

# Chapter 1: Personal



**On the Tee!** The **P** in PARS stands for **Personal**. We feel being personal is one of the most important things you can do as an online writing instructor. Personalizing the classroom, your instruction, or (if you're in administration) the way that you handle your writing instructors is key to success. We encourage you to consider the myriad of ways you can be personal as you develop your OWI practice.

## Personal OWI: Theory, Practice, and Significance to OWI

We all have had that one professor who went out their way to connect with us. In fact, these connections might be the very reason we're teachers now. Jessie remembers a time when a professor called her on the phone after some emails they had exchanged regarding Jessie's concerns about the class. Because the instructor thought Jessie was struggling, she wanted to make sure she was okay and was getting the help she needed. Casey remembers his first Ph.D. class where the professor went out her way to work with him and help make connections between his background in creative writing and literature with rhetoric and composition—he understood Hurston and Vonnegut just fine, but Burke made no sense to him (and still doesn't!).

When it comes to creating and teaching an online writing course one of the biggest obstacles, you'll encounter is that you cannot duplicate the face-to-face class. As much as you may want to and as much as you may try, it's just not possible because the experience occurs in a very different medium. However, we do

think you can get close to mirroring some of the best elements of a writing class and share in the joy of learning as a group of developing writers. We believe that if you take steps to make online spaces personal and inviting, as you would if the students were physically present, you can drastically change the experience your students have with learning to write in a digital classroom. It's incredibly important to be personal and show your students who you are and that you are there in the online classroom with them; that you're part of the experience with them. As instructors, we like to emphasize that we are here to help! We go out of our way to encourage students to take us up on our offers for help and students like when you are there to help. Strategically emphasizing that you're there to help them goes a long way but in an online course this gesture goes even further because of the isolation many students feel.

Yet, online writing instruction doesn't have to be impersonal or isolating just because you never get to actually meet in person. In fact, being personal is one of the most important things you can do as an online writing instructor in order to forge connections with your students. Warnock (2009) illustrates this by arguing that "Writing instructors have a unique opportunity because writing-centered online courses allow instructors and students to interact beyond content delivery . . . to build a community through electronic means" (p. xix). We want to encourage everyone to capitalize on this "unique opportunity" and make a concentrated effort to create a personal student user experience.

Whether we like it or not, the act of learning to write and the act of writing are fraught with emotion; these are incredibly personal processes. When we teach face-to-face, we can address this emotion with students through our tone of voice, body language, sharing of personal struggles with writing, etc. When writing instruction moves online, connecting with students proves more challenging, so that's where being personal in specific areas of the course can help to create similar connections as one would in a traditional face-to-face course. Sharing your own struggles with the students in the introduction discussion or your professor biography goes a long way in showing students that you acknowledge that writing is an emotional journey. Writing is personal and teaching is personal—connecting with students is a way to confirm students understand various elements of the course. With this comes the need to provide more direction to the students and guide them through the online space. When a student responds to a question in class of "Did that make sense?" with a "Yeah." We can tell if the student is saying "yeah" to confirm understanding or if they are saying "Yeah?" to confirm confusion and it's important to pay attention to these subtle nuances. In online courses we have to decode student responses in email and discussion posts which further complicates our ability to see if they are "getting it" or if they need more help but are afraid to ask.

When you open your courses, you should remind students that when it comes to an online class compared to a face-to-face one, the type of workload can be

similar, but the time and energy spent on that workload is likely triple because of the additional text/reading and the lack of normal clarification and interaction a student might get from attending a physical class. You will find that some students may initially believe that an online course is easier to take. Thinking back to our undergraduate days before most classes were being offered online, there were “self-paced” classes (correspondence classes) where the instructor would hand out the schedule, due dates, office hours, and that was it. The concept of “self-paced” was quickly replaced with “fast-paced” as the professor was rarely around and due dates piled up. Unfortunately, online courses (especially poorly designed ones) have kept a little of that correspondence course presence to both students and outsiders. Many still view online courses as correspondence courses and students are sometimes surprised when they enter an online course and they actually have restricted due dates, access and forced interaction with their peers. By creating a personal approach to your class, you can mitigate some of that false correspondence course appeal to the online writing course. You can make it clear that your course is similar to a F2F course and that students will be expected to act and interact as they would in a F2F course. Focusing on creating a personalized course can position you as a guide who helps students achieve the goals of class at a pace that does not leave others behind or allow others to work in isolation of the rest of the class as the earlier correspondence courses did. Providing students with a personal learning experience takes additional effort. In a traditional F2F course, students have the opportunity of chatting with their instructor before and after class, during office hours, or during scheduled conferences. These options for contact with the instructor are not present in online courses, so it’s important to build them into your course through the course design and through your instruction of the course.

