Abstract:
English 101 and 102 were designed as Blackboard courses during the fall semester of 1999 while I was teaching these courses on-campus in a computer lab. I integrated the material that I was using day by day and basically designed a replica of my on-campus classes for my on-line classes. My four on-campus classes and my on-line classes are on separate Blackboard sites so that there is no confusion when changes are made from class to class, but all courses are on the same schedule as far as assignments and requirements.
This paper addresses the initial problems and solutions of design and implementation for these freshman courses, which have been offered since the fall of 2000 at Nicholls State University.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS:
Student Population
Many adults in the Houma-Thibodaux area, which Nicholls serves, have never attended college. Some of these adults are in the work force in minimum wage jobs; some have climbed the ladder from minimum wage jobs to a point where they can go no higher without a college degree; others need to enter the work force to provide a second income for their families.

Because of their current situations (jobs, families), these students are unable to attend college classes and, until now, have seen no solution for their educational needs. These were the students I most wanted to reach by offering freshman composition courses on-line.

Freshmen vs. Upperclassmen
On-line classes were first considered at NSU as a solution for upperclassmen and graduate students who could not schedule a course required to complete their degree. There was general concern that freshmen students did not have the self-discipline, time management skills, independence, and study skills necessary to take a course on-line.

The student population I wanted to address were those who had never started college at all. I believed that once they got started and realized what they could accomplish, they would be committed to eventually getting a degree.

Traditional vs. Nontraditional
There was also concern that traditional students would see these courses as an opportunity to get credit for a course they did not have to attend, and that the courses would be flooded with students who otherwise would have been in on-campus classes. I hoped to find a way to weed out those who had no real need for an on-line class to keep those places open for the nontraditional student who could not take the course any other way. I also believed that the nontraditional student would likely be capable of independent learning and time management, possess motivation, maturity, and a drive for success, and thus be likely to complete the course successfully.

My courses are “flagged” for admission only with instructor’s permission. I speak to each student to determine his/her reason for enrolling in an online course before permission is given.

Skill vs. Content
Freshman composition is largely a “skills” course rather than a “content” course. As such, could it be taught effectively without face-to-face contact between instructor and student? I had used Blackboard in my
composition classes for several semesters and knew that, if used correctly, it could work as effectively as a traditional classroom.

**Critical Thinking vs. Testing**
Freshman composition cannot be evaluated through testing. The freshman composition courses at NSU are designed to teach and evaluate critical thinking and logic, as well as analytical reading and writing. Could this be accomplished in an on-line environment? This was the issue I have spent the most time addressing because I believe it is the most important one.

Quizzes on reading assignments are essay questions designed to evoke thoughtful analysis, not simple answers. Writing assignments are submitted in small segments and returned to students with suggestions for improvement without being graded. Topics for essays are very specific and based on previous student discussion and feedback.

**On-Campus Meetings**
When on-line classes were first proposed at NSU, instructors were required to meet with their classes in a traditional classroom setting several times during the semester. This seemed to defeat the purpose. If students had to attend class once a month, the course was not really a distance education course. It immediately eliminated students who did not live within driving distance as well as students who worked shifts or evenings (which many of these students do).

Students attend an on-campus meeting the first week of the semester for an introduction and explanation and a diagnostic essay; they return for the final exam, an in-class essay. Students who live too far to drive (Oregon, Florida, Saudi Arabia) complete these requirements at a Testing Center.

**PROBLEMS**
I try to resolve problems in my on-line classes by thinking about how I would handle it if this were a traditional class. Because I teach the same course on-campus each semester that I am teaching on-line, it is a fairly simple thing to do. In fact, I frequently post an announcement after my on-campus class concerning anything that has come up that might be useful to my on-line students, including brief transcripts of class discussions.

**Student Emails**
One of the first problems I faced was the inundation of email from on-line students. Because they were freshmen and because most of them had been out of school for quite some time, they seemed to need reassurance about everything they were supposed to be doing. I would often have 15 emails in one morning on the same subject. I solved this problem by adding a forum to Discussion Board which reads as follows:

Miscellaneous Student Concerns: If you have questions about anything during this course, submit them here so that others can see the answer to your question or answer it themselves.

As often happens in a traditional classroom, 1) other students frequently answered the question asked before I even saw it; 2) students who hadn’t thought about the question asked were provided with the answer before they knew to ask the question; 3) once I answered the question, I didn’t have to answer it 19 more times.

**Meaningful Discussion**
In an effort to encourage students to think critically through reading assignments and to stimulate intelligent exchange of ideas, I developed Discussion Board questions on each story that we read. Responses are not polished responses, just discussions of issues that seem relevant. Responses are not graded, but students are given participation points for regular submissions to Discussion Board (one response to the question and at least one reply to another student).

The following is an example of the forum posted after reading Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues.”
There are several issues buried within this story. I want you to look at the story as a whole, and tell me what issue seems most meaningful to you. Explain the impact of this issue on the characters and your understanding of it.

**Chat Sessions**
Students are invited, not required, to meet in Chat Sessions on Sundays at 8PM. I chose this time because it was likely to present the fewest conflicts with work or family. An announcement on Blackboard tells students what we will discuss in that week’s chat session. Usually it is a discussion of the reading assignment they are analyzing at the time, but it is also a time to clear up misunderstandings or clarify upcoming writing assignments. If I have noticed problems during the week with things they are turning in to me, we will address that during Chat.

**Modeling**
A major component of my on-campus classes is sharing good student writing with the rest of the class. It provides positive reinforcement and an audience for the students whose writing is shared; it provides examples of “what I want” for those students who are still uncertain. This is just as easy to accomplish in an on-line class and probably even more important since it allows them to connect with the other members of their class through their writing. I regularly post outstanding papers in a folder for the entire class to read.

**Audience**
Because a major consideration for my writing students is the audience they are addressing, it is crucial that their papers be read by someone other than me. I use file exchange on the group page to encourage students to share their essays with the members of their group for feedback and discussion.

**Feedback**
Students are encouraged to send essays-in-progress to me for my suggestions and comments. I read, comment on, and edit all rough drafts before they are graded. These essays are sent through Drop-Box. Deadlines for submission are critical; otherwise I will not be able to respond in time for the essays to be revised before the due date.

**CONCLUSION**
It has been five years since English 101 and 102 were first offered as online courses at NSU; yet I still see these courses as “under construction.” They change not semester by semester, but month by month and week by week. The development of an online course in freshman composition has been the most challenging task I have faced in twenty-five years as an educator, but it has also been one of the most rewarding.

Testimonies from nontraditional students who are now graduating seniors are evidence of the impact this has made. Waiting lists of 40 students per semester indicate that the demand is high. Rising retention rates suggest that 1) the process of “weeding out” has been refined, or 2) refinement of the course has produced desired results, or(3) public awareness has resulted in better students.

**Author’s Note**
I would be happy to send you a copy of the handout from this presentation. It contains the basic parts of the Blackboard course I have created, including announcements, folder descriptions, discussion board items, an online quiz, and an edited rough draft. Contact me by email becky.leblanc@nicholls.edu. I will send it to you as a file attachment.