



*Mark your calendar now for  
ITLAL Spring Events*

**How Can I Use Writing to Help  
Students Learn Content?**

February 25, 3:00-4:30pm  
ITLAL Underground (Library 69)

Asking students to write frequently in your discipline helps them to begin creating organizational structures, trains them to begin thinking more like an expert, and creates opportunities for your feedback to guide their development. In this workshop, we will explore principles for designing both short writing tasks and more formal writing assignments that will help your students become more fluent in your content and improve their disciplinary thinking.

**Enhance Your Course with  
Online Tools  
and Proven Strategies!**

March 6, 10:00-11:30am  
ITLAL Underground (Library 69)

This workshop will provide information on online tools and strategies to enhance the learning experience for both you and your students. In this session we will consider readily available tools and simple strategies for creating the learning environment you want for your class. We will also have the opportunity to learn from a panel of experienced instructors who will share their tips, tricks and advice for running a smooth classroom be it online or face to face.

To register for events or request services, please visit  
<http://albany.edu/teachingandlearning>  
Or  
Telephone: 442-5521  
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E-mail: [teachingandlearning@albany.edu](mailto:teachingandlearning@albany.edu)

## *What's Happening with Online Teaching & Learning at UAlbany?*

### *A Conversation with Peter Shea, Assoc. Provost for Online Learning*

#### *What are some recent developments in online teaching and learning at UAlbany?*

**Shea:** Some of the exciting developments include work being conducted through support of the Office of the Provost and the CIO which has encouraged new faculty-led development and enhancement of online teaching and learning. There is a wide variety of projects currently in the works across many different departments to extend access and increase quality of instruction with and through online and blended learning. For example, the Department of Public Administration and Policy is meeting the demands for nonprofit leadership education by offering a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) for the first time this semester. More than 10,000 students have enrolled, most of these not for credit. In addition, online and blended courses are also being developed across the University—in the Departments of Atmospheric and Environmental Science, Communication, and Informatics and in the Schools of Social Welfare, Business, Criminal Justice, Education, and Public Health.

#### *You mentioned MOOCs here at UAlbany, and those certainly get a lot of attention when talking about online courses. What is the role of MOOCs in online learning and teaching?*

**Shea:** MOOCs are an updated way to offer continuing education and to leverage with technology what we are already doing in the classroom. I don't see MOOCs as a practical way to offer credit-based courses in a broad sense (though some are experimenting with this). But organizations like Coursera and edX have developed platforms for reaching millions of people who may never have heard of the University at Albany. This kind of technology-mediated outreach is consistent with the historical goals of higher education, especially continuing and distance education initiatives. We have a few faculty-led projects to experiment with MOOCs—some with support from the OTL (Online Teaching and Learning) initiative. As mentioned above, Yvonne Harrison from the Rockefeller College is offering a MOOC in Nonprofit Governance. In addition, Trudi Jacobson in the University Libraries is offering a Metaliteracy MOOC that uses digital badging to deliver content, and Sanjay Goel of the School of Business is developing a digital forensics MOOC on "International Cyberconflicts." I'd love to see our faculty and staff share lessons learned from these experiences—maybe here at ITLAL!

#### *What is OpenSUNY, and how does involvement benefit UAlbany?*

**Shea:** OpenSUNY is a collaborative effort across all SUNY institutions to help campuses address many of the challenges associated with the growth of online education across the country. This collaboration also represents an opportunity to be reflective about how we currently implement online learning and to benefit from dialogue with others involved in this enterprise. Other institutions (outside of SUNY and the state of New York) have made huge investments in public-private partnerships to build large online efforts: by collaborating internally rather than externally, we can avoid some of the downsides of these partnerships.

On a more practical level, OpenSUNY offers an opportunity to raise the profile of our programs through coordinated efforts to improve quality for faculty, students, and the technology environment and to benefit from marketing and other opportunities being made available centrally. Being a part of OpenSUNY provides us with the potential to reach more students and increase program media coverage and recognition through [open.suny.edu](http://open.suny.edu). I believe that our participation in OpenSUNY has opened a dialogue among online program directors and with support units that can help raise the quality of courses and services for students and faculty.