## Personal Design

The course design is the first place you can start using personal approaches/elements that invite students on a journey of learning together. Designing a class experience is more than just designing documents (syllabus, writing assignments, etc.). As the instructor you must take a user-centered design approach. That is, the student user must be at the forefront and their needs evaluated (Borgman & Dockter, 2018). Personalizing the online classroom/CMS with images, putting your picture on emails, combining your voice with written feedback, and creating videos that walk students through assignments and lesson plans can help you engage in a personable partnership with your students. These small gestures of personalization can also help establish your *ethos* with your students. By doing these few things, you can create a dynamic interaction and collaboration with your students and bridge lack of face-to-face interaction.

Personality plays a key role in how you approach your online writing course

(Hewett & Martini, 2018). We know from experience that not all people are cut out to teach online and some need a lot of extra training to make them great online instructors. We encourage instructors to evaluate their own personalities and be honest about the type of interactions they value. If one-on-one connections through office hours or writing workshops is something you value, you might consider how you can build those into your own online courses using web conferencing programs. We encourage instructors to evaluate their own experiences as a student and reflect on what they enjoyed from each of their instructors' personalities. In reflecting on your own experiences it's also important to look at what you value, what your personality type is and how it will translate to the online space, "... you should consider how your personality influences the way you interact with your students . . . Students need to 'see' you—and each other—in a certain way to have a productive class experience" (Warnock, 2009, pp. 182-183). When we teach online, we both have inviting personalities and we encourage students through multiple means to interact with us. Sometimes we make them interact with us through writing workshop meetings. Our personalities also drive us to make the classroom design more inviting because we don't want students to be put off when they first enter the online space. We want them to understand that we've worked hard to create this personal experience and we want them to see in the design elements how much work we've put in to make them feel welcome. However, we acknowledge that this takes effort. It takes time, planning, and one might argue, extra awareness to be personal in a space where the very nature is impersonal but there are so many opportunities to incorporate personal elements into your online writing course. In addition to inviting connection, community, camaraderie, aesthetics and sensory experience play a strong role in making a course personal so keep that in mind as you design these online class experiences for your students.

The way in which online courses are traditionally designed and facilitated runs counter to our natural instincts to learn through multiple means (aural, tactile, auditory, visual). Therefore instructors/designers must work harder to create learning opportunities that appeal to the various senses. We know that the importance of learning in "robust, sensory rich environments and engaging activities that bring students into contact with one another is how true learning occurs . . . passive learning is simply not compatible with the way the human mind processes information" (Ruefman, 2016, p. 8). In other words, students are more engaged in courses that have a social sense of community, that include sensory details and engaging material and that pay attention to the entire experience, not just the content to be learned. Addressing the geographical distance in online courses is the eternal struggle and designing an online student user experience is something that takes a little practice. In looking at how global education has evolved, personalizing the classroom can also go a long way in assisting learners of other cultures. In the article, "Cultural Dimensions of Learning: Addressing

the Challenges of Multicultural Instruction,” authors Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) adapt Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov’s (2010) cultural dimensions to education, forming the cultural dimensions of learning framework (CDLF). In this piece, they argue for instructors to pay attention to cultural dimensions when designing courses. They note that, “The growing multicultural nature of education and training environments makes it critical that instructors and instructional designers, especially working in online learning environments, develop skills to deliver culturally sensitive and culturally adaptive instruction” (p. 1). Essentially, when designing your online course, if you are personal in your approach to teaching, you will invite these global learners to step out of their cultural-training and become engaged with the course.

