

Against the odds: Teaching writing in an online environment

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This paper outlines an approach to teaching academic writing in an online mode. The Pathways Enabling Course at the University of New England (UNE) was launched in 2008 and has provided us with a cohort of students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds who often lack the social capital necessary to write successfully in an academic context. These academic literacy units have been developed and taught by Academic Language and Learning (ALL) staff at UNE. As the Pathways students are external, there is a danger that they will not engage with the unit content and learning environment. The challenge has been to adapt writing pedagogy to the online environment, subject to the constraints of the tools that are available in the learning management system (Moodle). In the five years that this program has been offered, we have developed some key strategies that provide appropriate, scaffolded teaching and learning activities to develop academic writing in the online environment. This involves the innovative use of the available tools to successfully engage students in writing activities. Our primary teaching tools included Moodle's database activity, which we integrated with other online activities to generate substantial student engagement, participation and interactivity. We believe our approach offers a valuable opportunity for ALL professionals and students to interact online, producing written work that can be shaped through corrective feedback and redrafting. We present some samples of student work and show how, with appropriate feedback and learning resources, students can develop their proficiency in academic writing to improve their chances of academic success.

Key Words: academic writing, online learning, feedback, academic literacy.

1. Introduction

Widening participation in higher education has seen an increase of students from diverse backgrounds, many of whom come unprepared or underprepared for the demands of academic writing. One result has been the growth of academic language and learning centres in universities, offering a range of programs and models of support for students (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012). Successful approaches to the teaching of academic writing have been documented (e.g. Hyland, 2003; Martin, 1993, 2006; Rose, 2009), including a growing number of successful approaches to the teaching of academic writing online (e.g. Drury, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Hofmeister & Thomas, 2005; Kim, Mendenhall, & Johnson, 2010; Mort & Drury, 2012; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). The challenge for teaching online has been to try to adapt best practice approaches for teaching in the classroom to teaching in an online environment. But while teaching writing online is not new, much of the literature refers to blended modes of delivery where the online component supplements face-to-face instruction. In the absence of face-to-face instruction though, working with students effectively in a virtual, asynchronous

environment raises a host of difficulties. Consequently, this paper outlines the strategies used to teach academic writing exclusively in an online program that has been developed and refined by Academic Language and Learning (ALL) staff at the University of New England since 2008.

The online writing program comprises two core units on academic literacy offered in the university's Pathways Enabling Course. It is taught totally online and aims to develop academic writing for students undertaking an alternative pathway into the University's undergraduate degree programs. The fact that the course is taught exclusively online presents a whole range of challenges. For a start, online learning lacks the immediacy of face-to-face learning, and this can lead to a sense of isolation and detachment, and thus to a lack of engagement on the part of the student. Particular characteristics of external students, such as level of computer literacy, prior learning experiences, self-direction, and competing family and work commitments, may also impact on a student's capacity and motivation to participate effectively in online academic study. For the lecturer, it can be difficult to fully gauge to what level students have engaged or disengaged with the content of the course and the learning materials and activities, possibly resulting in students not receiving support or feedback when it is most required. As the teaching of academic writing is a core objective of the Pathways Enabling Course, the challenge for staff has been how best to adapt successful approaches to writing pedagogy into an online environment, to enable students to participate effectively and successfully in university study while maintaining student engagement with the online program through the use of the tools available in Moodle and on the web.

2. Context

At the University of New England, students are drawn from diverse backgrounds. Over 80% of students are external, and may never attend face-to-face lectures. In addition, approximately 40% of UNE's student cohort come from rural and remote areas and approximately 20% are from low socio-economic backgrounds. These groups often experience educational disadvantages due to isolation or lack of resources and opportunities (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). However, with current government imperatives to increase the number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), the University has implemented an online enabling course which provides students with an alternative entry pathway into a university degree program. The Pathways Enabling Course consists of four trimester-long units: two foundation units that introduce students to the academic literacies required for successful university study and coordinated centrally through the University's Academic Skills Office, and two elective units selected from a range of first year units offered from across the different schools, and studied concurrently with the foundation units. The particular design of the course meant that the foundation units needed to introduce students to university study and the writing process as well as some of the characteristic texts that students may encounter in their elective units. The program also faced the challenge of teaching students exclusively online. We therefore needed to develop a comprehensive, scaffolded program to prepare students for their written assessment tasks as well as maintain student engagement in the course. Over the 5 years of the program, we have developed some innovative methods to teach writing using the tools available in the learning management system (LMS), Moodle (currently version 2.3.6).

The two foundation units in the Pathways Enabling Course are underpinned by a genre-based approach (e.g. Martin, 1993; Rose, 2009) and critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992) in which students become familiar with the function, structure and features of some of the more common genres that they may encounter in their university courses. In the first unit, Foundation 101, students focus on the structure of various genres and at the same time build their knowledge and understanding of critical thinking through readings on critical thinking and climate change. The unit takes this "top-down" approach as students may be required to submit written assessment tasks such as essays in a concurrent elective unit. The second unit, Foundation 102, focuses on consolidating various features of academic writing such as grammar, academic style, paragraph structure and referencing through application, practice and assessment. At the same time, the two units simulate the writing process, taking students

through the various stages of drafting, editing and rewriting their assignments. As the course is taught totally online, we therefore had to find novel ways to guide students through the program to develop their proficiency in academic writing. We feel we have been able to achieve this through the use of various tools in Moodle and other online resources, thus providing a rich media experience for students combined with the use of constructive feedback that students are required to respond to.

