

Teaching English Online: Challenges and Successes

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Abstract: Teaching English--or any subject--online requires industrious, hard working teachers who keep current on technology trends and learning management systems (LMS). Resilience and professional development aid teachers navigating this ever-changing landscape. Without Wisconsin state requirements for online teacher professional development, quality instruction falls solely on teachers and administrators.

Although some districts offer online classes year-round, the high school where I work, Arrowhead Union, offers traditional and blended classes during the school year, while exclusively online classes are only offered only during summer school. Throughout my past decade of teaching these courses, I've made invaluable professional, community, and student connections; learned more about myself and technology; and watched students acquire English skills as they matured academically and personally. But I also experienced challenges and setbacks.

Creative thinkers and educational pioneers are long accustomed to learning, growing and adapting. But because technology constantly changes, online teachers in particular need to remain responsive and reflective. By anticipating roadblocks and collaborating with colleagues and professionals, online teachers can meet student needs.

Teacher Resources and Support

One of the biggest obstacles I encountered teaching online was installing, incorporating, and instituting multiple learning management systems (LMS). In 2003, teachers at my high school used Moodle to electronically store and disseminate course content in online, blended, and face-to-face classes. A few years later, Arrowhead phased out Moodle. According to Donna Smith, Arrowhead's Director of Library Media and Technology, Moodle "was a widely used learning management system. At the time, Moodle user communities and professional development were robust and commonplace A district need only maintain the system on a server and set up a domain name." When Moodle no longer met Arrowhead's needs, Smith contracted with Canvas. While some teachers moved content to Google Classroom, others utilized Canvas. As teachers moved content from one LMS to another, support was provided. Specifically, online teachers participated in several meetings each year, developing protocols and sharing best practices.

At Arrowhead, all online teachers provide students with a welcome letter (Appendix A) highlighting course procedures, teacher office hours and LMS information. In this letter, students learn about a mandatory face-to-face meeting (prior to the course start date) where the teacher will field questions and introduce content. Similar protocols from all online instructors allow for transparency and for students to accurately gauge what will be required. Once enrolled in the course, students have the opportunity to watch a welcome video. Most instructors introduce themselves, state course goals and encourage students to raise questions and concerns.

To help teachers instruct online, in 2013, Smith and I created an online teacher expectation rubric (Appendix B). This rubric allows teachers to assess themselves on daily visible presence (responding to students within 24 to 48 hours regardless of weekends or holidays); constructive posts; comments that respectfully challenge students; contact with parents, as needed; and engaging activities including events, lectures, guest speakers, discussions and tutoring. Furthermore, where in-school collaborative time is not provided, teachers could reference online communities and discussion boards. Specifically, in Canvas, the Commons allows educators to "find, import and share resources." In Moodle community forums, instructors share ideas and connect. Other

resources include the *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* (JOLT), International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), and the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching (iNACOL).

Meeting Student Needs

During Arrowhead's six-week summer school session, students might find themselves at sleep-away camps, working 40-hour weeks, or traveling. With the flexibility of online classes, students can build their own schedules. In end-of-class surveys, 25 percent of my online students report regularly accessing course content between 50 and 250 miles from school on phones, tablets and computers.

Offered to incoming juniors and seniors, online summer school English classes include composition, creative writing, journalism, and college strategies. Last year, 89 students enrolled in these online classes. The online summer school course offerings match what is offered to Arrowhead's juniors and seniors during the school year. For freshmen and sophomores, summer school offerings remain remedial and face-to-face only.

Smith told me in an email:

We offer online courses at Arrowhead because there is a need for our students to experience self-paced and personalized learning. Online learning takes a lot of discipline and motivation. Students need to be willing to ask questions and troubleshoot technical problems if they arise ... The benefits to our students are many. Online courses help create learners who are independent and persistent. Some learners find they prefer the discussion opportunities and personalized feedback in online courses. As online courses and training become more prevalent in post secondary education and in the workplace, we feel that we are preparing our students through blended and online opportunities at Arrowhead. The time management and communication skills our students practice in online courses will benefit them in all aspects of their future lives.

