Christian Giovannetti

Professor Mainer

ENC 1102

9 June 2025

Modality and Rhetorical Awareness: A Comparative Study of Writing Course Environments

Writing instruction plays a critical role in developing students' rhetorical awareness. In this paper, rhetorical awareness is defined as one's understanding of audience, context, purpose, and voice in writing. First-year writing courses are often tasked with building this foundational skill. With the recent rise of online and hybrid education, mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and professors have questioned whether or not online courses support rhetorical development as effectively as traditional face-to-face courses. The National Council of Teachers of English has noted that traditional first-year writing (FYW) courses build rhetorical awareness and metacognition in a way that alternative formats struggle to match (Gray 185). At the same time, colleges have rapidly expanded their online course offerings. By 2013, around one-third of college students in the United States were enrolled in at least one online course, and this number has, of course, grown since then (Gray 185). This begs the question: How does modality influence a student's rhetorical awareness?

While there has been a lot of research on online student learning outcomes and digital literacy, fewer studies have directly compared rhetorical awareness outcomes between face-to-face and online writing courses. This article aims to fill that gap by looking at how course modality affects the rhetorical awareness skills of first-year writing students at UCF. Understanding this is critical as schools and colleges grow their online offerings while also attempting to maintain their rigorous writing instruction standards.

Existing articles on the subject offer varied stances on how different modalities impact rhetorical awareness. Docktor and Borgman show how multimedia tools in online courses can minimize rhetorical distance while also enhancing engagement. They claim that audio-visual tools and structured asynchronous interactions can bridge the gaps that are created by the absence of physical presence (Docktor and Borgman 220). On the other hand, Gray demonstrates that structured peer interactions and reflective activities within a hybrid writing studio significantly boost students' rhetorical awareness. Gray argues that intentional and deliberate design in hybrid formats promotes a deeper understanding of rhetorical concepts.

The comprehensive 2021 CCCC OWI report highlights ongoing challenges in online courses. They claimed that there were often times difficulty in maintaining meaningful interaction and providing adequate support for rhetorical development (CCCC 30). The report emphasizes that online courses typically require more pedagogical planning in order to achieve outcomes that even come close to face-to-face courses. To add to this, Ellozy and Mostafa indicate that reflective activities in online courses *could* effectively develop rhetorical skills, but caution that these same activities may not fully replicate the immediate interactive activities that can only be found in physical classrooms.

Other scholars in the field, such as Warnock, further back the idea that online courses require different approaches than face-to-face courses. He emphasizes that adapting traditional rhetorical practices is crucial for online courses and that instructors must integrate synchronous and asynchronous communication strategies to maintain students' rhetorical engagement (Warnock 18).

Overall, these scholars acknowledge the potential for developing rhetorical awareness while also recognizing that in order to reach this potential, careful pedagogical design and

intentional incorporation of both reflective and interactive elements must be employed. This literature sets the stage for further research into how specific modalities might distinctly influence students' rhetorical development.

For this research, I conducted a survey of 20 first-year writing students at UCF. These students consisted of ten from face-to-face courses and ten from online courses. They completed surveys designed to assess their own perceived development of rhetorical awareness, the frequency and quality of their instructor feedback, as well as any kind of peer interaction. Survey questions included:

1. Rate your confidence in identifying and adapting your writing to different audiences.

2. Describe the frequency and quality of instructor feedback you received.

3. Explain how class interactions influenced your understanding of rhetorical situations.

4. Provide an example of an activity that most effectively helped you understand rhetorical concepts.

5. What improvements, if any, would enhance your ability to develop rhetorical awareness in your course modality?

Responses were analyzed using thematic coding. My initial open coding grouped responses into themes such as audience awareness, peer interaction, and instructor interaction. When I got to axial coding, I then established connections between modality and the students' perceived rhetorical growth.

