

Big Class, Small Communities: Creating New Structures in a First-Year Writing Course

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Goals of Redesign

Emphasize training and support for future teachers and teaching associates; develop thoughtful practices around teaching and responding to student writing.

Develop assessment practices and research agenda in the writing program—create opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to participate in composition research.

Rethink the role of the writing instructor by considering a “community of practice” (Wenger) model. Create small learning communities, embed mentor support, and support the development of English 130 students into capable peer responders to writing.

Reduce the cost of English 130.

March 7, 2010

Big Classes Encourage Experiments in Teaching

Cal State U. at Chico reworks courses, while instructors worry



Photographs by Paul C. Miller for The Chronicle

In a newly redesigned composition course at California State U. at Chico, some sections were expanded to include 90 students, who also meet periodically in smaller groups.

By David Glenn

Chico, Calif.

Back in 2005, officials at California State University at Chico asked students how to improve English 130, a composition course that almost every undergraduate there takes. One consistent response: Class sections should be smaller.

But in the years since then, the enrollment cap on English 130 sections has actually crept upward, from 22 to 30. That's no great surprise. Across the country, budget-straitened colleges have been quietly increasing the sizes of all sorts of courses. At some institutions, introductory-level lectures are now capped at whatever the fire code will allow, and upper-level seminars are drifting from 12 students to 20 and beyond.

Many instructors are deeply uneasy about those changes. With rooms bursting at the seams, they say, faculty members are less likely to interact personally with students—and are less likely to use essay tests or to assign serious amounts of writing.

[Enlarge Image](#)



Undergraduate teaching assistants like

Still, some administrators and professors say they are trying to make the best of a bad situation by redesigning courses for a new era of high student-faculty ratios. Chico State, for example, has rolled out six experimental course redesigns this year. Some feel bulging class sizes provide an overdue opportunity for faculty members to think about how to use new learning technologies, such as online instruction.

Theoretical Frame

Social Cognition/Situated Learning

Attention placed on: Identity, Participation, Material Conditions

Learning occurs in participation and social relationships, not “in the heads of individuals” (Hanks qtd. in Lave & Wenger, 1991)

Provides a framework for studying and understanding how individuals shape, are shaped by, and learn from, the communities in which they participate

Shifts the unit of analysis away from a focus on the individual mind and towards social and material conditions that influence learning and meaning making

