, Alyssa K <Knight096@live.missouristate.edu>

Greetings!

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study, *Beyond Classroom Interactions: Influences and Trends Between Entry-Level College Composition Students and Course Instructors*, taking place in your English 110 course as part of Ms. Alyssa Knight's fulfillment of her graduate program requirements. The research study collects information through three primary means: instructor notes about interactions, course-related emails, and an anonymous survey. Your instructor, Ms. Knight, sent a prior email to communicate that I would provide the survey access link via email.

The survey should only require 5-10 minutes of your time and may be completed at your convenience. By completing the survey, you are reaffirming your participation in the study. Your participation does not hold any impact or bearing over the English 110 course itself; your course grade will not in any way be affected by your responses or lack thereof.

Please click the [Interaction Survey Link](#) so you can fully participate in the research study. All information about you will be kept confidential. To protect your privacy, no information which could identify you appears on the survey.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions about the study or the data collected, please contact myself, Ms. Alyssa Knight, or Dr. Margaret Weaver.

Sincerely,

Dr. Cathie English

*Principal Investigator*

Dr. Margaret Weaver

*Co-Principal Investigator*

Cathie English, Ph.D.  
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**MAKE YOUR  
MISSOURI  
STATEMENT**