3. The teaching program

The Foundation units are taken consecutively. The units are structured to guide students through the writing process in an attempt to simulate the research and writing cycle that is required of academic writing. The initial steps of the writing process are covered in Foundation 101, with later writing refinements, such as editing and proof reading, covered in Foundation 102. Initially, Foundation 101 directs students' attention to key features of the whole text such as the generic structure and function of different written academic texts including essays, reports, critical reflection and case studies, and they practise aspects of essay writing, such as question analysis, essay planning, academic writing style and referencing. By the time they reach Foundation 102, the students have had some feedback on their writing skills from Foundation 101 and their elective subject and are ready for more intensive work on their basic writing skills: paragraphs, sentences, grammar, punctuation and spelling are foregrounded in their learning activities, and they are given instruction and feedback on their writing attempts. The model below demonstrates the approach to teaching writing online in Foundation 101 and through into Foundation 102. It necessarily has many layers and elements that interact to form an holistic process as outlined in Figures 1 and 2.

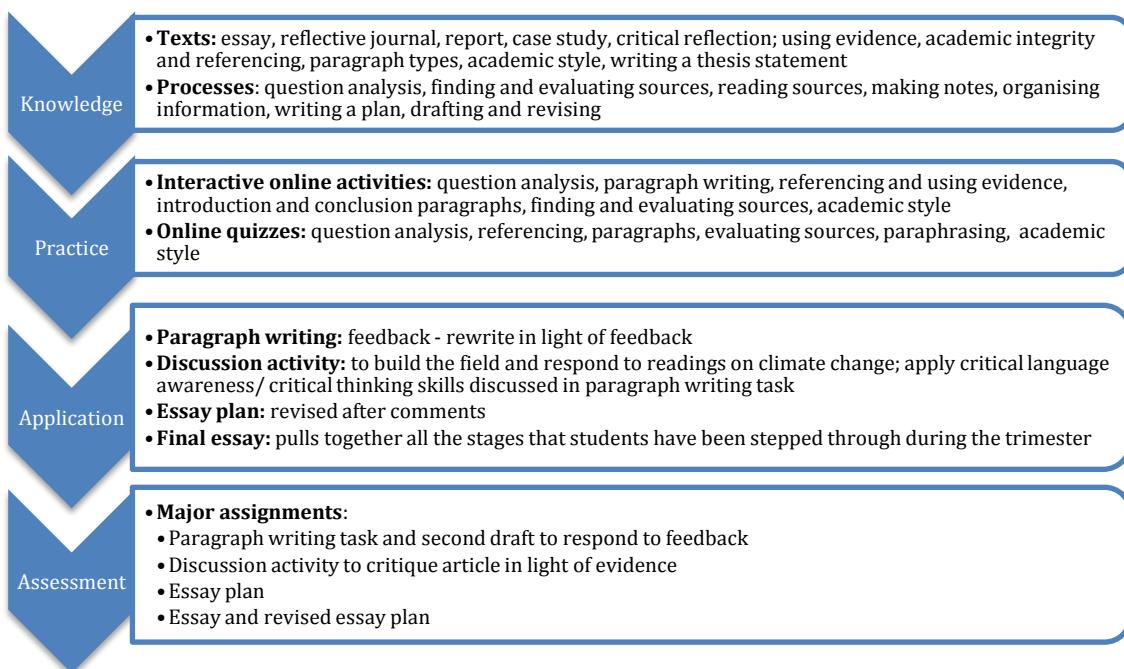


Figure 1. Outline of the model for teaching writing in Foundation 101.

Foundation 102 focuses the students on writing and editing skills that may have been identified in Foundation 101 and their elective unit. The outline of Foundation 102 is summarised in Figure 2.