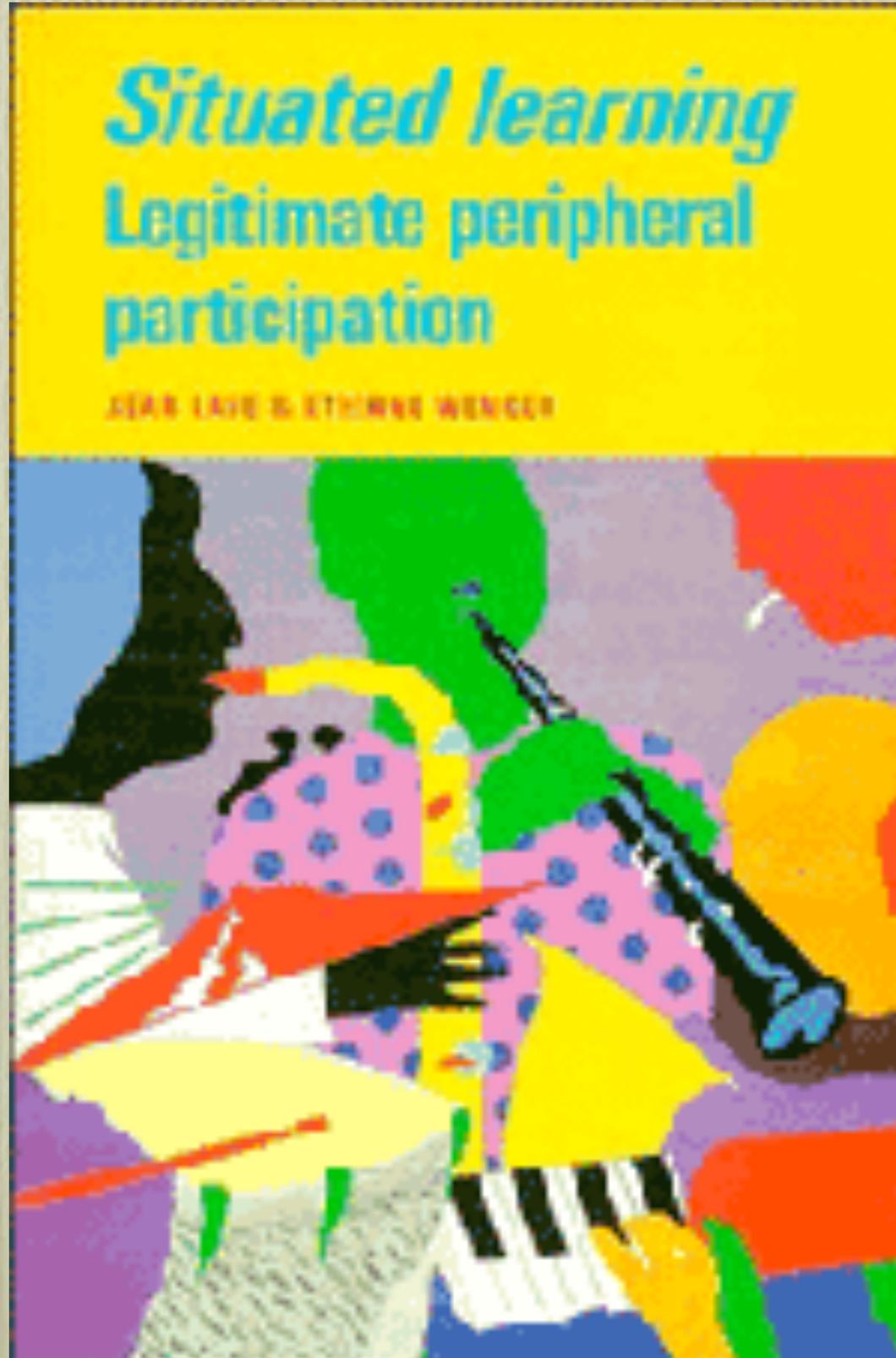
Distributed Cognition

“knowledge and cognition is distributed across objects, individuals, artifacts, and tools in the environment”

