Facilitating Student Engagement with Academic Writing: review of an online resource in a widening participation context

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Introduction

As education undergoes a process of rapid change, impelled by government intervention and market forces, collegiality has for us generated an increased sense of purpose amidst these pressures and a positive way of harnessing new technologies for enhancing our students' learning.

The 'widening participation' student in particular tends to experience higher education as a series of 'struggles' in the face of discourses of derision, over-assessment, participation in paid employment and, perhaps, those e-learning initiatives designed to rationalise resources rather than support staff or empower students.

This paper reviews the 'Write to Learn' (W2L) resource that was produced by collaboration between academic, learning development and learning technology staff to support students in their real-life situations – with their actual academic writing tasks.

The 'Write' Context

The rise of new managerialism coincides with the move to a mass HE system and concomitant shifts to modularization (Noble 2002) and the increasing participation of students in paid employment (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003). Lecturers find themselves driven by internal and external targets, inspections and QAA; running increasingly larger lecture and seminar groups over ever shorter module teaching weeks; having little time to tackle complex issues; and with few opportunities to give formative feedback. All these factors cannot but impact on student success (and retention) rates; and nowhere in the university system is the debate about the 'crisis' in education and the 'lowering of standards' more intense than in the arena of student writing (Lillis 2001). Faced with poorly expressed written work lecturers may complain that students cannot write grammatical English or formulate

syntactically correct sentences, and frequently send these students to Learning Development to be 'fixed' (Mitchell, 2003).

The widening participation student, from working class and other 'non-traditional' backgrounds, 'consistently … classified as dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect' (Skeggs 1997; 1), is silenced - or dismembered and dislocated - by the discourse of derision. Typically apprehensive if not terrified in the unfamiliar world of HE where 'to be working class is to experience the shame of never getting it right' (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003), such students have little time to tackle new material, to practise their thinking/writing nor to familiarise themselves with a bewildering array of assessment methods[1] - unmodelled at best and typically described contrarily by academics. Perhaps it is not that the trouble with students is that they cannot write, but that they have to write when:

- insufficiently inducted into the epistemology, discourse and content of a subject;
- tackling new material, at new levels, within a variety of assessment genres;
- having little opportunity to 'write to learn' or to practice their writing.

Mitchell (2003), from the 'Writing in the Disciplines' project (Queen Mary, University of London), argues that whilst academic staff might see themselves in the business of teaching (content) and assessing writing – they definitely do not see themselves as teaching writing. Typically writing is talked about as something that students cannot do. Hopefully here at London Met – not least via this collaboration – we, as with Mitchell, 'seem to be moving beyond the discourse of complaint and denial of responsibility in relation to student writing' (ibid.).

More broadly, the following conditions (among others) have been proposed as necessary to improve retention in a widening participation university:

- a valuing of the wealth of different experiences and self-commitment of 'non-traditional' students, instead of seeing them as deficit;
- opportunities to gain practice in writing and skills development in the subject;
- access to specialised support in study skills and language development

(see Warren 2003 and Wend 2003).

These factors are amongst those that we wished to address in our collaboration around the development of an e-learning resource that would support our students in the processes of writing a real academic essay – based within their real module workload. We recognised, with Norton et al (2004), that '[s]tudents from diverse backgrounds and with differing abilities need help in writing academic essays'. We

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[1]Currently students at our institution tackle presentations & seminars; essays, reports, papers & projects; case studies & child studies; annotated bibliographies; reading records; learning logs; abstracts & summaries; seen & unseen exams; open or closed book exams; exams with differing time limits; exams with differing word limits; and group work – with group mark awarded - with individual mark awarded - plus or minus self- and/or peer evaluation.

were also mindful of the ambiguities around e-enablement in a climate of diminishing resource:

> 'The independent learner is, of course, essential at a time when 'the under-resourcing of teaching has meant a shift from 'fat' to 'lean-and-mean' pedagogies, with reduced tutorials, increased tutorial size, and less student contact' (Blackmore 1997; 92).

Further, Gilliat *et al* (2000) talk about how there is a seeming consensus around the view that the 'consumer' of public services needs to be liberated from 'recipient' to one of 'responsible partner' in the delivery of services. In the context of resource constraint, this means that service users – here, the students – are increasingly being asked to collude with the process. The same authors also maintain that consumption is a skilled accomplishment requiring a range of skills that the 'consumer' of public services is assumed to have. In the context of widening participation, the question is should we assume this in relation to academic writing?
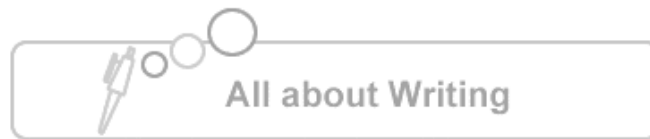
Developing a student friendly resource

The 'Write to Learn' e-learning resource was developed with our students in mind – and in conjunction with students themselves – through collaboration between members of the Learning Development Unit, colleagues in the Business and Early Childhood Studies subject areas, and the Teaching and Learning Technology Centre.