Annually, in end-of-course surveys, Arrowhead students, at a 90 percent rate, recommend that all students take an online high school course. They recognize that online classes require self-direction, motivation, organization and independence. They also recognize high school as a place to develop these skills in a safe and encouraging environment.

At Arrowhead, online English classes, capped at 15, remain a stark contrast to in-person classes capped at 35. Online classes of 15 allow instructors to monitor student progress and provide individualized attention and faster feedback. Smith says, “Online education creates an awareness of the importance of clear communication on behalf of both the instructors and students.”

In addition to presenting English content, netiquette rules, and information on web tools and the LMS, I monitor student progress. According to the Wisconsin DPI’s FAQ on online and blended learning:

Learning Management Systems (as well as the Student Information System) in online courses often provide a wealth of information about students’ times logged in, times on task, and assessment results. Especially in cases where the student’s pace, time or motivation seems to be a problem, teachers will want to work with the local contact person (sometimes called a local education guide, coach, case manager, mentor, or liaison) for further insight.

At Arrowhead, a secretary serves as a liaison between teacher and student only during the first week of summer school. This secretary contacts students who fail to log on or complete tasks; communicates student concerns to parents; and coordinates adds and drops. These efforts allow teachers to focus on students and instructing. Beyond this contracted time, these responsibilities fall to the teacher.

Special education teachers remain available for online summer school students, and the library is open during regular summer school hours. In the library, students receive technical support, wireless access, and devices, allowing teachers to focus on instruction

and assessment rather than hardware or access issues. Although I do not require students use the library for learning, it remains a hub for academic and technological resources. My office hours are held in the library and, often, students will choose to work there, discussing assignments or collaborating with peers.

At Arrowhead, parents can access Canvas as an observer. This allows them to follow the course and see their son's or daughter's progress. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) list of online teacher responsibilities:

Online courses are particularly suited to keeping parents and guardians informed and involved as they can be given online access to their student's progress and work. Continual communication and collaboration is a key to success. Communication with students, parents, counselors, etc. can be accomplished via phone calls, e-mails, progress reports, screencast videos, texting, announcements on home page, web conferences, and feedback within individual assessments.

For students who fail to complete assigned work, a nudging email or LMS message is the first step. A face-to-face conference is a second step. Often, these contacts propel the resistant student. Initial contact can also be made via web or phone call. Losing points can serve as motivation, as students see how negligence impinges academic success. According to Hamilton and Jorgensen (2017):

If the students remain resistant, a phone call or email home can be the impetus needed. If a student continues to refuse, connecting with a previous teacher or guidance counselor can provide insight (what motivated a student to work in a previous class can often continue to be a motivating factor online). (p. 367)

Additionally, every composition, creative writing, and journalism assignment is completed for an authentic purpose and audience. Writers' markets, with hard deadlines and strict requirements, motivate students with the allure of publication or prizes.

However, if students still refuse to work, parents and I will collaborate and require them either to meet with me or work in the library.

At the end of each summer school session, data is reported to administration, correlating student failures to time spent online. At the end of last year's session, three students failed online English classes. One spent a total of 57 minutes and 23 seconds on the course; another spent 37 minutes and 01 second; the other spent seven hours, 16 minutes and 28 seconds. This is in contrast to successful students who spent a minimum of 60 hours.

In an online class, I want students to get to know me. If students enjoy me and my instruction, they are more likely to increase effort and achievement. To accomplish this, I post videos (shorter than three minutes) highlighting course information, announcements or updates. I record myself informally using my iPhone and then upload the content either directly to the LMS or use a YouTube link. If I see common errors in student work, I create and record mini lessons or lectures. I also provide video resources from Khan Academy or TED Talk. By combining a variety of resources, I scaffold and differentiate.