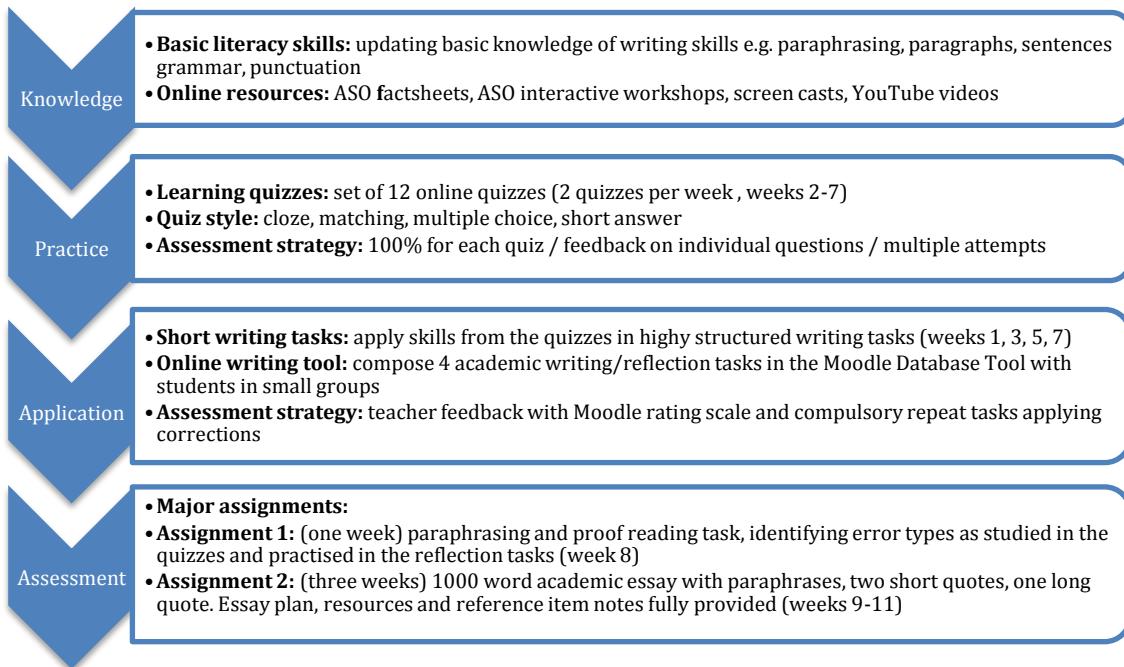


Figure 2. Outline of the model for teaching writing in Foundation 102.

At the completion of the process, the following comment was recorded in a participating student's reflection, highlighting the value of the model for helping students develop their knowledge about and abilities in academic writing:

I have found that the essay is the final piece in fully comprehending academic writing. It has been where everything I have learnt over the past trimester has come together and from where I have learnt the most important parts. For instance, it refined my academic writing by going beyond writing a single paragraph to a composition of paragraphs that most importantly had to link together. In addition, the one part I noticed from writing the essay was that it had to provide a detailed perspective with an objective view of the topic. With mobile phones being such an important part of society, I found it difficult not to write about my thoughts and beliefs. Compelled to write from the sources provided in the assignment task, I found it necessary to stray away from my personal beliefs and reference the researched facts as expressed by other people. Also, there were so many important points in the readings that being able to summarise was another important technique that I learnt. Overall, it is a great relief to see it all come together, as being able to write an academic piece is a vital component in university studies.

4. Strategies for teaching writing online

The writing program developed for the Pathways Enabling Course brings together tools and resources available online and on the LMS (in this case, Moodle version 2.3.6) that have been used effectively to assist students to develop their academic writing. These tools include the online discussion forum, database tool, quizzes, interactive flash-based activities, screen casts, YouTube videos, pdf documents, Turnitin and Grademark. One of the major challenges for online learning is the degree of digital literacy a student needs to possess to be able to participate successfully in an online course. The Pathways Enabling Course attracts students with varying levels of computer literacy, including those who may possess only basic skills to begin with. This has been addressed in a number of ways to assist these students to develop their proficiency with using the online tools and resources, including instructions with screen shots or podcasts and IT phone support. However, we have found that the most effective method for assisting students develop their computer literacy is to set tasks that force the students to

confront the use of the online tools. Students then assist each other in the discussion forums, and are also connected to IT support for any further problems. This way, they use their peers as well as the university support mechanisms that are offered specifically to help students with their computer issues. An example of this peer-peer interaction can be seen in the following screen shot from one of the Moodle units:

The screenshot shows a Moodle forum discussion. The first post, titled "Rewrite of reflective paragraph", was made by Becc on Thursday, 4 July 2013, at 1:08 AM. The message reads: "This may seem like a silly question, but where do we submit the rewrite of our reflective paragraph? do we edit the original, or submit a whole new one? thanks, Becc." Below the message are "Edit | Delete | Reply" links. The second post, titled "Re: Rewrite of reflective paragraph", was made by another user on the same day at 8:46 AM. The message reads: "Hi Becc, There should be a little hand holding a pencil under your paragraph, I think if you click on that you should be able to re submit your work in the box it opens." Below this message are "Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply" links.

Figure 3. Sample of a peer – peer forum discussion.

4.1. Multimedia tools for teaching

In an exclusively online environment, there is a danger that the teacher may lose the essential ability to demonstrate how to perform certain tasks. For example, students new to university study are often baffled by the meticulous attention that needs to be paid to referencing conventions in their writing. We have found that this potential shortfall in teaching online can be avoided through the strategic use of various video media, either readily available through public sites such as YouTube, or teacher-made online resources through the use of various software packages such as Camtasia Studio. Short lessons can be made up to supplement the materials already available, showing students, for example, how to format a reference list or how to include references in-text. Flash technology is also useful to demonstrate the analysis of the generic features of a text. For example, students can be directed to the particular features of an essay so that the core stages and recurring patterns of the genre can be made explicit to students before they attempt to construct their own texts. In addition, by embracing the rich media experience offered by Web2.0 technologies such as Flash Action Script, students become active learners, for example by reconstructing a text. Therefore, we have found that sets of activities on textual features that employ the learner in activities beyond reading contributes to their developing knowledge of the written features of academic texts. Each weekly program uses a range of online media tools (see Figure 4) to enhance the students' learning experiences.