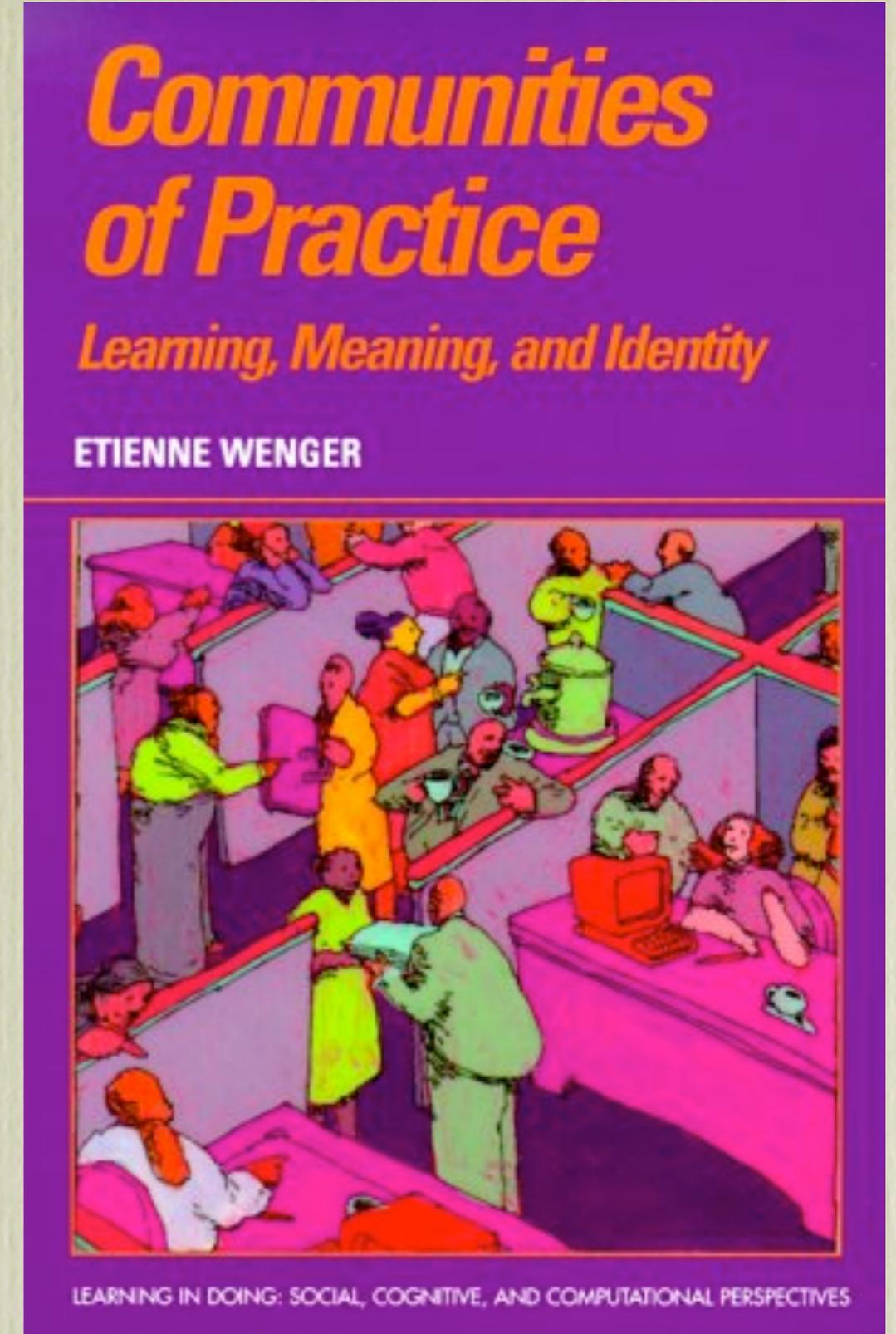
--Ed Hutchins

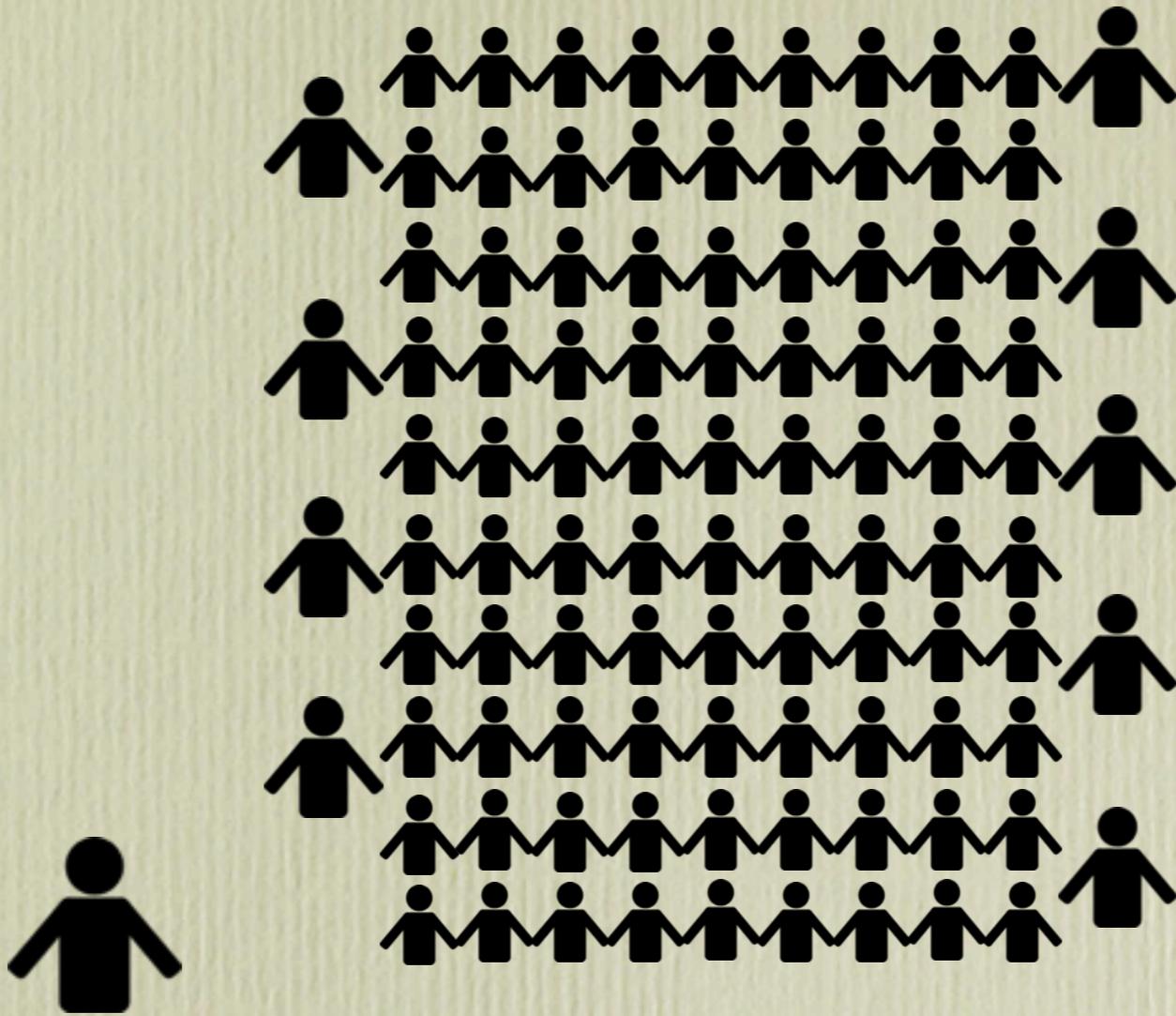
Learning as Social, as Participation

Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger

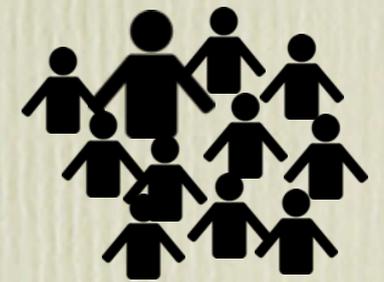
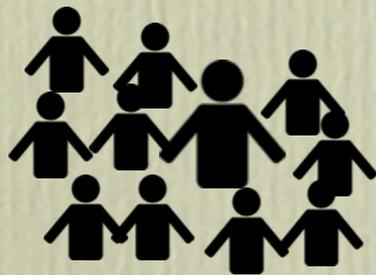
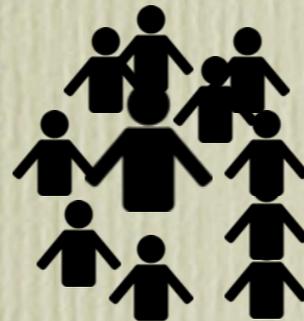
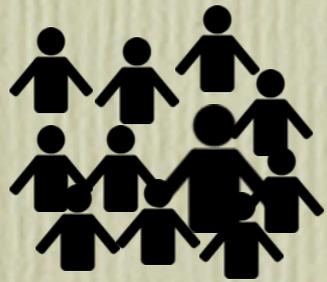
