**Overview: Bridging the Virtual Gap with eJournals**

**Background**

Distance learning has opened the doors of higher education to groups with previously little access to university study – older students with jobs, families, and little time for additional commitments during the day and the underprivileged without the solid educational background to enter a traditional school. Many online students openly reveal histories of poverty, abuse, legal problems, and homelessness to their instructors and fellow classmates, and these facts of their lives often translate into a lack of self-confidence and a sense of hopelessness. We know that those who possess knowledge, writing skills, and self-confidence are often able to break through the bonds and social confines of class.

**Problem**

Although most students have a desire to be known personally and to be recognized as an important member of the learning community, distance learning has intrinsic limitations that must be overcome by strategic actions. (See Rovai, 2002, and Moore, 1993, for more on transactional distance and building community.)

Some of the problems of distance learning include the following:

* Feelings of isolation for student and instructor
* Inconsistent interpersonal contact due to the nature of the delivery system
* Increased chances for misunderstanding through misinterpretation of the written word with no visual clues from the sender
* Higher risk of conflicting expectations and goals

**Solution**

Students need to know that they are valued and have something worthwhile to contribute. By providing opportunities for our online students to connect, we ensure that they become a part of a learning community, while developing interpersonal and technical skills that will serve them well in future courses and in their chosen careers.

To cultivate community and a sense of connection in the basic writing online classroom, we use the available technology to offer extra assistance. One tool that helps to bridge the gap is the e-Journal, which offers increased interaction and instructor immediacy. The result is students feel they have a role in the classroom and are “known” to some extent. In this space, they begin to feel comfortable writing about what they know well.

When students feel they belong to a community and that they are working within a safe, nurturing, and supportive classroom, stress is reduced, and learning becomes much easier. The learning environment needs to reflect collaboration and positive problem-solving with the basic assumption that every student can learn and be successful.

**eJournals offer a special connection. They:**

* Allow private, timely communication between teacher and student
* Help students understand expectations for the course and for moving to the next level
* Provide ongoing feedback for developing writing skills
* Establish a support system for at-risk students
* Develop a strong sense of community

**The following are some examples of how eJournals may be used:**

* A personalized welcome letter at the beginning of the session
* A quick touch base at strategic points

(How are things going for you? I haven’t seen you posting in the past few days.)

* An opportunity to get to know the student better and understand his/her concerns

(You mentioned in your last entry that you have not been doing the participation portion because you don’t feel qualified to critique others’ writing. Why do you feel that way? You have a unique perspective and can offer valuable insights.)

* A way to share expectations about the course

(It’s important to use appropriate language in the discussion threads. I noticed you are using “texting” language when you write to your peers, and I wanted to let you know that using shortcuts such as “u” and “r” are not acceptable in college-level writing courses.)

* A means to offer timely support

(You wrote in your last entry that you are feeling depressed and sometimes think about harming yourself. I want to share some information with you about the free counseling services our school has to offer….)

* A place to practice problem-solving skills

(You and Sharice seem to be having a difficult time communicating with each other on the discussion boards. What do you think the issue might be? How might you solve it?)

* A chance to strengthen a particular writing skill

(I noticed you are still struggling with commas in compound sentences. Here is an example and a link to the Purdue OWL. Take a look, and then let’s meet on Skype or Class Live Pro to chat.)

* A place to submit assignments and share private, individualized feedback

(I was so touched when I read your narrative about the death of your father and the impact it has had on your life, and I wanted to share the following thoughts….)

**Here are two example assignments:**

**First Journal Entry**

Do you keep a personal journal? Is it a spiral-bound notebook with a flower on the front, or is it a worn leather volume with parchment pages inside? Does your journal have a skull-and-crossbones warning and a lock for those who dare to trespass? Or maybe yours is virtual and resides on your computer. Do you scribble down your thoughts and feelings, fears and flights of fancy, or questions and concerns in your journal? Would you like to be able to?

A journal can be a nifty spot to write notes and reminders, or it can be a special place to carry on a conversation with oneself. But what if a journal were something more? What if someone with care and concern for you and a few answers to your questions were to write back? What if you were able to have a dialogue with this person in your journal?

That's the basic idea behind the Journal here in ENG0099. Each class member has his/her own spot to put ideas, concerns, questions, and classwork. You might find it helpful to place notes here as you are reading from your textbooks or viewing online sites. It is also a place to get helpful feedback on your work and to ask questions of your instructor in a private forum.

Access: Look up to the tab bar at the top right of the classroom, where the Gradebook is located, and you will see your Journal. Click it, and it will open.

By [DATE], go into the Journal, and post an entry. You may tell about your history with writing if you like. What are your goals for the course? Also let your instructor know if you have any questions or concerns at this point in the course.

**Journal Self-Assessment**

During this session, you have progressed from writing single paragraphs to creating full essays, and you have thought about important questions concerning the writing process and have helped your peers strengthen their writing assignments through the writing circle.

By [DATE], post a short and convincing self-assessment of your writing progress during this session to your Journal.

Reflect on the following questions as you compose your self-assessment:

* What have you learned?
* How has your writing changed and improved?
* What do you still want to work on?
* What are your strengths?
* What experiences were most helpful to you in becoming a stronger writer?
* What are you most proud of as a result of taking this course?