The screenshot shows a Moodle course page for "Week 5 program & resources". It lists several items:

- Your work program: Week 5**
- READ this reflection 3 example**
- Reflection 3: How to format a long quote in Moodle (VIDEO DEMO)**
- Reflection 3: submit HERE/Check for REPEATS HERE (ReflectionGrouping)**
- Restricted: 'Available from 29 July 2013, 12:05 AM.'
- Week 5 quizzes**
- English Quiz #07: Subject-verb agreement**
- Restricted: 'Available from 29 July 2013, 12:05 AM.'
- Short video clip: Subject-verb agreement**
- EQ#08: Verb tenses**
- Restricted: 'Available from 29 July 2013, 12:05 AM.'
- Short video clip: Verb tenses**
- Week 5 forum**
- Ask questions about week 5 program HERE**

Figure 4. Sample of different multimedia resources in use in the Foundation 102 program.

4.2. Moodle tools for learning, testing and assessment of writing skills

Moodle offers a range of tools which we have used to full effect to enhance the learning of writing. At the same time, students will also become familiar with the tools that may be used in their elective units or future units studied at UNE.

4.2.1. Discussion forum

The online discussion tool is one method for students to submit assessable writing. Online discussions can foster a community of learners (Hofmeister & Thomas, 2005) and encourage deep learning (Fox & Mackeogh, 2003). When discussions are included as part of their assessment, students are more likely to participate in meaningful exchanges with their virtual classmates. Moreover, the asynchronous nature of the online discussions gives students the ability to consider their response to the task more carefully and write more complex answers to the questions (Drury, 2004). Foundation 101 includes an online discussion as one of the assessment tasks. After reading a number of articles about climate change and climate science, students are given a newspaper article on climate change by a climate change sceptic. A series of guided questions directs students to comment on the text, looking particularly for the argument presented, language features used, and consideration of the purpose and effect of the linguistic choices made. They are also asked to consider the article in light of the other texts they have been given to read on climate change and reflect on the nature of the evidence presented. Students post their own response and then are required to reply to other students' posts, an approach also adopted by Hofmeister and Thomas (2005). The task also assists the students to develop a rudimentary knowledge of the field to enable them to work towards a final essay for the unit on a similar topic. The following exchange illustrates how two students participated in a dialogue on the issues presented in the readings:

Student A

For decades, the anthropogenic implications of climate change has been a topic of much contention, covered from many different angles by many different people, but still not always represented objectively. In her article 'Beware the Church of Climate Change', Devine (2008), expresses the opinion that those who have accepted the reality of climate change and wish to take action against it, are 'alarmist' in their views. Her article, from its title to its conclusion, draws parallels to liken such people to religious zealots and fundamentalists. The article itself, however, fails to represent both sides of the debate, and focuses primarily on the argument that changes in climate are inherent, have occurred periodically in the past, and therefore cannot be connected with human activity. Its use of personalization, dramatization and other journalistic norms (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007, para. 8-9), are evident from the first paragraph. For example, by establishing that the Czech Prime Minister is 'anti-totalitarian', and that the New York Times 'opened their profile of him' with information garnered from 'a communist secret agent' (Devine, 2008, para. 1-2), the author is using personalization, or one might even suggest manipulative language, to cast positive/negative light onto others in a way that promotes her own viewpoint. One might, however, question its relevancy to the topic. Such journalistic norms are used liberally throughout the article. The author implies that the scientists conducting research into climate change are disconnected from public life, yet fails to acknowledge the fact that the scientists' conclusions are professional, and have 'a pervasive and well-developed quality-control process' (Davies, 2008, para. 4). Devine herself cites much of her contrary 'evidence' from limited sources, which in themselves are secondary and almost certainly biased, as indicated in a recent article by Hamilton (2006). In its wider aspect, Devine's article provides a resounding voice for climate sceptics who are in fact in a minority; and backs up its arguments with a definite flavour of hypocrisy.

Student B

Miranda Devine's opening two paragraphs have very little relevance to her topic. These paragraphs do, however, give an indication as to her intended audience. The emotive language she uses, particularly the "1980's communist secret agent's" quote, clearly indicates this article is intended for the over sixties population, those who have memories of the cold war and the threat of communism. Hamilton (2009) states, "As jubilation over the fall of the Berlin Wall subsided, the wave of environmental activism around the world was perceived as a political threat " (para. 2). It would appear from this article the majority of climate change sceptics do come from a particular age group those in their "60's or older, schooled in the unquestioning pre 1970's" (Hamilton, 2009, para. 11). It would seem therefore, from these initial paragraphs, Miranda Devine does know her target audience.