The findings from the survey show fairly clear differences in how rhetorical awareness developed across different modalities. Face-to-face students were consistent in emphasizing class discussions and immediate instructor feedback as critical to developing their rhetorical awareness skills. One face-to-face student noted, "Discussing audience directly in workshops

helped me see how my choices affected reader interpretations." Another student described how peer reviews in real-time gave them essential insights into audience perception.

However, online students frequently mentioned that they felt far less engaged due to reduced peer interactions. One online student said, "Journals were helpful in thinking deeply about audience, but without direct peer feedback, testing these ideas was challenging to me." A lot of online also described a need for more instructor presence or just clearer feedback in order to guide their rhetorical decisions.

Other students indicated a desire for more synchronous interactions in online settings. One student said, "Occasional live sessions would've helped clarify expectations and would've given me an opportunity for instant feedback." Statements like these show the importance of intentional synchronous activities along with the typical asynchronous activities.

These findings align well with the already existing literature that emphasized intentional instructional design. Gray's hybrid studio model shows the effectiveness of structured peer interactions, and this supports the need for more intentional interaction designs in online courses. Doctor and Borgman's endorsement for multimedia tools also aligns with the responses that highlighted the absence of meaningful interactions when these tools weren't utilized effectively. Warnock's insights even further validate the students' calls for integrated synchronous activities.

This paper confirms that modality has a significant influence on rhetorical awareness through how interactions are structured and also how they are implemented. Face-to-face courses naturally facilitate spontaneous engagement with rhetorical concepts, allowing for immediate feedback and deeper insights. Online courses, on the other hand, must deliberately incorporate structured interaction elements in order to match face-to-face effectiveness.

The findings themselves suggest that teachers and professors in online writing courses should give priority to enhancing interaction and feedback in order to replicate the strengths of face-to-face courses. Specifically, integrating synchronous video discussions, structured peer review activities, and clear instructor feedback may just bridge the current engagement gaps between the two modalities.

This research highlights the necessity of thoughtful pedagogical planning in online education. Further research on the matter might explore specific online tools, the longitudinal effects of modality on rhetorical skills, or even comparative studies across diverse institutional contexts. Another thing future research may want to investigate extensively is hybrid modalities, as these could offer a solid middle ground between the two modalities.

Understanding the effect of modality on rhetorical awareness is becoming increasingly important, given the rapid expansion of digital education in recent years. Ensuring equitable rhetorical development across all modalities will require continued research and pedagogical innovation.

Appendix A

Please confirm your consent to participate in this research study:
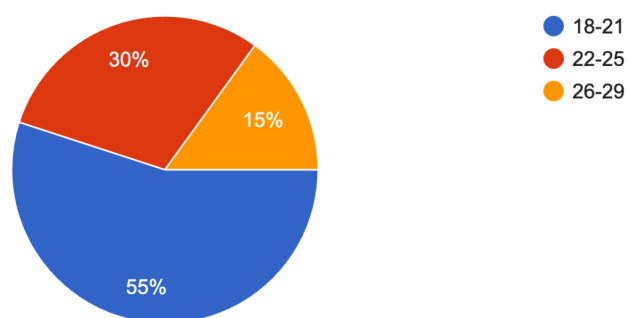20 responses

I consent to participate in this study ... 20 (100%)