The work in my online courses relies on student engagement and options, similar to my face-to-face courses during the school year. I present several options or strategies and allow students to choose the task or assignment which will best demonstrate mastery. During online summer school, I utilize writers' markets. Last summer, students wrote haikus for the Milwaukee Haiku Club's [haiku competition](#), poems for the [Milwaukee Public Museum 10th annual poetry competition](#), and essays for [The Capitol Centennial Commission K-12 Art and Essay Writing Competition](#). For each, I required students to understand the authentic audience and compose multiple drafts. Throughout the writing process, I provided individualized feedback.

Online feedback is different from that in face-to-face classes. Whereas in a traditional classroom setting, I confer with students at their desks, the same is not possible online. I've found students can be more sensitive to feedback provided in text comments because they can carry an unintended tone. Utilizing voice comments on Google Docs is one way students can understand my perspective and hear my intention. In Canvas, instructors

can leave feedback for students using text, audio, an attachment or video. The same can be done in SpeedGrader. In addition to addressing my feedback and watching videos and lectures, students read exemplars, complete research, peer edit, and post to discussion boards.

I encourage students to use web tools to demonstrate learning. They explore digital storytelling and create presentations that utilize music, narration, text, photographs, animation and video. In my online classes (in contrast to face-to-face classes), they are allowed to use multimodal text to demonstrate content mastery. Often, they will use PowerPoint, Google Slides, Moviemaker, podcast, montage, infographics, collages or public service announcements to demonstrate learning. They reflected on this in an end-of-course survey:

The example pieces really helped me wrap my brain around what we were doing. Also because the course was online, I could pull up things multiple times to just double check, which was nice.

This class had many different writing assignments which kept variety in the course.

I liked the different resources of different kinds for different ways of learning.

I really enjoyed the assignments where there were videos along with them. I found that they helped inspire my writing and answer questions I had.

Overcoming Challenges

My online summer school courses (similar to my traditional classes) focus on writing for an authentic purpose. But challenges arise when many student writers' markets close during summer months. Specifically, the Sejong Cultural Society offers a [sijo-writing competition](#) that accepts submissions through late February. I asked contest coordinators

if they would allow summer submissions. Although they would not, they offered a different contest solely for my online students. In this competition, each student wrote a sijo poem and submitted it to professor Mark Peterson of Brigham Young University (a renowned expert on Korean poetry). Peterson provided individual feedback to each student and Amazon gift cards to the top three entries. The lesson for me: finding creative solutions is the first step in elevating the opportunities and instruction my students receive.

Arrowhead administrators recognize the time and training it takes to deliver quality online instruction. The technology integrators offer Canvas professional development during weekly professional collaboration time, but no remuneration is offered for course set-up, curriculum development or training when administrators adopt a new LMS. Additionally, technology integrators are not available during summer months. In my tenure teaching online classes, I have transferred content to and from three systems in a laborious and time-consuming process. I anticipate my online teaching will continue to evolve as both technology and students change. I also recognize the importance of utilizing professional development and my colleagues.

When Arrowhead migrated to Canvas, I found it less intuitive than Moodle. Canvas didn't play nicely with Google Docs, my preferred vehicle for providing feedback. To get around this, I created a submission process that fit within Canvas (where students created and shared a Google folder with me). Students expressed frustrations and after the first year, provided feedback:

I personally don't like using Canvas as Google Classroom was easier to use.

My main issue with Canvas is that every assignment from a form had to be copies of the original, not automatic individual forms like Google Classroom. However, I did like the forum-esque communication and I found the grade feedback options helpful.

This was the first time that I really had to use a Canvas page for a class, and it took a bit to adjust from the normal Google Classroom.

I really enjoy Canvas now because of the online courses I took simply because it's a lot more accessible than Google Classroom is. It's easy to see how the course is laid out (modules) and it's easy to keep track of what you've done.

