At the end of Summer Session A, 2007, I finished teaching what I thought was a successful class. Students in my online Writing 50 class (a sophomore and junior level class dedicated to research writing) had done good work—often very good work. I knew their work intimately, I had conferenced with them frequently on AIM, and I understood their strengths and weaknesses as writers, readers, and thinkers. However, there was one small problem.

At the end of the course, when we met face-to-face after five weeks of working at a distance, I had a hard time lining up their names and their faces. I could do it, but it was as if I had only "really known" these students for a couple of weeks—the names were not locked into place. All of this led me to question my initial assumption: that the class had been a success. Then, almost immediately after that, I began to wonder if I might have experienced a different kind of success with these students, and a different kind of learning. Ultimately, I've come to realize this: online courses can improve students' reading and writing skills, but there are tradeoffs—many of them having to do with a sense of community. However, new versions of a community were available to my students and myself.