0   5   10   15   20
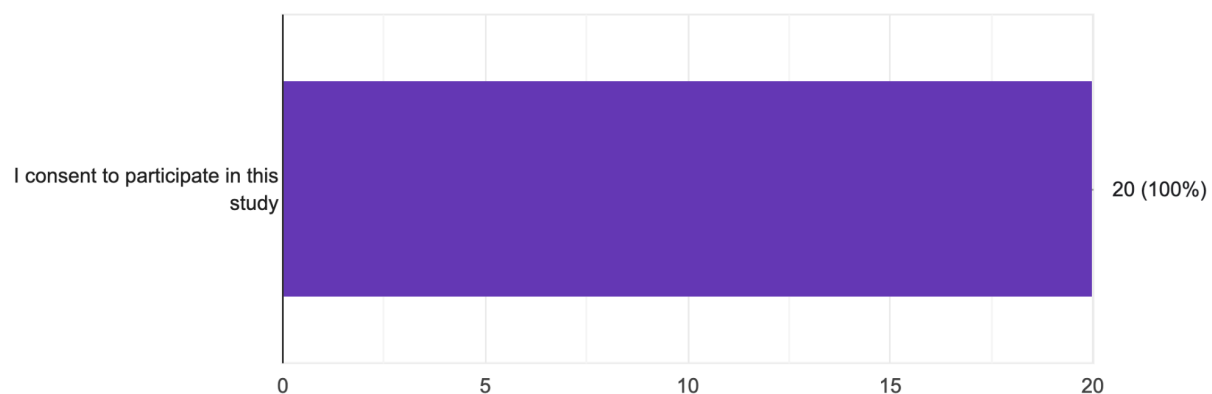
All 20 of the participants consented to the anonymous survey.

Appendix B

What is your age?
20 responses

30%
15%
55%

● 18-21
● 22-25
● 26-29

The age distribution of the participants.

Appendix C

How do you identify yourself?

20 responses

Legend:
- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Nonbinary

40%

55%
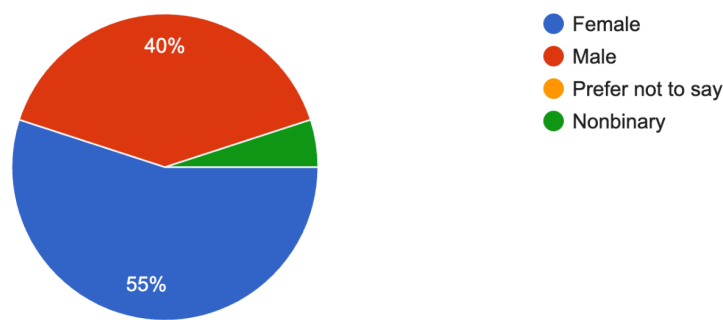
The gender identities of the participants.

Appendix D

What is your ethnicity?

20 responses

1 (5%) African American
4 (20%) Asian
3 (15%) Black
2 (10%) Hispanic
2 (10%) Latinx
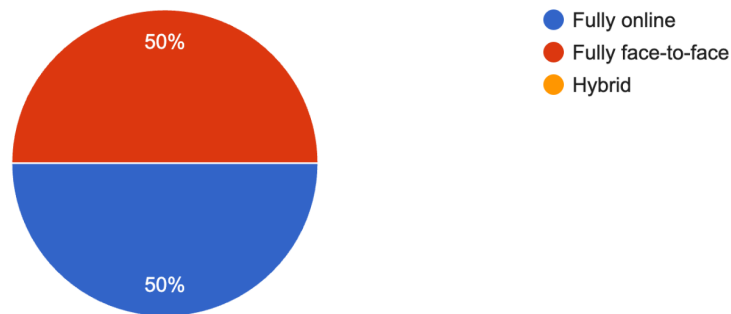2 (10%) Middle Eastern
6 (30%) White
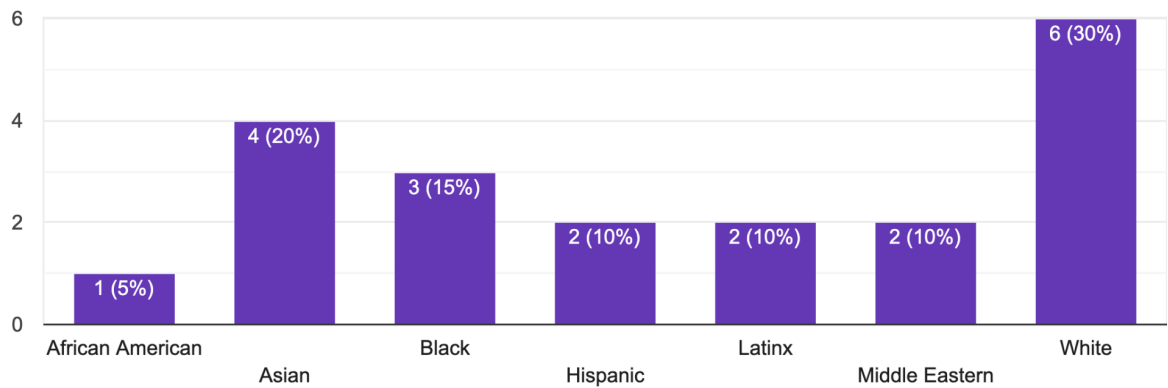
The ethnicities of the participants.