Aesthetics play a large part in the personalization of the online classroom. Including an instructor contact card or instructor bio with a picture allows your students to place a face with a name. You can also include an introduction welcome video which allows students to see you as you welcome them to the course. Introductory videos can also be used to help teach students how to navigate the course. Even if your school has a standard course template where all of the course information appears in the same place across disciplines it can help to provide students with an introductory tour in case they’ve never taken an online course before at your school, or they simply need a refresher on where course elements are located. Using stock images throughout the course is another way to make the course more personal and inviting. Where you place the weekly “to do” list you can place an image of a checklist or an image of a calendar. The office or questions area of the course can have a picture of an office door, or a desk as well as a picture of you (see the Drive for Show, Putt for Dough! example in this chapter). Other options for enhancing the aesthetics of the online course in an effort to create a more personal experience include:

- Providing Direction (instructions, plus audio/video overview)
- Reinforcing Content (making content accessible in multiple formats)
- Offering Constructive Feedback (screen capture, audio feedback) (Ruefman, 2016, p. 12-14).

There are so many ways to make your online course more personal for the students. Spending a little time with the course design and incorporating some of these personal elements will go a long way in helping your students feel more connected to you and to the course material. While these things may seem trivial and minor, they make a big impact on the student user experience. Digital technologies are helping to break the boundaries of geographic difference of online courses but you don’t have to be a technology wiz to incorporate some of these small personal elements. Check out The OWI Community ([www.owicommunity.org](http://www.owicommunity.org)) for quick tips, suggested technologies and other ways to design a personal course.

## Personal Instruction

One major criticism of distance education is the lack of personal connection with students. And because writing is such a personal act, online writing instruction proves even more challenging when it comes to creating a personal connection. Every instructor usually develops his or her own way of showing their personality online, but there are several direct ways instructors can make themselves more personable to their students. We have found from experience that because the online course is so disconnected from physical cues (body language, eye contact, voice tone, etc.) students feel insecure and struggle to develop a relationship with the instructor unless the instructor is personal and invites that relationship. We know that in an online course personal connections are harder to come by and those relationships take more effort but we also echo the sentiment that “Interpersonal communication always matters in an educational setting, but it seems so much more crucial in an online environment where most of the talk is conducted textually” (Hewett, 2015, p. 226). Instructing students from a distance requires more work on the instructor’s part. It challenges instructors to be their best self in every mode of communication and that’s hard! Creating your own strategy for personalized online instruction aids in making the student user experience better and it helps to forge a stronger community bond in the course.

Another way that personalized instruction helps is that it addresses some of the cultural differences and views of power present in global learners. In looking at the power distance dimension in education, Hofstede et al. (2010) note that in some cultures, large-power-distance cultures, the parent-child inequality is continued in schooling with the teacher-student relationship (p. 69). In large power-distance cultures, the authority that parents hold over children is reinforced through schooling and respect is given to the teacher figure, just as it is given to a parent figure. Further, the education that a student receives is teacher-centered (the teacher is the keeper of the knowledge). In small-power-distance cultures, the roles are different and the teacher and student are viewed as equals; the teacher takes on more of the coach role, than the authoritarian role (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.69). In small-power-distance cultures, education is student-centered, therefore students are encouraged to ask questions, argue with the teacher and find their own educational strategy (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.70). We all have had the student say they would rather learn from the teacher since that is “what they are paying for,” but by making your instruction personal and engaging, students can move into a more dynamic and collaborative learning space. The personal instruction in the course invites students to engage in a more developed learning community and help to reduce the teacher student power dynamics.

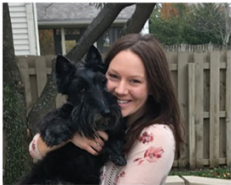
As advances in technology allow connection to happen more frequently, our culture is changing to a global culture and, “As technology continues to



evolve, we are no longer limited to physical interactions; we connect with others worldwide, our world becomes smaller, and the boundaries between the real and the virtual dissolve. In this new era of rapid technological advances, the value of creating a sense of presence cannot be ignored” (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010, p. 111). We feel that there are many ways you can show your presence and increase the personal aspects of your instruction. For example, using students’ names goes a long way in making your interaction with students more personal. One way to ensure a personal connection with students occurs is to focus on making connections with students during the first week. Warnock (2009) suggests ice breaker activities during the first week of class as a way to help shape one’s teaching identity. He notes how he spends a lot of time in the first week responding individually to each student’s ice breaker activity in an effort to build a connection with each student surrounding common interests (2009, p. 8). He further argues that “In an online class, brief conversational links with students go a long way toward making them feel welcome and connected. When you teach writing, these feelings can build the mutual respect necessary to work with students on their core writing and thinking skills” (2009, p. 123). In other words, be human!

