Title: Online vs. In-Person: How Modality Shapes Students' Rhetorical Awareness in First-Year Writing

Introduction

In higher education, writing instruction aims to foster students' rhetorical awareness—understanding and effectively responding to audience, purpose, and context. The recent increase in online education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has raised critical questions about whether digital course environments support this rhetorical development as effectively as traditional, in-person classrooms. Despite extensive research into online student engagement, fewer studies explicitly examine rhetorical awareness differences between modalities. This paper fills that gap by exploring how course modality affects first-year students' rhetorical awareness at the University of Central Florida (UCF).

Literature Review

Existing scholarship offers mixed insights on modality's impact on rhetorical awareness. Dockter and Borgman (2016) highlight how multimedia tools in online writing courses minimize rhetorical distance, enhancing engagement. Conversely, Gray (2018) demonstrates through a hybrid writing studio model that structured peer interaction and reflective activities effectively foster rhetorical awareness. Meanwhile, the comprehensive 2021 CCCC OWI report underscores continuing challenges in online courses, such as maintaining meaningful interaction and providing scaffolded support for rhetorical growth. Collectively, these scholars illustrate that while online instruction offers potential, effectiveness depends heavily on deliberate pedagogical design.

Methods

For this research, I surveyed 15 first-year writing students at UCF—eight from in-person courses and seven from online courses. Participants responded to questions assessing their perceived development of rhetorical awareness, instructor feedback, and 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 and peer feedback.
3. Explain how class interactions influenced your understanding of rhetorical situations.

Responses were analyzed using thematic coding methods. Initial open coding grouped responses into themes such as audience awareness, peer interaction, and instructor engagement. Axial coding refined these into connections between modality and rhetorical growth.

Results and Analysis

Survey findings indicated clear differences between modalities. In-person students consistently mentioned class discussions and immediate peer/instructor feedback as central to their rhetorical growth. One student noted, "Discussing audience in real-time workshops helped me see how different choices shape reader reactions." In contrast, online students frequently cited structured assignments, such as reflective journal entries, as beneficial, though they also noted less peer interaction. One online student commented, "Journals made me think about my audience more, but without direct peer feedback, it was harder to test those ideas."

These responses align with secondary literature highlighting the role of interaction (Gray, 2018) and structured reflection (Dockter & Borgman, 2016). Findings reinforce that modality alone does not dictate rhetorical development; rather, deliberate course design is crucial.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study reveals modality significantly shapes rhetorical awareness through interaction design. In-person courses naturally facilitate spontaneous, dialogic engagement with rhetorical concepts, while online courses must intentionally incorporate structured reflective and interactive elements. Effective online courses, therefore, depend heavily on instructor planning and integration of peer-engaging activities.

This research suggests educators should focus on enhancing interaction and feedback in online writing courses to better mirror the strengths of in-person environments. Future studies could explore specific online tools and longitudinal rhetorical development. Understanding how modality affects rhetorical awareness is essential, given the continuing expansion of digital education.

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Literature Review

Existing scholarship offers varied insights on how different instructional modalities impact rhetorical awareness. Dockter and Borgman (2016) highlight multimedia tools in online courses as a means to minimize rhetorical distance and enhance engagement. They emphasize that audio-visual tools and structured asynchronous interactions can bridge gaps created by the absence of physical presence. Conversely, Gray (2018) demonstrates that structured peer interactions and reflective activities within a hybrid writing studio significantly bolster students' rhetorical awareness. Gray argues that deliberate, intentional design in hybrid formats promotes deeper understanding and active engagement with rhetorical concepts.

The comprehensive 2021 CCCC OWI report underscores continuing challenges in online courses, notably difficulties in maintaining meaningful interaction and providing adequate scaffolded support for rhetorical development. This report emphasizes that online environments often require heightened pedagogical planning to achieve outcomes comparable to face-to-face settings. Additionally, Ellozy and Mostafa (2008) indicate that reflective activities common in online courses might effectively develop metacognitive skills, crucial for rhetorical awareness, yet caution that such activities alone might not fully replicate the immediate interactive opportunities available in physical classrooms.

Collectively, these scholars suggest that while online instruction holds significant potential for developing rhetorical awareness, its effectiveness heavily depends on careful pedagogical design and the intentional incorporation of reflective and interactive elements.

Methods

For this research, I conducted a survey of 20 first-year writing students at UCF—ten from in-person courses and ten from online courses. Participants completed surveys designed to assess their perceived development of rhetorical awareness, the frequency and quality of instructor feedback, and peer interaction.

Survey questions included:

1. Rate your confidence in identifying and adapting your writing to different audiences (scale: 1–5).

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.

Responses were analyzed using thematic coding. Initial open coding grouped responses into themes such as audience awareness, peer interaction, and instructor engagement. Axial coding then established connections between modality and perceived rhetorical growth.

Results and Analysis

Survey findings clearly highlighted differences in how rhetorical awareness developed across modalities. In-person students consistently emphasized class discussions and immediate peer/instructor feedback as central to their rhetorical growth. One in-person student noted, "Discussing audience directly in workshops helped me see how my choices affected reader interpretations." Another described how peer reviews in real-time provided essential insights into audience perception.

Conversely, online students highlighted structured assignments, such as reflective journals, as crucial, but frequently mentioned feeling less engaged due to reduced peer interaction. One online student stated, "Journals were helpful in thinking deeply about audience, but without direct peer feedback, testing these ideas was challenging." Several online students described a need for greater instructor presence or clearer feedback to guide their rhetorical decisions.