Student A

Excellent point! One might say that Devine's attempt to draw a parallel (albeit not explicitly stated) between the Communist manuvourings of the Cold War era, and the present objectives of climate activists is journalistic manipulation at its most ridiculous. It is comparable, in fact, to anti-euthanasia religious factions trying to suggest that euthanasia could lead Australia into the realm of the politics practised by National Socialist Germany. In her article, Devine argues that those who are realistic about global warming are being 'alarmist', even while she concurrently sensationalises in the extreme. Unfortunately, some people take such opinions very seriously, as indicated by Hamilton in this quote by Rush Limbaugh: "With the collapse of Marxism, environmentalism has become the new refuge of socialist thinking." (para. 2). Yet, unlike political ideals, climate change is, at its heart, an issue of science.

It is clear from this exchange that, given the opportunity to think about their response along with quite clear guidelines on the topics to focus on in their discussion, these students were able to craft quite sophisticated academic responses. This task then feeds into the final assignment on the climate change debate where students can transfer their ideas into the academic essay genre.

4.2.2. Quizzes

Both units use the quiz tool extensively to foreground basic academic writing skills. Before students complete the quizzes, they are linked to relevant online resources, either in the form of PDF fact sheets or other online resources such as interactive tools using Flash technology, in order to build their knowledge of various features of text, academic style, grammar or punctuation. They can then check their understanding of these topics through automatically marked quizzes for which they are required to score 100%. The quizzes take a number of forms, such as cloze, matching, multiple choice and short answer. This type of self-assessment has been shown to assist with the development of independent learning and self-management skills, necessary for successful study at university (Boud, 1995; Ibabe & Jauregizar, 2010). Figure 5 illustrates the capacity of the quiz tool to provide instant feedback on the quiz questions, which students can then continuously revise until they reach the required 100%.

The following student comment demonstrates how the student links the learning in the quizzes to the composing activity in the reflection task undertaken in the database tool, described below.

At the beginning of this unit, I believed that I was already a competent writer; however, the English quizzes and reflection tasks have forced me to reassess my literacy skills, and brought to my attention a number of mistakes that had become entrenched in all of my writing. For example, my reflection feedback indicated that I had a tendency to overuse commas. Also, the quizzes made me much more conscious of my grammatical habits and have led to improvement both in my academic and personal work. In this way,

FNDN studies have helped me to a great degree with my elective subject. For example, I am now more aware of my use of commas, transition words and proper spelling; through inattention, I had a tendency to let American spelling slip in. By keeping these rules in mind, I believe that I will be more successful in my future studies, approaching projects with greater focus and confidence.

When you are PROOFREADING your work, you should examine every apostrophe you write and consider:

1. whether an apostrophe should be there at all
2. whether an apostrophe is needed to show a contraction
3. whether an apostrophe is needed to show ownership/possession

Select ONE correct word from each of the following TEN pairs of words:

Use **apostrophe's** correctly when you write **you're** **X** academic **essays** ✓. If you learn the **rules'** **X** and apply them to every word that **contains** ✓ an apostrophe, the **lecturer's** ✓ **comment's** **X** will show appreciation for your accuracy in writing. **There's** **X** much to be gained from showing accuracy in your writing as lecturers are often inclined to think that a **student's** ✓ attitude to study is reflected in the quality of **their** ✓ work.

Check

Partially correct

Marks for this submission: 0.50/1.00. This submission attracted a penalty of 0.10.

When you make a possessive for SINGULAR nouns and indefinite pronouns (e.g. someone), use 's (i.e. the apostrophe goes BEFORE the s). Read the following sentences with the possessive apostrophe in mind:

In accordance with our **university's** assessment **policies**, the **students** failure to hand in her **assignments** on Charles **Dickens**' novels on the due date led to **penalties**. **Everyone's** essays were due before the vacation.

Only ONE of the following sentences uses the 's correctly for **all** of the required words in the above sentences. Select the correctly punctuated sentence.

Select one:

- a. In accordance with our **universities** assessment **policy's**, the **students** failure to hand in her **assignment's** on Charles **Dickenses**' novels on the due date led to **penalty's**. **Everyone's** essays were due before the vacation.
- b. In accordance with our **universities'** assessment **policies**, the **students'** failure to hand in her **assignment's** on Charles **Dickens'** novels on the due date led to **penalties'**. **Everyone's** essays were due before the vacation.
- c. In accordance with our **university's** assessment **policies**, the **student's** failure to hand in her **assignments** on Charles **Dickens's** novels on the due date led to **penalties**. **Everyone's** essays were due before the vacation. ✓
- d. In accordance with our **university's** assessment **policy's**, the **student's** failure to hand in her **assignment's** on Charles **Dickens's** novels on the due date led to **penalty's**. **Everyone's** essays were due before the vacation.

Check

Correct

Marks for this submission: 1.00/1.00

Figure 5. Sample of formative feedback in quiz questions.