We feel that one area of the online classroom that is a very easy place to be personal is in the instructor information section, sometimes known as the virtual office. Both of us utilize this space to show to our students that we indeed have a face and we are a human, not a computer. In some online courses the instructor information section and virtual office (area to ask questions) are separated. We prefer a mixed approach that mimics a traditional F2F setting—a virtual office where students can learn about their instructor, connect with him/her, and ask questions about the course. Utilizing a specific space in the course where students can be reminded that their instructor is a human, can find information on how to connect with the instructor and can seek out help, reduces the feeling of isolation that often accompanies online courses. Further, because this space is public for the entire class to see, it encourages other students to join in and ask questions and seek out a connection with the instructor. Personal touches could include: the instructor’s hobbies/interests, a photograph of the instructor or his/her family, a warm/inviting tone of the writing, the invitation for students to seek out help and help each other, contact information, days off, etc.

Figure 1.1 illustrates one way to make the instructor introduction more inviting and personal. Including some of your hobbies, interests and a little information about your family helps your students know that you’re indeed a real person with real interests and that you have a life just as they do. When an instructor starts sharing his or her experience with writing, such as in a biography introduction to the class it invites students to share their own experiences forming bonds among instructor and student and student to student. Figure 1.1 also illustrates how instructors can create a sense of their presence early on in the course.



I love my job and I love learning about and teaching college writing. I entered the field and became an instructor because writing was always difficult for me. I struggled in both high school and college with writing and with getting my thoughts into coherent texts. I tend to write like I talk, which is all over the place!

As my career has grown, I have had great opportunities to teach multiple sections of college writing both face-to-face and online at several different universities.

I am pursuing a PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric. So, I'm in a similar boat as you...I'm also in school. I understand that going back to school takes a lot of dedication, time and effort!

In my free time, (if I ever have any), I like to spend time with my husband and my dogs, (all three Scottish Terriers) Gus and Zoey and Luna. I also enjoy watching NFL football, college basketball, cooking great food, trying new recipes, being outside and working out.

I'm looking forward to working with all of you this term!  
Please don't hesitate to contact me for help :)

*Figure 1.1 Instructor Bio. This figure illustrates a Personal way to create an instructor bio for your online writing course.*

Presence in an online course is “social, psychological and emotional” and the reason creating a personal presence is so imperative is that as humans, we are social beings, “When the social aspect is absent, we tend to crave it and look for ways to accommodate its absence. Our social nature is integral in our perceptual process when interacting with others not only in the real world but also in the online environment” (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010, pp. 6-7). Creating this social aspect in your course is possible, but it takes direct effort. One way you could help students feel comfortable interacting is to give them a space (like a discussion thread) where they can post and talk to their peers, share their creative work, pictures, etc. Seeing each other and you (as the instructor) as human beings with real lives helps to support the social bond in online courses. Creating student-to-student and instructor-to student connections early helps to establish a sense of community in the class, striving to create “links” between the students and the instructor helps to “create an audience for students,” and in doing so helps bridge the gap of writing to an undefined audience that is so challenging for traditional face-to-face students, and further exacerbated for online students (Warnock, 2009, p.8). As the instructor you can model this social bond by facilitating a discussion based on non-class related topics and help to create “links” and a real picture of a defined reading audience for your students. Casey shows his students who their audience is by creating an instructor information card in the syllabus. By including your contact information and availability, you invite students to communicate with you and reiterate that you are in fact a person, not a computer (see Figure 1.2).

We have seen a lot of insights and strategies for personalizing the online classroom and an instructor’s approach to teaching the course in distance education scholarship. Research shows that creating a personal element in online courses can increase retention. In their study on community college online courses



and social presence, Liu, Gomez, & Yen (2009) found that a constant marker of persistence in online courses was “developing integrated social and learning communities” (p. 172). We have found this to be true in our own work as online instructors. We both have reached out to students to keep them from dropping off in progressing through the course. We have been able to solve many student concerns and issues through a quick phone conversation or web conference. We have seen firsthand the value of these personal interactions instructors can make and we want to reiterate their importance in creating and sustaining a successful student learning experience.