Although no one system will please administrators, teachers, parents and students, the nature of technology requires all stakeholders to modify previous practice to meet current needs. For example, when I started teaching online classes, web 2.0 tools remained a bedrock of quality online instruction. Teachers used web 2.0 tools to instruct, and students used them to demonstrate learning. But a web 2.0 tool used in 2009 may now be defunct. Take Kerpoof. In 2009, it was named the top web 2.0 tool by *Technological Horizons in Education (THE) Journal* (Riedel). But by 2014, it closed its doors. The same was true for number seven on the list: Yack Pack. As Bates (2014) said in "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teachers Who Use Technology," teachers need to "embrace change" and be "extremely thorough and think two steps ahead." This, in addition to course development, curriculum management, instruction, clear procedures, responsive feedback and meeting the needs of each student, remains paramount if students and teachers are to have success online.

Lingering Questions

When the 2013 Wisconsin Act 257 repealed the requirement for 30 hours of professional development for online teachers, it allowed any individual to "teach an online course in a subject and level in a public school, including a charter school, without a license or permit from the department if the individual holds a valid license or permit to teach the subject and level in the state from which the online course is provided." But what does this mean for Wisconsin's online English teachers and the students they serve?

According to Wisconsin DPI's list of online teacher responsibilities, "[I]t is up to the certified teacher to assign the class activities" and that "[T]eachers will need to plan for and coordinate the provision of specially designed instruction and needed supports," provide both summative and formative assessments, and report outcomes to administrators, students, parents and guardians. Although many of these duties are consistent with face-to-face instruction, there are differences in teaching and learning online. First, online classes remain open for learning, 24 hours a day. This requires specific district expectations for feedback and communication timelines. Additionally, content and presentations must be planned and offered in advance. In my online courses, all materials are available on day one, so each student is able to work at his or her own pace. The exigency of online students requires teachers to anticipate roadblocks and offer personalization at the forefront. Because online teaching and learning are done through asynchronous communication, protocols must signal completed work.

According to Wisconsin DPI's State Budget Licensure Changes, since no Wisconsin mandates, state legislature, or regulation monitors teacher training, practices, or online instruction quality, educators and their administrators must develop, offer, and utilize quality online instruction. Teaching online comes with a responsibility to meet not only the state content standards, but also the International Association for K-12 Online Learning's (iNACOL) National Standards for Quality Online Teaching. According to the Wisconsin DPI's FAQ on online and blended learning:

As teachers go through classes, they must reflect on what works and what can be improved. Student assessments and participation can be used as data. State and other standardized tests can inform the teacher about which standards and objectives students are learning and which may need additional attention.

In every online course I teach, I provide instruction in a variety of ways: written instructions, recorded lectures, YouTube videos, audio files, infographics. Diversifying instruction, as well as the ways in which students can demonstrate learning, helps meet a variety of student needs. Course organization, clear procedures and engaging materials also increase student and instructor enjoyment and success.

At Arrowhead High School, students rely on traditional and online classes to prepare them for the future. As instructors, a responsibility remains (regardless of state requirements) to provide quality, personalized and effective instruction both in person and online.

At the end of my online summer school course last year, one of my students said, “I wasn’t sure about this course at first, but as the course continued, I learned more about my writing and myself which was what I was hoping for.” And in the end, that is my ultimate goal, regardless if I’m teaching online or in person.

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Appendix A: Welcome Letter



The Arrowhead Union High School District

South Campus/District Office
700 North Avenue
Hartland, Wisconsin 53029
(262) 369-3611
www.arrowheadschoools.org

North Campus
800 North Avenue
Hartland, Wisconsin 53029
(262) 369-3612

Dear Online Summer School Student:

Welcome to online summer school! You are enrolled in Creative Writing Journalism

Your class will run for six weeks, from Monday, June 12 through Tuesday, July 18. You will need Internet access every day in order to be successful. There is one face-to-face meeting, but after that, you will work solely online. Before the face-to-face meeting, please make sure you are enrolled in the appropriate Canvas course.