4.2.3. Database tool

Perhaps one of the most powerful tools that we have made use of in the Foundation units that is available in Moodle is the “database” tool. This tool allows students to upload a short piece of writing on which we can provide detailed and constructive feedback on their ability to construct appropriately structured and correctly written text. Feedback is an important device in the teaching of academic writing as it can be used to scaffold language development (Mahboob & Devrim, 2013). This is particularly important for students studying in an online environment because they can get targeted information on their writing achievements and problems which can help motivate and encourage them (Hyland, 2001). As well as the feedback itself, it is also important for students to respond to the feedback in some way, for example, through revision of their writing (Ellis, 2009). As Ellis notes, “clearly, corrections can only work if writers notice and process them” (p. 105). The database tool in Moodle has the capacity for students to contribute additional text to their original entry. Thus, in subsequent contributions, students can rewrite their composition in light of targeted feedback. A variety of rating tools that link to the electronic Grades tool are also available to the marker and may be used to challenge students to improve their writing.

Further to this, the tool allows for students to be assigned to groups which helps to keep control of student numbers in an interactive situation. The interaction that takes place in group work can have a positive influence on cognitive processing which can result in learning (King, 2002, p.

33). In an online environment, the ability of students to share their feedback with others in their groups could facilitate their understanding of various aspects of academic writing. Students can be divided into groups for the database writing tasks and teacher responses to student efforts may be viewed by other members of the group. Thus, the effort expended by student and teacher may become the subject of study for the group members. Feedback to each student becomes available to other students, making the process of marking and commenting more economical; for example, students see the written responses that are valued by the marker; they see well-structured paragraphs, and suggestions for clearer presentation of arguments; and they also see the errors that mark inappropriate academic writing style and incorrectly written English. The tool allows participants in the groups to be set up anonymously or with student names, according to the discretion of the teacher.

In Foundation 101, for example, the database tool is used in an exercise in which students first practise presenting two sides of an argument. The task introduces students to the concept of critical thinking and the fact that the term is not actually clear-cut, but, rather, is contested. Students are asked to read a number of texts on critical thinking, ones that present critical thinking as a generalist skill, and others that present critical thinking as a disciplinary skill. The writing task asks students to write a paragraph presenting both sides of the debate and to take a position on the debate. The students then post the paragraph into the database. These are then marked up by the markers with comments and corrections. Students are then required to revise their paragraph, taking account of the feedback provided and post the revised text under their first one. As the writing sample below demonstrates, this activity provides the opportunity for the markers to raise several points about academic writing, including the development of ideas, use of topic sentences, appropriate tone and register, appropriate acknowledgement of sources, as well as issues with grammar or written expression.

Based on the fact that it has been ‘one of the most widely discussed concepts in education and education reform these days’ (pg71). I’d say it’s a question we should all understand the answer to. Critical thinking is thinking that has a purpose (pg4). I understand it involves being open minded enough to take in the evidence, and to be able to analyze it in a systematic fashion. Being able to evaluate the information and justifiably make judgment. Critical thinking involves discipline we don’t consciously consider using on a daily basis. Thinking critically and to question without fear, to seek out radically different solutions and to voice them without reprisal, to read widely and deeply, and to examine without end and grow intellectually (mike Mullen). I understand critical thinking is having an opinion, finding evidence based on your opinion, be it for or against. Analyzing the evidence, picking holes in it. Judging the source from which the evidence came, and most importantly, being able to either change your opinion or to have the courage to without a doubt, stand up and say here is my opinion, here is the supporting evidence and my mind won’t be changed.

In Foundation 102, the tasks are clearly focused on the development of academic and reflective writing skills. For example, submissions are written in paragraph format and may incorporate such skills as writing paragraph topic and concluding sentences, using transition words and reporting verbs, employing correct academic style, incorporating paraphrases and short and long direct quotes in the correct format. The paragraph feedback also offers students information on their core literacy skills: correct sentences, grammar, punctuation and spelling. When entering text into the database tool, students and markers are able to make use of a rich text editor (RTE). The RTE presents typical WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editing. The markers use a range of agreed upon conventions when providing students with feedback. As shown in the example below, some of these conventions include the use of text effects (e.g. strikeout and strong emphasis) and colour choice for corrections and encouragement. Students may be directed to repeat their work following suggestions in the feedback if necessary. As mentioned above, this demonstrates to students the value and necessity of redrafting their work. The writing is then rated and forms part of the assessment profile on each student. The following

example is one of four “staged” writing activities set using the database tool that that will eventually lead into a 1000 word essay.

SAMPLE OF A STUDENT ATTEMPT WITH TEACHER INTERVENTION

PARAGRAPH 1 (student academic paragraph writing submission with corrections)

~~Social networking has become a common form of communication in most Australian homes. Today it is that may be used for much more than catching up on celebrity gossip.~~ (one topic sentence that reflects the intention of the paragraph e.g. positive uses of social networking tools – stick to the topic information without bringing in your own ideas about social networking here) Social networking assists people to keep in touch, as well as never losing contact with anyone ever again, (no comma here) (Jackson, 2011, p. 66). Sites such as Facebook allow people to keep track of social stories and events. It also has wider inclusion parameters than other basic forms of communication. (fullstop) **Moreover**, (use transition words) Peters and Hogan (2010, para. 36) say consider (use appropriate reporting verb) that it allows people who are shy and disabled to have a social life via the computer screen whereby (connecting word) they They can socialise "without fear of rejection for people with low self esteem". (good structure for direct quote) Another successful application for this technology is that it has become an avenue for spreading news because people can get the Internet on their phones. So it social networking sites is can be very successfully used for disaster management (e.g. during the Brisbane floods), (for e.g. use brackets) instead of just depending on official news updates ("Modern Communication", 2011, para. 16). As a result of the explosion of social networks in communities on Australian culture, a great many hurdles in terms of successful communication have been overcome. (good try with concluding sentence).