## WRA 101

### Writing as Inquiry

**Casey McArdle**

email@email

Zoom address: link to Zoom

Online office hours: days & times

My name is Casey McArdle and I will be your guide this semester as we traverse the rewarding waves of writing, reading, and researching.

*Figure 1.2 Instructor Contact Information. This figure illustrates a Personal way to create an online instructor contact card.*

This need to feel a connection to other learners proves to be even more important in a writing course as the online course setting forces writing (a very personal thing) to become a very social act. The very nature of online courses makes writing both personal and social because the course is so text dependent. We have found in our experience that students want a social experience, even if it's in an online course; humans are social and they want their courses online to feel social and it's not so much that a class is actually social but more that it gives off the appearance of being a social community, “A student with a positive perception of social presence maintains a high degree of interaction and collaboration with peers, and is more likely to successfully complete a community college online course with a better grade” (Liu et al., p. 173). Instructors should take the lead in making the online classroom a safe space to share their writing by sharing some of their own writing and inviting conversation. Online courses then become a space for sharing very personal stuff and that can be intimidating to students who are already self-conscious about how well they think they write. We feel that instructors can help facilitate safe classroom connections by inviting students to share and interact and see themselves and the others

in the course as more than just computers interacting in a digital space. Other suggestions include:

- Demonstrate When and How to Communicate
- Consider Tone in Both Asynchronous and Synchronous Settings
- Teach Through Modeling
- Be a Thoughtful Communicator (Hewett, 2015, pp. 228-249)

Other ways that instructors can facilitate a more personal experience is by emailing students or giving them a phone call when they miss an assignment or just stop participating. We've both had really good experiences helping students get back on track. Students appreciate the extra effort of you taking just a few minutes to reach out and see if they are okay and if there's anything you can do to help them get back on track. We have found small personal gestures such as emailing or calling students who just stop participating can also help with retention. They realize that they're not out there alone taking your course in isolation so they become more motivated to participate again. Additionally, we've also found that once you make that contact with the missing or inactive student it encourages more communication. Both of us have had a quick phone call with a student and that broke the ice for the rest of the semester and the student started asking questions and getting clarification on confusing aspects of the course or assignments. As you continue to develop your skills as an online instructor, you will find your own unique ways of personalizing your instruction. The possibilities really are endless.

## Personal Administration

Within Personal Administration we feel there are two levels: serving faculty, and in doing so, serving students. While we discuss administration in other chapters, for this personal section we believe it begins with being selfless and treating your faculty and others with respect. This may sound like something that does not need to be said, but in our experience it does. As an administrator you're operating on multiple levels. You're serving your department, your faculty and the students who take your writing courses, you're also a researcher and scholar in the field and likely you have a family and personal interests (Hesse, 2016). All of these things pull at your time and energy but one of the first things you learn as you move into administration is that "it's not about you anymore." Many of your colleagues are not meeting with you virtually to see how you are doing, they have questions and situations they need to share with you and now it's your job to listen. Personal administration begins by acknowledging that your faculty needs you. They need you for training and ongoing support to successfully teach writing courses online, they need you to support them and their students, and they need you to be there for them when teaching feels overwhelming and unfulfilling.

At Michigan State University (where Casey is) there are around 7,000 stu-

dents in our classes for the academic school year and around 60 faculty (both fixed term and tenure). Casey directs two programs on his own, Experience Architecture and Professional and Public Writing, which have over 300 students and 30 faculty combined (one of the degrees is interdisciplinary, which means he works with faculty from other departments across campus). What these numbers mean is: *please have a little compassion for the admins who are doing everything they can*. Now, that doesn't mean you can't take the initiative to learn on your own and report back to your admin teams what you learned. A colleague of Casey's, Mike Ristich, was tasked by his department to look into what might happen if MSU started to shift around 20 sections of FYW to hybrid. Mike got all of the instructors for the hybrid classes together, created a hybrid support group, gathered all of the research he could find, came up with some strategies, did a few surveys, and now meets with faculty and deans across campus to share his results. He then created support documents, protocols, and other resources for onboarding new hybrid faculty and administrators. The research he is conducting could help shape the way the university offers hybrid and online courses in the future.

