

## A Conversation with Elizabeth Smith

**BACKGROUND.** Elizabeth Smith is a professor in the English Department at the State College of Florida (formerly Manatee Community College), where she has specialized in developmental reading and writing for 25 years—and where for 21 of those years she was the director of the SCF's reading and writing center. Smith was among the first instructors in Florida to design and teach online developmental reading and writing courses; and in her role as the SCF, Venice, Developmental Education Curriculum Coordinator she has been integrally involved over the past 20 years in developmental education redesign at both the college and state level. She currently serves as the chairperson for Florida College Reading Council, and is in frequent demand as a workshop leader and presenter at campus-based, state, and national conferences. Among the most noteworthy accomplishments in her academic career is that the success rate (based on exit exam scores) of the students who've taken and completed her online developmental writing course has averaged 98% for the past ten years.

### **How much of a difference is there between the challenges you were up against when you were developmental writing 25 years ago and the challenges you're up against today?**

Not as you much as you might expect. One positive difference is that the technology now available to writing instructors has made it a lot easier than it used to be to deal with the course management aspects of teaching. On the other hand, the trend today toward accelerated developmental courses means that even though the number of hours students spend in class is pretty much the same as it's been before, the time frame of the many developmental courses has been compressed. So you don't have as much deep learning going on to foster achievement of the course objectives. Prior to the passage of Florida SB1720, which made all recent Florida high school graduates exempt from developmental education, I was finding that many of first-year students who were recent high school graduates were not giving as much thought as students did 25 years ago to what they wanted to be doing with their lives once they got out of school. So they tended to view the courses I teach as a *requirement*, as opposed to an opportunity to learn skills that will prove valuable to them later in life. Today, most of those students simply choose to skip placement testing and developmental courses.

### **How are you responding to this new challenge?**

Fortunately, I haven't found it necessary to make major changes in the basic course design and instructional methods that I've been using in my classes for many years. But what I've had to do in this new environment is to significantly ramp up my own efforts to implement that accelerated design--and to be especially vigilant when it comes to making sure that my students are keeping pace with what we're covering in the course. The accelerated or compressed design requires an enormous amount of work outside of class time for both students and faculty.

## **What are the core elements of course design you've just mentioned?**

Nearly everything I do in my classes is based on a course design model that I learned from the woman who mentored me when I first joined Manatee Community College as the assistant director of the writing center and as an adjunct professor. What's interesting about the model is that its core elements are very much in line with what recent research has shown to be best practices in writing instruction in general—but with this difference: I never lose sight of the fact that what may be a “best practice” in a higher-level writing class won't necessarily work with students who, in most cases, have little or no understanding about the basic conventions of writing and, beyond that, are not avid readers

## **Can you elaborate a little on how that challenge influences your teaching?**

It's basically a matter of not taking anything for granted. It's not enough, for instance, to get students to simply recognize that writing is a multi-stage process. You need to walk them through each stage and closely monitor the work they do in each of the stages. Another key element of the design is scaffolding: introducing course material in clearly defined, manageable chunks and in ways that build upon what students have learned up to that point. What I try to do, above all, with my students is to not simply teach them writing “techniques” but to make them much more metacognitively aware of the relationship between what they're thinking about as they write and how those thoughts influence the writing they ultimately produce.

## **How do you handle the assignment aspects of your course?**

It's a well-established principle in developmental writing instruction that even though you want students to be writing and receiving constructive feedback as frequently as possible, you need to be careful about setting deadlines that put students under too much pressure—especially at the beginning of the course. So even though I expect my students to complete at least two writing assignments a week, I keep the requirements of the assignments short and focused—and always connected to concepts that we've covered in class. And even though I agree with the basic principle of setting a low performance bar for early assignments—a practice usually referred to as “low-stakes” writing—I don't agree with the popular notion that these low stakes assignments should go ungraded.

## **So how do you handle the grading?**

What I do with these low-stakes assignment is to base the grade on whether the students have demonstrated in the assignment an understanding of what we've covered in class. So if the assignment, for example, is to write a paragraph that begins with a topic sentence that is followed by three supporting points—with the proper punctuation mark at the end of each sentence—I'm not concerned at this point in the course with any other problems I might find in the writing. If the assignment meets those three criteria, I'm going to give the assignment an A. That way, I can help the students to develop the habit of applying what they're being taught to whatever they happen to be

writing. Gradually, as we move the course, the assignments become a little more complex, and I raise the grading bar accordingly.

### **How do you integrate technology into your teaching process?**

The main technology-based resource I use in my coursework is the ComFit Online Learning Center, and it helps me in a number of ways. At the start of the course I require all my students to take the ComFit writing skills assessment, which does a very good job of identifying for both the students and for me what skill gaps in grammar, sentence, and punctuation are creating problems for the students as a group and for each individual. I use the ComFit group learning needs report to determine which concepts are learning priorities for the class as a whole—and I'll devote a certain amount of class time during the semester to cover those concepts. Even though I do systematically teach grammar to the class as a whole, there is no practical way that I can teach each individual student the specific basic grammar concepts he or she ought to have already learned

### **And how do the students use ComFit throughout the course?**

I make it a course requirement that students work their way through the ComFit mini-lessons that are aligned to whatever skill gaps have been uncovered in the assessment. The students can always come to me if they are having problems with a concept, but they need to demonstrate, by virtue of the workout scores they achieve in the mini-lesson workouts, that they've mastered the concepts in whatever mini-lessons they've worked on. This specific component of the course accounts for 25% of the grade students receive in the course, so I don't have to worry too much about motivating students to go through the mini lessons and complete the workouts. And I have no doubt that what they learn from the work they do on ComFit is one of the main reasons I've been able to achieve such as a high success rate in my courses over the past ten years.

### **Unlike many writing instructors, you seem to be as effective in the online courses you teach as in your face-to-face classes. How do you account for that?**

Well, for one thing, I've always been comfortable with technology. As far back as the late 1990's I created my own website for the courses I was teaching. And I've also made it a point, as often as I can, to attend workshops and presentations that focus on technology-enhanced instruction. But probably the main reason that my online courses have been successful is that the basic course design principles I follow in my online course are essentially the same—except for some minor modifications—as the principles that underlie my face-to-face classes. I have heard of instructors who, because of their teaching style and personal charisma, get excellent results in face-to-face teaching environments, even though the design of their courses might not be all that solid. The problem here, of course, is that charisma doesn't do much for you in an online environment. You need to find other ways to connect on a personal level with your students.

**What do you do in your online courses to help make that connection?**

I do two things. For one thing—and what I’m suggesting here might not be possible in many online learning situations—the students in my online classes come together as a group for an on-campus session once a month. That session, in and of itself, helps to create to at least some extent the person-to-person dynamic that occurs naturally in a face-to-face environment. I also give my cell phone number to each of my students, and I let them know on the first day of class that if they have any question or problem they can call or text me at any time seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. That may sound like a potential problem for me. But the fact is I receive very few of those calls during the course—and when I do get a call, whatever issue the student wants to talk about doesn’t take very long at all to resolve. Even though most students don’t feel the need to call, knowing they can gives them a sense of security.