NOTE: 1. When you use abbreviations like e.g. or i.e., you MUST put them in brackets OR write the words in full in the text, for example,. See ASO online workshop Academic style.

NOTE: 2. Print out the ASO factsheet Connecting your ideas and put it in front of you somewhere so you get going with connecting your sentences with transition words.

PARAGRAPH 2 (student reflection submission with corrections)

As a student of distance education, (comma here) I found the topic sentence relatively easy as social networking is something that I use frequently. (BUT the topic sentence is not really about what you know, rather it is a summary of the purpose of the paragraph) After coming up with an introduction a topic sentence, I brainstormed for a while to make sure I could make the ideas to connect into logical sentences. (BUT you need to use transition words) I always have a copy of the APA referencing factsheet so as to make sure of correct in-text references. Along with the referencing, (comma) I worked hard to put the direct quote into a sentence so it made sense and gave the paragraph maximum impact. (good comment) In conclusion, (comma) I have learnt that brainstorming is an important part of assignment (spelling) writing, along with proofreading and referencing. I intend to APPLY this knowledge in any future assignment tasks.

REFERENCE ITEM

Jackson, P.J. (2011). Social communication in the Internet. *Computers in Society*, 2(5), 21-76. doi:10.1094/092-3578.6.884 (italics for the volume number / NO space after colon in the DOI)

Good try, but you added info that you were not given. I feel that rewriting this with corrections will help. REPEAT PARAGRAPH 1 with corrections. Do not delete any of the above paragraph. Just click on the little hand and do it again following the instructions you were given.

REVISED ATTEMPT BY STUDENT ON ACADEMIC PARAGRAPH

In modern society, social networking sites allow people to communicate with each other and keep up to date with social issues. Social networking assists people to keep in touch, as well as never losing contact with anyone ever again (Jackson, 2011, p. 66). Sites such as *Facebook* allow people to keep track of social stories and events. It also has wider inclusion parameters than other basic forms of communication. Moreover, Peters and Hogan (2010, para. 36) consider that it allows people who are shy and disabled to have a social life via the computer screen whereby they can socialise "without fear of rejection for people with low self esteem". Another successful application for this technology is that it has become an avenue for spreading news because people can get the Internet on their phones. Therefore, social networking sites can be very successfully used for disaster management (e.g. during the Brisbane floods), instead of just depending on official news updates ("Modern Communication", 2011, para. 16). As a result of the explosion of social networks in communities, a great many hurdles in terms of successful communication have been overcome.

Thank-you. Hope the repeat cemented a few of those basic skills that everyone is learning about. Reflection 2 completed. See your *-*** star rating in Grades.**

The key has been to develop simple conventions that are easily communicated and understood by the markers and students for reasons of economy.

One of the constraints presented by the online environment is the student perception that there should be immediate feedback on submitted work (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). This perception presents itself as a glut of emails from students asking why their contribution has not yet received feedback, often within hours of having contributed their paragraph to the database, despite being given instructions that it can take a few days for all submissions to be marked. Having the ability to arrange students into groups allows for a neat division of labour among markers. Devising a modest and not overly complex set of markup conventions and a bank of comments helps to maintain the quality of feedback without reducing the efficiency of the marker throughout the often tedious marking process. The effort of the individual student and the marker's feedback to assist the student is viewed by all participants in the group which increases the value of the collaborative effort.

Lastly, designing writing activities to keep the word count of student contributions to a short but meaningful length is another response to the constraints of the online environment. It appears that a relatively short piece of text with "built-in" writing challenges exposes flaws in most students' writing abilities. In Foundation 102, each student is required to submit four sequential writing tasks, so it becomes quite obvious to the teacher when students are applying their learning from the previous task or simply submitting a fresh piece of writing without responding to teacher feedback as the same errors are quite obviously repeated. Therefore, this relatively small but meaningful interaction with the writing activity, while keeping the workload at a reasonable, non-overloading level, not only helps teaching staff to develop a writing profile on each student, but also prevents students from perceiving the activity as busy work.

4.2.4. Online marking tools (Grademark)

Students are required to write a final essay in both units to apply the skills and knowledge that they have acquired through each trimester. These are submitted online through Turnitin, and can be marked online using Grademark. The benefits of using this online marking system are that it is possible to build up a bank of comments that focus on, for example, the categories outlined by Hyland (2001) of content, organisation, accuracy or presentation. This saves much time in

marking and administration. The tool in Grademark also allows for highlighting or strikeout and there is even the ability to insert global feedback, insert a short audio file and include the marking criteria. In addition, students can access their marked assignments as soon as they are marked.