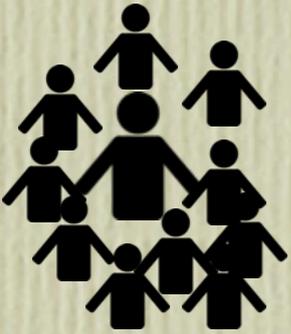
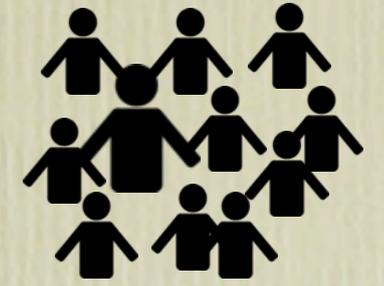
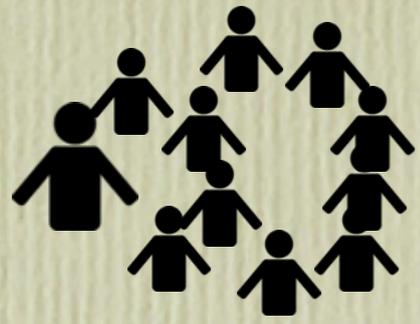


Etienne Wenger





Small Working Groups
10 Students + 1 Mentor
Further Divided into
Permanent Group of 5











Key Structures

Small Research Teams:

Permanent groups of five who establish norms together

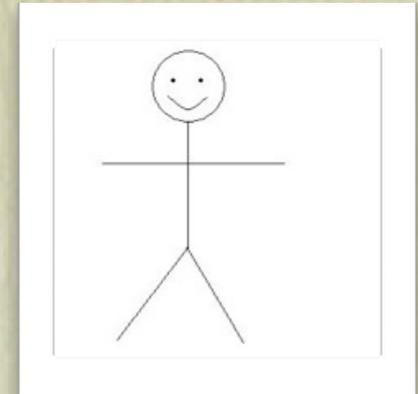
Mentors:

“More capable peers” (Vygotsky)

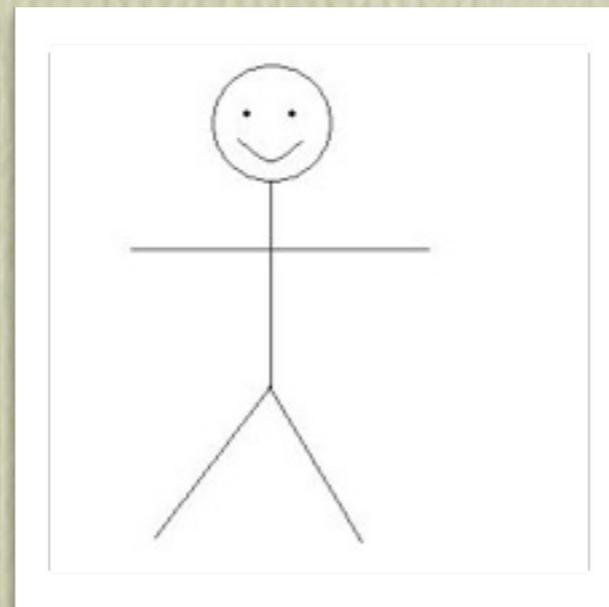
Technology:

Particularly social media, as a way to open up participation and support community building

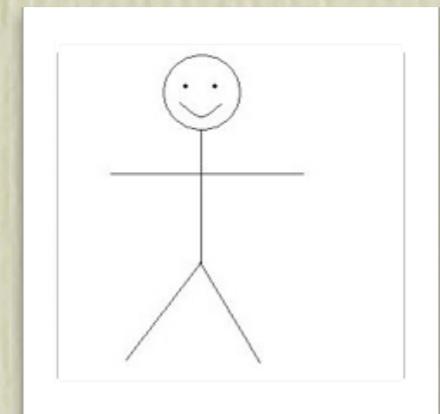
Student



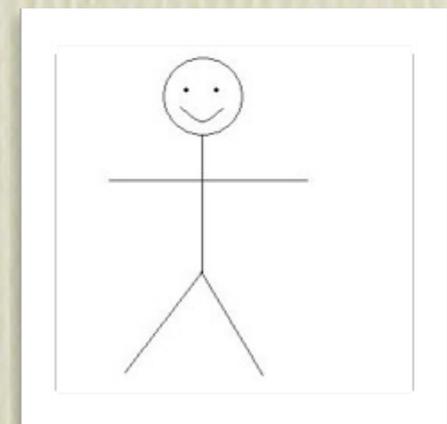
Instructor



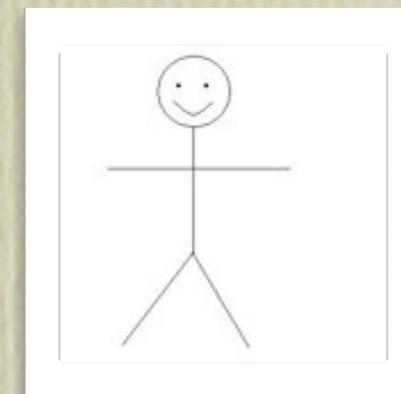
Student



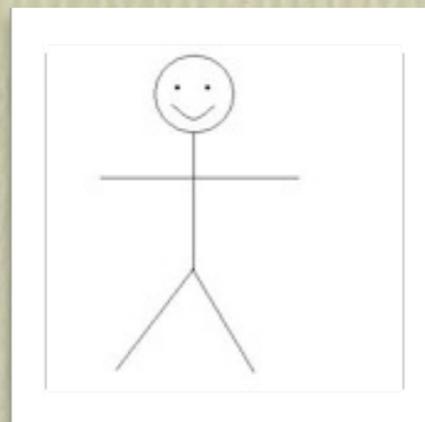
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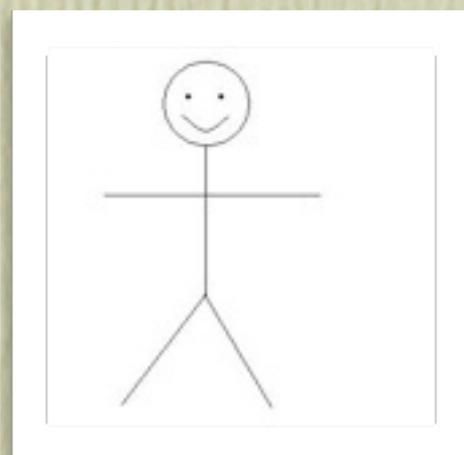
Student