Personal administration begins with treating your faculty with respect and acknowledging that they are contributors to the larger field of writing studies even if they are just instructors and not producing scholarship or presenting at conferences. Teaching is a contribution to the field and it's your job as the administrator to support and acknowledge their contributions. Building personal relationships with your staff is a way to create a better experience for all.

As a WPA, you don't just impact the way writing is taught as part of the general education curriculum; rather, you shape the campus-wide writing culture, especially with the help of others. Taking the time to build these relationships helps open avenues of future collaboration on writing related projects. Taking the time to build these relationships makes everything you do on campus easier. (Graziano, 2016, para. 4)

Building personal relationships helps facilitate coaching and positions you in a place of both authority (you have much knowledge) and of inspiration (you're there to help make everyone better).

Administering online writing courses and the faculty that teach them requires that you are aware of your audiences (the students, faculty, other school administrators, accrediting bodies, etc.) and respect this diverse group of individuals and their roles in the success of your program. You're creating a user experience for your instructors and your students so it's important to not only be aware of their needs but also respect their limitations. Personal administration recognizes that the skills/knowledge you used to create your own courses can help your instructors create great personal learning spaces for your students. Sharing your knowledge and struggles is one way of being a personal administrator. Respecting your instructors is a large part of directing a writing program but we feel this gets

muddled sometimes when administrators are simply looking for someone to take the class (a teacher to fill a slot of the schedule). You will get some instructors who don't care. Okay. So, work with them. Help them find resources that might be of interest to them but still meet the learning outcomes of the program. Depending on where you work, you might have graduate students teaching in your program while finishing up coursework. Help support them. It might be their first-time teaching. Think about that for a minute. It could be their first time teaching *ever* and their first experience is teaching online where the work and stress is double than a traditional face-to-face classroom. Setup bi-weekly video or F2F conferences with your grad students who are teaching in the program—all at once if possible. Make them super informal. Just maybe 10–20 minutes, tops. Check in on them. Make sure they are doing okay. See what you can do to help them with attendance and technology—share stories from when you were in school and had to teach. Help them connect with each other as their cohort goes through the program. Be sure to do all of this for your new instructors as well—especially the ones you just hired. Even if they have taught online before, get bi-weekly video or F2F conference meetings on the calendar, all in a big digital room, and have them go around and share stories. Bring them in. Don't let them sit out there teaching remotely feeling alone. We talk about how important it is to create a community for students when they take our classes online, do the same for your faculty so they don't feel alone.

Being aware of what your department's and your school's diverse audience needs are allows you to be a more successful administrator. Listening to and supporting faculty (so they can support your students) makes you not only a better teacher, but a more personal administrator. Conveying your school's needs also helps you to be a better administrator. Communication with your faculty is imperative and sharing the student demographics, the school's new online learning initiatives, the available resources for online students really helps support your faculty and allows them to be more successful in their jobs because they get a better picture of the school's goals and a clearer picture of the student learner's needs. One way you can share this information is to model for your instructors how to create personalized spaces for their students. You can do this by creating an online course and a video which explains where personalized elements can occur and how instructors can be more personal with their responses to students. Sharing examples of how instructors can be personal using the online teaching training course (if your institution/department has one) is a great place to illustrate the value of being personal to your staff.

As you begin to do this, know that you need training and support as well, especially if you've never taught online before (Borgman, 2016). A WPA that oversees online courses should have the same opportunities for professional development and formative and summative assessment as their F2F teaching counterparts (Minter, 2015, p. 220). Some online writing program administrators have previous OWI experience (even limited experience counts) and if you're one of