Appendix E

Which format best describes how you took your first-year writing course (ENC 1101/1102)?
20 responses

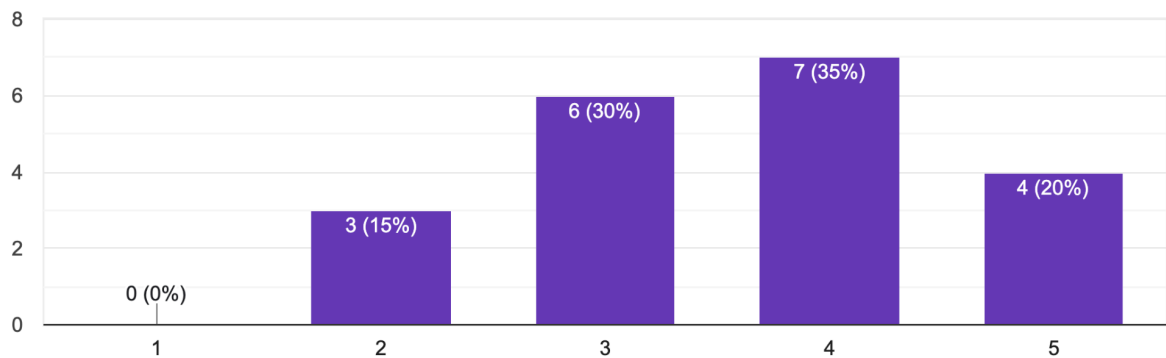● Fully online
● Fully face-to-face
● Hybrid

The modality distribution of the participants.

Appendix F

Rate your confidence in identifying and adapting your writing to different audiences. (1 being the least confident, 5 being the most)
20 responses

The participants rated rhetorical awareness confidence.

Works Cited

Gray, Mary. "Chapter 11. Something Gained: The Role of Online Studios in a Hybrid First-Year

    Writing Course." The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado EBooks, 6 Oct.

    2018, pp. 185–206, https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/studio/. Accessed 9 June

    2025.

Dockter, Jason, and Jessie Borgman. "Review Essay: Minimizing the Distance in Online Writing

    Courses through Student Engagement." Teaching English in the Two-Year College, vol.

    44, no. 2, 1 Dec. 2016, pp. 213–222,

    www.owicommunity.org/uploads/5/2/3/5/52350423/tetyc0442reviewessay__1_.pdf.

    Accessed 9 June 2025.

CCCC OWI Standing Group. "2021 SOA Full Report."Conference on College Composition and

    Communication, Dec. 2021,

    cccc.ncte.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2021SoAFullReport.pdf. Accessed 9 June 2025.

Ellozy, Aziza R., and Hoda Mostafa. *Using E-Maps to Enhance Critical Reading Skills*,

    MERLOT, Sept. 2010, jolt.merlot.org/vol6no3/ellozy_0910.pdf. Accessed 9 June 2025.

Warnock, Scott. *Teaching Writing Online*,

    cdn.ncte.org/nctefiles/resources/books/sample/52539intro_x.pdf. Accessed 9 June 2025.