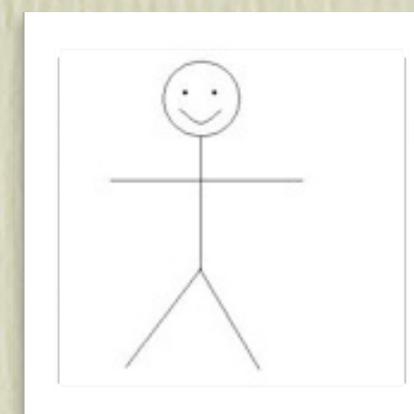
Mentor



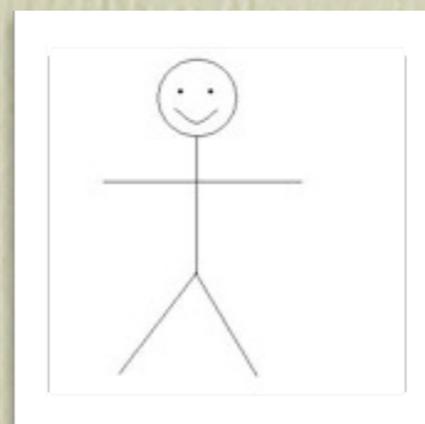
Instructor



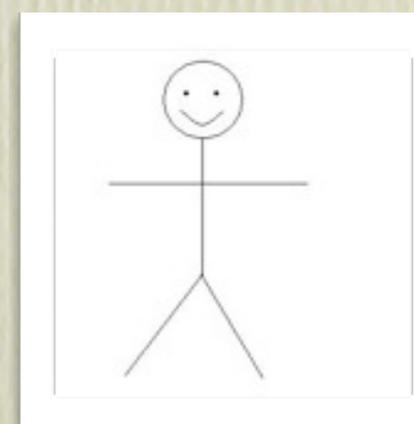
Student



Mentor



Student



Role of Mentors

Trained mentors: must complete a four unit, 400 level course, Theories and Practice in Tutoring Writing, and pass with a B or better. Internship as part of the course.

“More capable peers” (Vygotsky)

Provide feedback on writing; guided by instructor

Model curiosities and research practices

Meet weekly with instructor

The Role of Technology

Community

Participation

Collaboration

diigo

Google
Sites



Blackboard
Vista



Twitter



Google Docs



PaCha6 Group 10: more diverse because friends of friends can become a part of the cause online, like a chain affect

2:34 PM Feb 16th via web



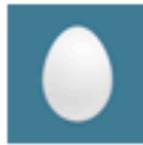
cthao33 Group #15: Forming a group network is better than forming a physical group because your identity can be more hidden.

2:31 PM Feb 16th via web



M_OneLove_N G 17:The network gets info out faster, but you are braver for being out there in person. Online you more personal and secretive We say do Both!

2:30 PM Feb 16th via web



lumpa1223 Group14: Support from networks is ethical because it allows more connection than in person to spread certain causes/issues to others.

2:30 PM Feb 16th via web



ulloamata group 4 Facebook is the first step taken to promote a cause and the flash mob is the aftermath the follows, basically its talk now do later.

2:29 PM Feb 16th via web



acestrain17 Group 18: Some people don't really listen to protesters and now a days everyone uses the internet. You can make a difference, but maybe long

2:28 PM Feb 16th via web



bournhia Group # 3 Ways NOT ONLY JUST A CERTAIN PLACE IN THE WORLD KNOWS< BUT EVERYONE WHO HAS FACEBOOK AROUND THE WORLD MAY KNOW ALSO ABOUT A CAUSE!

2:28 PM Feb 16th via web



You're using an older version of Twitter that won't be around for much longer.

Switch to New Twitter!



hosuna01 Group16: Social media reaches out to and connects more people but in the end you don't get the same feeling you would at a live protest.

February 16, 2011 2:38:28 PM PST via web



ythao17 Group6: Network is a better way where one can communicate faster with a variety of people and have more voice to the world.