these administrators you can relate to the struggles online teaching presents. We see value in sharing your struggles with your new and existing online faculty and we feel that doing so opens up a personal dialogue about the challenge that is online instruction. Not everyone gets the luxury of having a person who is an administrator solely responsible for the online writing courses position in their department, an Online Writing Program Administrator or an OWPA, but having someone who can provide guidance and insight on online courses is essential (Borgman, 2016). One inexpensive way to accomplish this is by job shadowing. If you come into your position with no online teaching experience it's important that you get training and that you get some experience teaching online ideally before you ask inexperienced instructors to move into the online domain. If you are lacking in experience, take the time to shadow an online course and understand everything that goes into it. One way to improve your ability to lead others is to get experience yourself and "Having a person with OWI experience in an administrative role allows for an advocate for support for the online writing instructors, especially contingent faculty who tend to be marginalized [and] would help professional development of the faculty who are required to, or voluntarily offer to teach the OWI courses" (Borgman, 2016, p. 199). Being able to be an administrator who can lead by example will improve your ethos with your staff and it will help you to create a better writing program, one that includes thoughtfully planned and facilitated F2F and online writing courses. Shadowing a faculty member helps "improve communication across departments" and it allows you to "gain insight into roles and responsibilities" of others (Manchester Metropolitan University, n.d.). One of the first courses Casey taught involved distance education and by shadowing an instructor for an entire semester before his course began, he got to see how assignments were posted online, discussions, homework, and how the teacher created an engaging learning space, helped him to better understand his online teaching for the next semester and for his F2F courses going forward. This also works for graduate students. If you plan ahead, you have the time to develop faculty and graduate students so they can model the right way to approach OWI and hopefully pass it on as they move into other university spaces. The Online Writing Instruction Community Facebook group (<http://facebook.com/groups/owicommunity>) is a great way to network and connect with other online writing instructors to shadow or invite as guest speakers to a graduate seminar or lunch and learn for your faculty (if you're an administrator).

## Final Thoughts

Current technologies cannot accurately duplicate a F2F environment, which is okay, because we're not advocating that you do that. What we are advocating that you do is create a personal space to engage with your students so that they can get the best learning experience. We have talked a bit about why students take online courses (scheduling, inability to make it to campus, accessibility, social

anxieties, etc.) and ideally, they have chosen your online class to learn. By making the experience personal, you are one step closer to helping them reach their goal of learning but you're also allowing them to learn in an inviting environment that allows and encourages them to show their human side. Being personal does so much more than invite your students to be active participants in the course. Using personal elements in your class is the first step in creating a student-to-student and student-to-instructor bond which will facilitate community building in your class for the entire semester. Personalization of the classroom doesn't have to be a huge endeavor, small steps go a long way.

## For the Hole in One!

Do an icebreaker activity! In our years of teaching, we've found the icebreaker activity to be the best way to build connections in the first week of the class. If there is one thing to take away from this chapter, it is that making personal connections with students early is imperative. Oftentimes, students will enter an online course with a misunderstanding of what an online course is and that the course will be work at your own pace (correspondence like). Doing an icebreaker activity early in the course allows students to interact with each other right off and helps them to understand the level of participation and response that will be expected. It further helps students to make connections with each other. For example, if your school offers online and face-to-face courses, some students in the online course could be attending campus courses as well and could form study groups for your online course (we've both had this happen!). The thing with icebreaker activities is that they don't have to be elaborate. They can be as simple as "Tell us who you are, where you're from, and why you're in school now" or they can be a game, such as "Two Truths and a Lie," in which students list two things that are true and one thing that isn't and the rest of the class has to guess the lie.

The icebreaker activity also allows you as the instructor to get to know your students because you can find out what they are motivated by, what they might struggle with (time management, confidence in their writing, etc.), why they returned to school and anything else they might want to share with you and their classmates. Further, it allows you to have a casual, but initial sample of their writing; it can function as a writing diagnostic. Icebreaker activities also provide a great opportunity for instructors to be personal. If you create an icebreaker with the goal of sharing personal information, you as the instructor then end up sharing personal information as you respond to everyone in your class and share your own experiences with their topics. For example, when responding to students, we will usually note how we both worked and attended school at the same time and how we understand what a challenge it is to balance so much at one time; this shows we're understanding of the expectations of supporting ourselves and bettering ourselves through learning. Using an icebreaker activity results in a lot



of great sharing and commiserating that reinforces the old adage “we’re all in this together.”

For more practice and application examples, please visit our site: [www.owicommunity.org](http://www.owicommunity.org).

## Drive for Show, Putt for Dough!

### Personalizing the Virtual Office Space

(Jessie)

As noted in our discussion in this chapter, the virtual office is a great space to make personal. In your virtual office, you can invite students to ask questions in order to reduce the intimidation factor, and help them feel like you’re there to get them through the course. The office space also helps to reduce duplicate questions (from students emailing) because it directs all questions on the course and course materials to a central location. This central location then serves as another space to build and reinforce the learning community you have set up in your virtual classroom.