DUE DATES: All assignments must be submitted by 11:59pm on the day the assignment is due or the assignment will be considered late (and reduced by 50%). I will look for assignments in the Google folder (Last Name, First Name) you created and shared with me. You must also give me editing rights (jorgensene@arrowheadschoools.org), so I can comment on your work. If you're going to be out of town, you must work ahead to complete the assignment(s) before you leave. You must notify me at the required meeting if this applies to you. All comments will be placed on your Google documents. All grades will be posted in Skyward.

REQUIRED MEETING: There is one mandatory, face-to-face meeting before the course begins. During this time, you will view assignments and due dates. Attendance at this meeting will confirm your enrollment in the course and provide you with the opportunity to ask questions face-to-face. Please **bring your device** and come to **N199** during one of these times (if these times do not work for you, please email me to set up a different face-to-face meeting time):

Wednesday, June 7th from 11am until 11:45am OR Thursday, June 8th from 6:45am until 7:30am

OFFICE HOURS: Office hours are available by appointment. We can arrange a face-to-face meeting during library hours or meet online. During summer school, the South Campus library will be open from 7:30a.m. until noon, Monday through Thursday. Remember about this resource in the event you have an issue with your personal device. If you need something, the best way to contact me is via email.

REMINDER: Your first assignment is due Tuesday, June 13. This is a credit course. If, for whatever reason, you decide the class is not for you, **the last day to drop without receiving an F is Thursday, June 15**. Contact the AHS office to drop.

I'm looking forward to class!

Sincerely,
Ms. Jorgensen

District Office Fax (262) 367-7406
South Campus Office Fax (262) 367-4693 • Office of Student and Staff Learning Fax (262) 367-2014
North Campus Office Fax (262) 369-0996 • Activities Office Fax (262) 367-1870



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Teachers should communicate online in multiple ways:

<i>Location</i>	<i>Type of Message</i>
Welcome Page	General course announcements from instructor to class
General Course Discussion Area	Questions related to course logistics, functionality, etc.
Weekly Discussion Areas	Communications around specific weekly activities
Instructor's Office Chat Room	Scheduled live chats with instructor (announce open hours)
Student Chat Room or Forum	Option for live chats among class members
Course E-mail	Individual communication between class participants and/or instructor

- Summer school classes should end on the last Tuesday or Wednesday of summer school; grades are due on the last Thursday of summer school (typically around noon).
- Do not make changes to your class after the first day. This way, if kids want to work ahead, they know the expectations won't change.
- Teachers may want to "Develop a course expectations agreement for students to read and 'accept' as an online assignment during the first week of the course. This document will help students to understand what is expected of them and what they can expect from the instructor" (Kleinman, 2005, pp.13-14).
- In calculating participation (or attendance) a teacher can look at
 - Total number of hours logged
 - Total number of log-ins
 - E-mail/message activity (number of emails initiated, number of emails replied to)
 - Total number of discussion forum posts
 - Peer evaluation results

ONLINE TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

- Each online teacher should complete a course in online instructing or receive administrative approval to teach an online class.
- Online classes will be listed on transcripts exactly like all other classes are. [Example: Online Advanced Composition and Advanced Composition/Hybrid and Advanced Composition will all be AdvComp on transcripts.]
- Teachers are not required to log on to their course management system on the weekend; however, teachers will make their best effort to respond to students within 72 hours, regardless of weekends and holidays.
- Teachers will log on each day summer school takes place. If teachers are unable to log on daily, they will communicate schedules to his or her students.
- Teachers need to offer content in a variety of ways (reading, listening, watching, etc.).
- Online summer school teachers cannot give students an incomplete or a grade extension.
- Teachers need to have students interact with each other (teachers need to build a classroom community).
- Teachers need to offer face-to-face meetings.
- Students should work online for approximately the same amount of time as they would for an in-person class.

TEACH NETIQUETTE

- Teachers need to discuss netiquette. Students need to
 - use standard English
 - use spell check
 - revise and edit their messages before sending them
 - use appropriate subject lines that reflect the content of the message
 - be polite and careful
 - avoid ALL UPPERCASE LETTERS!!! or multiple exclamation marks, as it is sometimes difficult to understand the tone of the message
 - avoid sarcasm and irony, which can be misinterpreted by the reader
 - be inclusive (including both their classmates and the teacher)
 - send group messages to all members, as well as to the instructor, to ensure all lines of communication stay open.