February 16, 2011 2:38:16 PM PST via web



Edgarm92 Yo! College students, have you guys read the new California Budget? It is ignorance at its finest! I would like to hear your stance on it

February 16, 2011 2:37:11 PM PST via web



s0sgomez Group 5 When you do it online more people participate it looks more formal. It is also a nonviolent way of protesting.

2:35 PM Feb 16th via Mobile Web



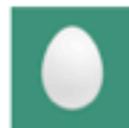
tanyadouglas1 Group 13: Meeting in person causes schedule conflicts, while networking is at the convenience of all. It helps spark new ideas.

2:35 PM Feb 16th via web



chii0z Group#8 a network can be better then a physical group because there is communication with others who you (cont) <http://tl.gd/8si2hi>

2:34 PM Feb 16th via Twitter for iPhone



9agarcia5 Group 1 A network will allow you to draw different opinions from other people. It is also a lot faster than forming a physical group.

2:34 PM Feb 16th via web

Display a menu

- 12:40 PM Oct 28th from txt

 **khasaka** RT @funnyoneliners: Those of you who think you know everything are annoying those of us who do.
12:40 PM Oct 28th from txt
-  **wilw** <http://twitpic.com/nahie> - Be careful - there's a Facebook phishing scam going around. Here's what the e-mail looks like.
12:01 PM Oct 28th from TwitPic
-  **park73** My last professor didn't show up to class. I hope he isn't dead. He's a good guy. But where did he go? The mystery continues.
11:11 AM Oct 28th from TwitterGadget
-  **mmerseth** i wish it was tomorrow!!
11:09 AM Oct 28th from web
-  **HayleyBarrett** wiped out from zumba!
11:08 AM Oct 28th from web
-  **khasaka** It needs to be 24 hours from right now
10:59 AM Oct 28th from txt
-  **khasaka** RT @funnyoneliners: It's easy to identify bad ideas. They come from other people
10:55 AM Oct 28th from txt
-  **ChicoER** Oroville homicide victim, suspect identified
<http://bit.ly/3p5qL5>
10:47 AM Oct 28th from twitterfeed
-  **drjaxon** @lalpert hurray!
10:36 AM Oct 28th from web in reply to lalpert
-  **lalpert** All of the mocking/positivity worked... the boot is gone! I think I'll walk to school on this lovely fall day...
10:14 AM Oct 28th from web
-  **CodyJCaudill** @drjaxon hey I'm coming to 130 today!
9:47 AM Oct 28th from mobile web
-  **khasaka** RT @ trentvanegas <http://twitvid.com/5F9F3> - Happy 120th Birthday, Eiffel Tower!

Research Questions

What is the changing shape of faculty “expertise” in the Jumbo model?

How do mentors view their role(s) in the classroom?
Which identities are useful in mentoring students and supporting writing?

What is the affordance of social media in relation to participation and community building?

Data Collection

- Portfolio Assessment
- Semi-Structured Interviews with Mentors (n=18)
- Daily Field Notes
- Survey Data from students (n=233. 52% population)
- Websites: Ning, Wikispace, GoogleDocs, Vista, Twitter

For the past 20+ years, the pass rate in CSU, Chico's first-year writing course has been between 89-92%. The pilot jumbo classes follow this trend:

Total Enrolled (6 sections): 538

Total Fails (DFW): 41

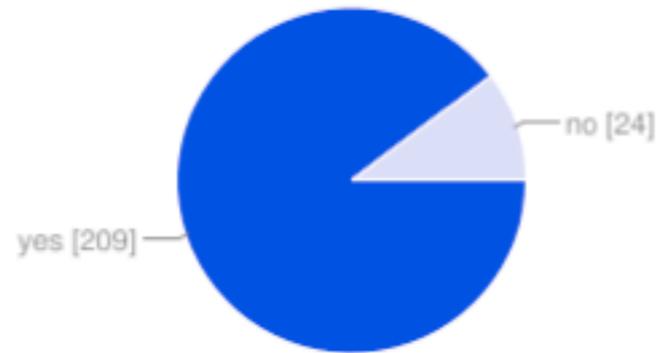
WU: 18

D: 10

F: 13

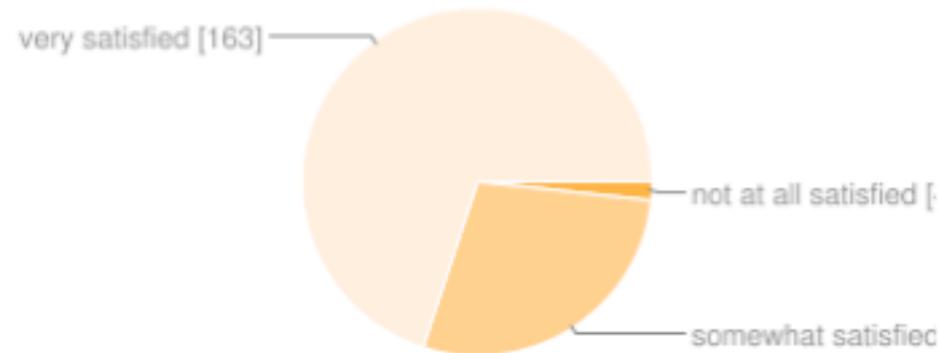
92% pass rate

9. Knowing what you know now, would you still enroll in this jumbo course or recommend it to a friend?



yes	209	90%
no	24	10%

10. Overall, how satisfied are you with this course?



not at all satisfied	4	2%
somewhat satisfied	66	28%
very satisfied	163	70%

90% (n=209) would recommend the course to a friend

70% (n=163) “very satisfied”

28% (n=66) “somewhat satisfied”

2% (n=4) “not at all satisfied”

What specific structures and activities contribute to the effectiveness of the jumbo class? How so?

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I feel the workshops have definitely helped in a huge way. This class would've been way more **confusing without the workshops**. The workshops helped me to understand everything better. It was also nice to have **so many ways to communicate** with people in the class. It helped to be able to read people's Twitter posts for example and know that they were having just as much trouble as you.

We are all freshman and didn't really know anyone, so when we were put in small groups you got to **know people** and we were always there to help each other. Also with the workshops it was nice because it was a smaller class and you really got **one on one time with the mentor** and they were always willing to help. Also using Twitter was a lot of fun. It was a good way of getting to know classmates and you could ask the teacher questions whenever you wanted, so it was helpful.

I really liked everything that we did. The workshops, small groups and communication online helped a lot! **It was nice to communicate as a whole online**, but then go **more into depth** in the **small groups** and workshops.

What's your biggest complaint about the jumbo course (other than it is a jumbo course)?

My biggest complaint about the jumbo course was that I felt there was so much going on and so much to do. I was getting a little lost and confused with the work. The jumbo class itself was fine and there was nothing wrong with a big class just the work part. It was hard to get through but I feel it actually helped me. It made me realize school comes first and that I need to get myself together. It made me work harder and become more organized.

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That there is so little time to address all students in that time frame (but makes up for it in workshops).

If I didn't seek Kim out to talk to her, there wouldn't have been much interaction so I'm sure people who didn't have time to talk to her outside of class would have not liked that.

Not really knowing anyone in the class other than my small group. Even though I loved them it would have been nice to occasionally mesh with other groups too. GO GROUP 9!

What have you learned about your writing from this course?

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Revision:

The smaller things don't matter that much. It's better to take a look at the overall picture and write then edit. Writing in college is different than writing in high school.

That it is not easy, you need to put forth a lot of **time and effort into your writing**. Also that you can not write a paper once and turn it in; you need to look it over a thousand times and edit, edit, edit!

I learned that my final draft should be totally different than my first and second drafts.

I have learned that I am terrible at grammar but that I am **capable of organizing my thoughts** and ideas more clearly. Also that there is no such thing as having only one revised paper, but that I need to **constantly revise**. I have learned that in my introduction, I should state my claims and arguments and not assume the reader understands the reasons **why I wrote a paper**.

Confidence/Identity as a Writer:

I have learned to get to the point. I have also learned that papers don't always have to be stressful, they can be fun!

Just a lot about my style what works best for me and how to work around my weakness and strengths in writing.

I have learned that I am able to write a 10 page paper! I have also learned to revise my own paper and make it "tighter". I also feel like I have improved in my peer editing.

What I have learned about my writing is that I am not a bad writer. I just need to take my time and really put 100% towards my papers. I know now that peer editing your own papers can help you a lot and make your paper better.

Implications

Class size may be wrong question/focus

Design

Space

Participation structures

Distributed Expertise

Not about buying tech solutions in search of a
problem

For a list of resources related to 21st C Learning:

<http://kimjaxon.tumblr.com>

Link to Survey Data:

<http://tinyurl.com/jaxon130P>

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