It's an ongoing experiment and we currently have three OpenSUNY Plus programs: two in Education, and one in Public Health. Staff in ITS and ITLAL are involved in these conversations and we hope to be able to offer additional opportunities for faculty to reflect on their online and blended learning as a result of this work.

***How will our online initiatives at UAlbany serve our students? How will this help them?***

**Shea:** Again, I think we need to understand the shifting landscape of higher education and to recognize the changing demographics of the students that we—and all colleges—are serving. UAlbany is competing for a shrinking pool of traditional aged learners in New York and everywhere as non-traditional students have become the majority in higher education. Providing high-quality and flexible instructional options will position us to address the needs of this growing population of students, especially in light of the options they now have at other institutions.

***What are some misconceptions people have about online learning & teaching at UAlbany?***

**Shea:** One of the biggest concerns I hear is that online teaching and learning may be inherently inferior in some ways to classroom teaching and learning. In fact, there is quite an extensive literature addressing the general question of online vs. classroom—and the results indicate “no significant differences” again and again. So it seems that some of the problems that we associate with the transition to online education are about design rather than mode of instruction.

***A lot of people also believe that some students are just better suited for online courses. Is this true?***

**Shea:** There is an interesting line of current research seeking to understand more nuanced questions by looking at the conditions under which different populations of students benefit from, or are disadvantaged by, participation in online settings. For example, quite a bit of research has looked at community college students who do seem to struggle in online settings. The very interesting opportunity it seems to me is to understand how to design environments that both increase access and provide the supports necessary for increased success—especially for the growing pool of non-traditional students who make up the majority of all college students in the US today.

***It seems that some students may struggle with online learning because it requires them to be able to stay on-task and work independently. What should we be doing to best prepare and support students taking online classes?***

**Shea:** We should make students aware of what they need to do to be successful online before and during their instruction. We have in place some documentation that provides a brief set of questions on ITS webpages to do this at one level. And through our collaboration with OpenSUNY, we are working on providing students with access to a more comprehensive readiness assessment that will allow them to better understand if online learning is a good fit for them. In addition to extended help desk hours available through OpenSUNY, we have also contributed to

an inter-institutional tutoring service with other SUNY campuses to provide students with access to tutoring. So, while online learning may require some additional effort to stay on task, we are striving to provide support to ensure our online students’ success.

***Will all faculty be required to teach online?***

**Shea:** In a word, NO. However, we do need to recognize that in New York and the US we have a growing population of nontraditional students who need more flexible options for attaining their educational objectives. Departments throughout the School of Education, for example, have discovered that our students will elect to take online courses when they are offered, as they allow students to continue in their careers while attaining their goals for professional development. Many colleges now offer online courses and degree programs, and students everywhere have the option to complete their degrees in ways that better suit their schedules and busy lives irrespective of where they live and work. The question that we need to confront is how to provide students with options at UAlbany that other, similar institutions inside and outside SUNY are now providing, while at the same time respecting academic freedom. We need to engage in respectful dialogue about the changing landscape of higher education and how we as an institution evolve to confront these changes.

***Do you see any disciplines at UAlbany where online teaching may not be possible?***

**Shea:** That’s another tough question—from a content perspective, I don’t think that there are disciplines that simply cannot offer online courses. The challenges are more cultural and related to the design of the instruction. For example, faculty in some disciplines see the need for proctored exams as a barrier to offering online courses. There are both technical and design solutions to this barrier. Other challenges are lab courses. Again, others have designed solutions to address these already. We can benefit from the successful experiences others have had.

***Who supports UAlbany faculty with online-enabled instruction?***

**Shea:** There are different units involved in this arena—increasingly ITS and ITLAL are collaborating to provide support at different levels. There is an established process for providing support to faculty who elect to teach online through workshops offered through ITS. But again, ITLAL, with support from the Office of the Provost and CIO, is also doing more in this space. For example, you folks offered a great workshop in collaboration with ITS in the Fall bringing together experienced online instructors to discuss challenges and successes. We hope to see continued collaboration between units to support faculty going forward.



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