ARROWHEAD ONLINE TEACHER RUBRIC

	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
Announcements	Teacher posts announcements weekly. Announcements contain information on assignments, due dates, exams or other relevant information; they provide focus that goes beyond due dates and general information and set the stage for future learning. Teachers should not delete announcements	The teacher posts two announcements per week, added on different days. The teacher includes a variety of announcements: voice, graphic, video, color, animation, etc.
Course and Curriculum	The teacher updates course content to reflect current dates and provide a syllabus with accurate information. Before the course starts, the teacher updates links, includes instructor/principal contact information and office hours and indicates availability. The teacher remains in compliance with fair use and copyright law, using citations and obtaining permission, where appropriate. The teacher reports curriculum concerns to Bonnie Laugerman.	The teacher revises or improves the previous online course.
Communication and Collaboration	The teacher participates and is present in all activities (discussion boards, wikis, blogs, voice boards, etc.) and takes an active role in creating a dynamic community. The teacher encourages involvement and creates a positive classroom culture. The instructor uses a variety of approaches to move the discussion forward and to engage students. The instructor is present and visibly active a minimum of four days a week and consistently monitor the course and address inappropriate comments immediately.	The instructor has a daily visible presence and postings are constructive to the discussion. The instructor adds comments that respectfully challenge students.
Grading and Feedback	Within four days, the teacher provides grade assignments and/or detailed and specific feedback at least once per unit. The teacher provides feedback that is professional, positive, personal and encouraging.	The teacher gives feedback or provides grades more than once per unit. The teacher provides feedback within three days of the due date.
Communication	Initial student contact is made within the first 48 hours and continued a minimum of three times per week. The teacher responds to phone calls or emails from students, parents, principals, etc. within 72 hours. The teacher updates Skyward weekly.	The teacher makes individual home contact on an as needed basis. The teacher contacts parent/guardian if student drops below a C-. The teacher updates Skyward on a daily basis and responds to phone calls or emails from students, parents, principals, etc. within 24 hours. The teacher documents all individual contact.
Instruction	The teacher supports, advertises and communicates office hours, events, lectures, guest speakers and any other announcements in a timely manner.	The teacher facilitates and/or presents an event, lecture, guest speaker, class discussion, tutoring center, or class review that would be available and beneficial across content areas. The teacher archives all activities or assignments for future use and makes these archives available for all future classes and teachers.
Intervention	The teacher accepts assignments that are submitted late (although this cannot happen during the last week of summer school).	The teacher allows students to re-do assignments (or portions of assignments), allows students to turn in additional related work to improve understanding, creates alternate assignments to accommodate struggling or gifted students, creates and documents alternate work submission schedules for students who fall more than a week behind and helps students catch up.
Administrative Requirements	The teacher follows the procedures outlined in the employee handbook, is available for office hours, enforces appropriate use policy, and submits all required grade updates, progress reports, etc. The teacher logs into the course regularly (at least four days a week), and demonstrates his or her presence via announcements, discussion board participation, grades, answering emails, etc. The teacher ensures instructional modifications—required by a special education student’s IEP or 504—are met.	The teacher logs on daily (including weekends and holidays). The teacher includes modified assignments for students of varying abilities. The teacher includes and offers CMC/other AHS resources to help students with special needs.
Professional Development	The teacher is aware of best online practices and uses those practices in their course.	The instructor engages in activities that serve to enhance the quality, availability and understanding of online learning. Example: A teacher could enroll in an online course, college course, webinar, conference or symposium. The teacher could follow experts on Twitter or another social network.
Student Evaluations	The teacher averages above a three in student evaluations.	The teacher scores between a four and five in all categories.
Student Achievement	The teacher experiences a successful completion rate which meet historical rates for the course.	The teacher experiences successful completion rates that exceed historical rates for the course.