#### Office Hours and Contact Information

**Office Hours:** I will be holding office hours each week on Mondays and Tuesdays from 8:20 a.m.-10 a.m. EST. During this time you can contact me via email or phone. If these times do not work for you, you can always email me and we can arrange an alternate time.

**Days Off Work:** I take two days off of work each week. I always take Wednesdays and Saturdays off each week.

**Ways to Contact Me:** The fastest way to contact me is by email. You will find that I’m often online during the day. Except for my time off, I check my email multiple times per day and will get back to you within 24 hours or less. If you do not hear from me within 24 hours of sending the message, please assume it wasn’t delivered and send it again.

**My email addresses:** [emailaddress.edu](mailto:emailaddress.edu)

**Telephone:** I am available to take phone calls (but please reserve phone calls for emergency situations and lengthy conversations). My phone number is XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Please be cognizant of time zones when calling. I am on EST, so please don’t call before 7 a.m. or past 9 p.m. on any day of the week.

**Questions for the Professor Thread:** If you have a question, but do not need an immediate answer, you can post your question right here in the Questions for the Professor area. I check that at least once a day and respond within 24 hours on the weekdays and 48 hours on the weekends.



In my online courses, I use a picture of my dogs because they are cute (yes, I’m biased!) and I feel like this lets the students into a glimpse of my life outside of being their instructor; a lot of students have pets of their own, so it helps them to create a “link” with me and my love for animals (Warnock, 2009, p. 8). I use this picture where they are both tilting their heads in opposite directions and they look curious. I tag line it with “Did you say you had questions?” I feel like the use of this image is less intimidating than an image of someone writing or an image of a textbook; using one of my own images reduces the stuffiness of the space and makes it inviting.

Additionally, I also like to welcome students to my office space and encourage them to participate in answering questions if they know the answer. I always include my scheduled office hours, as well as an opportunity to schedule another time to meet (by appointment). I include my phone and email address and a reminder that the space is public so anything they don’t want the whole class to see should be emailed.

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## Making it Personal—Hi, I’m a Human!

### (Casey)

I have shown you what students see when they log into our Course Management System (CMS) (Figure 1.2), but I also send out a number of emails and links to videos that introduce myself, the course, the week, and the first assignment. For example, my standard email to my students for every online class I teach resembles something like this:

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Scholars,



Welcome to **Writing as Inquiry!** My name is Professor Casey McArdle and I will be your guide this summer as we explore the ways writing impacts our interactions with our academic, social, and professional spaces.

Everything you need for the class will be hosted in D2L in terms of documents, readings, the schedule, assignments, and videos. We will also be using Eli Review, which you can log into via D2L. This class runs on US EDT time, so make sure that you adjust your schedule accordingly and turn assignments in on time. We only have 6 ½ weeks together so make sure you check the schedule as we will have an assignment due just about every day.

Here is a video that introduces the class: [Link 1](#)

Here is a video that introduces Week 1: [Link 2](#)

Here is a video that introduces Project #1: [Link 3](#)

We will have many videos over the course of the next few weeks and they will be tailored to our needs as we move through the course. If at any time you have a question or would like to talk, feel free to email me or set up a video conference.

Professor McArdle

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**Each video is under four minutes long to keep their attention**, which can help to personalize the discussion of the topics and assignments. These videos are by no means the same as interacting with them on the first day of a face-to-face class, but I am reinforcing the fact that I am here, that I am a human, and that I care.

You can use a variety of software, but my OS has built in video screen capture, so I do my videos with a box in the lower right corner where students can see me talking while I walk them through the assignments, the week, the readings, and so on. I do everything I can to have it resemble a video conference and structure it so that I can answer as many questions as I can before they contact me. I also make sure that these videos are closed captioned so they are accessible to students with disabilities and for my ESL students (here they get the video where they hear me speak and can follow the script at the bottom of the screen).

Making these spaces personal allows students to feel comfortable and supported in an otherwise cold online environment. If students feel such personal support, their level of engagement and inquiry will increase along with their success in the class.

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