5. Evaluation

The Foundation units are evaluated each trimester through the university's unit evaluation system, but have yet to undergo any other formal evaluation process. However, over the five years that the program has been running, there have been a number of changes and developments to each unit as we test various approaches and tools to see what works well with this student cohort. Much of the writing and the critical thinking components of the program have changed over time as successive iterations of the units and upgrades of the LMS have allowed us to refine the tasks and resources to better achieve our aims.

There is always a danger that students will not engage with a program taught totally online. However, the feedback from students in the University's unit evaluations of the two Foundation units, as well as through personal, unsolicited emails, attests to the success of the program. For example, a student in Foundation 101 commented that "a variety of interactive tests and quizzes helped to keep the learning fun and interesting. I also found that on returning to study, they provided a short continual sense of achievement. This was a great motivator." A Foundation 102 student coming to the end of two trimesters of study commented:

The unlimited attempts at the quizzes reinforces what I already know and gives me time to redo and understand what I **do not** know or am unsure of. Being able to redo until perfect is an effective learning tool for me. Having a week at a time to complete the reflection tasks can be helpful when I am unsure of how I am feeling. The time to ponder, write and rewrite is beneficial to me. I have learnt that it is okay to not get it right the first time. A rewrite can be done and is often helpful. Most definitely what I am learning in my FNDN subjects assists me with my ELECTIVE subject. My elective is ARPA 104, **and** I have had to write and submit my first ever university assignment that could count towards my teaching degree. This is not something I thought I would or could ever do. I strongly believe that this would not have been achievable without the knowledge I have gained on essay writing, critical thinking and paragraph structure from my FNDN course. I believe my academic skills strategies are successful because I am much more confident now than four months ago. I am not as stressed at the thought of writing an essay or doing a quiz. The more I see my grades improve and what I am capable of, the more driven I am to get a teaching degree.

The test of this writing program is how well students perform in their degree program once they have completed the Pathways Enabling Course. An analysis of the first cohort of students to complete the course and subsequently enrol in degree programs at UNE (96 students) found that the Pathways students' success rates were almost equivalent to a control group of 1,818 students in the same degree programs who had not first completed the Pathways Enabling Course (Muldoon, 2011). More recently, of the 174 students who completed the Pathways Enabling Course in Trimester 1 or Trimester 2 of 2012, 117 subsequently enrolled in Bachelor Degree programs at UNE. A preliminary survey of the results of this group indicates that these students are also performing at an adequate to high level in many of their units, and that a substantial number of the failures are in Maths units rather than units with written assessments. While we cannot attribute this success entirely to the Pathways writing program, we can assume that the writing preparation that students had from the Foundation program has had some influence in their capacity to succeed in their studies. Meanwhile, the higher failure rate in the Maths subjects demands further investigation.

While the program has been successful in many ways, there are still some areas which need further consideration to further improve the program. One area is that of the workload implications of the course. The need for constant writing, feedback, redrafting and marking can be extremely laborious and time consuming, not to mention stressful as there is often a fast turnaround of marking required. With large classes, this can severely compound the problem. What we have been fortunate with is the ability to employ casual markers. In addition, the use of Grademark may also go some way to alleviate the pressure as responses can be saved and reused.

6. Conclusion

This paper outlines a writing program developed for a specific enabling course offered at the University of New England. While students may be faced with a number of challenges that can obstruct their development and progress in an online environment, we believe that, “against the odds”, we have been able to overcome some of these challenges to assist students in their higher education goals. The tools available within the Moodle LMS have proved to be very beneficial for teaching writing to our students. A variety of tools such as the discussion forum, database tool and quizzes combined with resources such as pdf files, screen casts, YouTube videos and Flash animations have been used to great effect over the past five years for our particular student demographic. In this time, a substantial number of students have progressed into degree programs with a sound understanding of and proficiency in academic writing that was attained through this online writing program.

While the program outlined in this paper refers specifically to an enabling course, there is no reason why the strategies using e-learning tools could not be used in other settings and contexts where writing and academic literacy development is the aim. For example, given the success of the Moodle database tool and its efficiencies, it could easily be used to support the embedding of academic literacies and genre-based pedagogy into discipline-specific contexts. Moreover, the tool could be used to teach different text types such as introduction or conclusion paragraphs. There could also be more targeted group activities using the database tool. Currently, the ability is there for students to read and learn from other students’ feedback, but there is no structured activity to guide them in a group activity. An activity could be built in, for example, where students take note of the first draft and feedback to other students and then assess the quality of the second draft in light of the feedback.

Furthermore, online writing programs also need not be constrained by just these online tools. A range of other possibilities are also available, for example in the use of software such as Adobe Connect where students can come together in real time and take part in joint reconstruction of an academic text. So while there are many advantages of learning in the same physical space, there are many opportunities afforded by the various electronic tools available on the Internet.

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