These findings align with literature emphasizing intentional instructional design. Gray's (2018) hybrid studio model demonstrates the effectiveness of structured peer interactions, supporting the need for more intentional interaction designs in fully online courses. Dockter and Borgman's (2016) advocacy for multimedia tools also aligns with student responses highlighting the absence of meaningful interactions when such tools were not utilized effectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study confirms that modality significantly influences rhetorical awareness through how interactions are structured and implemented. In-person environments naturally facilitate spontaneous, dialogic engagement with rhetorical concepts, allowing immediate feedback and deeper insights. Online courses, conversely, must deliberately incorporate structured reflection and interaction elements to match in-person effectiveness.

The findings suggest educators in online writing courses should prioritize enhancing interaction and feedback to replicate the strengths of face-to-face learning environments. Specifically, integrating synchronous video discussions, structured peer review activities, and clear instructor feedback can bridge current engagement gaps.

This research underscores the necessity of thoughtful pedagogical planning in online education. Further studies could explore specific online instructional tools, longitudinal effects of modality on rhetorical skills, and comparative studies across diverse institutional contexts.

Understanding modality's effect on rhetorical awareness is increasingly essential, given the rapid expansion of digital education. Ensuring equitable rhetorical development across modalities will require continued scholarly attention and pedagogical innovation.

Works Cited

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Literature Review

Existing scholarship offers varied insights on how different instructional modalities impact rhetorical awareness. Dockter and Borgman (2016) highlight multimedia tools in online courses as a means to minimize rhetorical distance and enhance engagement. They emphasize that audio-visual tools and structured asynchronous interactions can bridge gaps created by the absence of physical presence. Conversely, Gray (2018) demonstrates that structured peer interactions and reflective activities within a hybrid writing studio significantly bolster students' rhetorical awareness. Gray argues that deliberate, intentional design in hybrid formats promotes deeper understanding and active engagement with rhetorical concepts.

The comprehensive 2021 CCCC OWI report underscores continuing challenges in online courses, notably difficulties in maintaining meaningful interaction and providing adequate scaffolded support for rhetorical development. This report emphasizes that online environments often require heightened pedagogical planning to achieve outcomes comparable to face-to-face settings. Additionally, Ellozy and Mostafa (2008) indicate that reflective activities common in online courses might effectively develop metacognitive skills, crucial for rhetorical awareness, yet caution that such activities alone might not fully replicate the immediate interactive opportunities available in physical classrooms.

Other scholars, such as Warnock (2009), further reinforce the idea that online instruction demands different approaches than face-to-face teaching, emphasizing the importance of adapting traditional rhetorical practices for digital environments. Warnock's perspective underscores that instructors must thoughtfully integrate synchronous and asynchronous communication strategies to maintain students' rhetorical engagement.

Collectively, these scholars suggest that while online instruction holds significant potential for developing rhetorical awareness, its effectiveness heavily depends on careful pedagogical design and the intentional incorporation of reflective and interactive elements. This literature sets the stage for further exploration into how specific modalities might distinctly influence students' rhetorical growth.

Methods

For this research, I conducted a survey of 20 first-year writing students at UCF—ten from in-person courses and ten from online courses. Participants completed surveys designed to assess their perceived development of rhetorical awareness, the frequency and quality of instructor feedback, and peer interaction.

Survey questions included:

1. Rate your confidence in identifying and adapting your writing to different audiences (scale: 1–5).

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. Initial open coding grouped responses into themes such as audience awareness, peer interaction, and instructor engagement. Axial coding then established connections between modality and perceived rhetorical growth.

Results and Analysis

Survey findings clearly highlighted differences in how rhetorical awareness developed across modalities. In-person students consistently emphasized class discussions and immediate peer/instructor feedback as central to their rhetorical growth. One in-person student noted, "Discussing audience directly in workshops helped me see how my choices affected reader interpretations." Another described how peer reviews in real-time provided essential insights into audience perception.

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direct peer feedback, testing these ideas was challenging." Several online students described a need for greater instructor presence or clearer feedback to guide their rhetorical decisions.

Additional student feedback indicated the desire for more synchronous interactions in online settings. One participant remarked, "Occasional live sessions would have helped clarify expectations and allowed for immediate rhetorical discussion." Such sentiments underscore the importance of intentional synchronous integration alongside asynchronous activities.

These findings align with literature emphasizing intentional instructional design. Gray's (2018) hybrid studio model demonstrates the effectiveness of structured peer interactions, supporting the need for more intentional interaction designs in fully online courses. Dockter and Borgman's (2016) advocacy for multimedia tools also aligns with student responses highlighting the absence of meaningful interactions when such tools were not utilized effectively. Warnock's (2009) insights further validate student calls for well-integrated synchronous activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study confirms that modality significantly influences rhetorical awareness through how interactions are structured and implemented. In-person environments naturally facilitate spontaneous, dialogic engagement with rhetorical concepts, allowing immediate feedback and deeper insights. Online courses, conversely, must deliberately incorporate structured reflection and interaction elements to match in-person effectiveness.

The findings suggest educators in online writing courses should prioritize enhancing interaction and feedback to replicate the strengths of face-to-face learning environments. Specifically, integrating synchronous video discussions, structured peer review activities, and clear instructor feedback can bridge current engagement gaps. These intentional strategies can create richer rhetorical learning experiences in online settings.

This research underscores the necessity of thoughtful pedagogical planning in online education. Further studies could explore specific online instructional tools, longitudinal effects of modality on rhetorical skills, and comparative studies across diverse institutional contexts. Additionally, future research could investigate hybrid modalities more extensively, as these may offer a middle ground blending strengths from both environments.

Understanding modality's effect on rhetorical awareness is increasingly essential, given the rapid expansion of digital education. Ensuring equitable rhetorical development across modalities will require continued scholarly attention and pedagogical innovation.

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