Tech Spec
The W2L site was designed and developed using the University's VLE, and the *Macromedia* suite of products including *Dreamweaver mx, Fireworks mx* and *Flash mx*. *Dreamweaver* is a web-authoring package and creates html (hyper text markup language) using a wysiwyg (what you see is what you get) interface. *Fireworks* is a vector based graphic production and editing package. *Flash* offers animation and interactivity enabling the learner to engage actively with a resource. The *Macromedia* suite is a standard development tool. Developing a web-based resource immediately generates limitations and restrictions. There is compromise between low file size and good quality for graphics and page sizes. Fast download times are crucial for the user accessing the site, especially if this is from home connecting via a 56k modem.
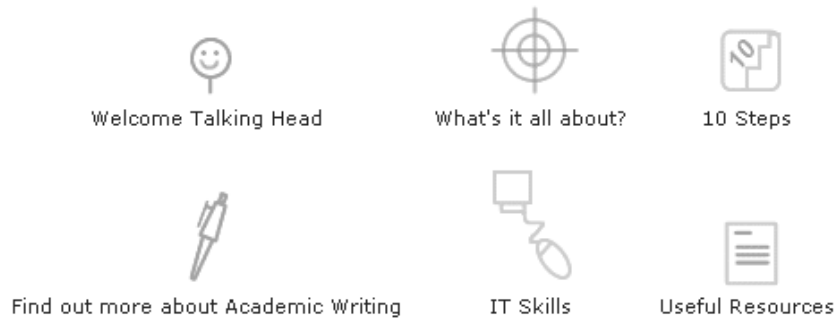
Design Considerations
The web site needed to be easy to use as the level of computer expertise of the user was unknown at the design phase. It needed to be attractive to grab the attention and imagination of new students. The site would be informative with an intuitive navigation system enabling the student to move easily throughout the web pages.

Welcome to All About Writing

This is an online resource to help you get started with the different kinds of writing that you will come across at University. These could include essays, reports and learning logs.

Work through the 10 Steps below to take you through the writing process.

Welcome Talking Head   What's it all about?   10 Steps

Find out more about Academic Writing   IT Skills   Useful Resources

Colours

The key difference of 'Write to Learn' compared to other University VLE sites are the bespoke designed banners and icons used on the homepage and within the whole site, as opposed to standardised ones, giving W2L its own unique identity. The initial design phase included choosing a colour palette of three colours. The colours chosen by the team included cream, lilac and blue with navy blue text against a white background. Limiting the colour palette in this way gives consistency to the look and feel of the site. These colours were chosen as they are complementary to each other, give a soft non threatening look and feel to the site and by using a white background keep the content information as clearly defined as possible.

Multimedia

Within the 'talking head' section is a *Flash*-based resource which enables the student to hear an audio transcript and see a still photograph of staff members involved with W2L. This has many benefits for the user, personalising the W2L site and giving it a 'real person' context, which can often be lacking in online resources.

Accessibility

In the design-testing phase the graphics were all checked for colour-blind compatibility. The graphics may look slightly different depending on the type of colour blindness a user may have, but the colour palette are all visible. The design team made sure there were no references to colour in the text i.e. 'click on the red link' as this can cause problems for some students.

All images within the site have alt tags enabling assistive screen reading software to give descriptions of the images. All of the text can be made larger via the browser as the site relies on Cascading Style Sheets for formatting.

Assessibility

W2L was designed to make transparent the forms and processes of academic discourse and support the planning, researching and drafting of an actual summative assessment academic writing task linked to a departmental 'Higher Education Orientation' module. It was linked to a Business department, with over 1000 new students in three geographically separate locations via the supporting website, as well as publicised to staff via email and flyer, and all students via the undergraduate centres and core classes.

Summative assessment looks to see how well the students have learned what they were supposed to have learned. Summative assessment, which is carried out after the teaching episode, can 'arouse passion, resistance and subterfuge' (Biggs 1999, p.143). Students fear this outcome, as futures hinge on it. Hinett (cited in Knight 2002) explores issues around assessment, asking whether an approach 'that invokes a feeling of failure in individuals' is necessary, and whether there are less damaging alternatives. Her tentative conclusions are that assessment tasks need to be

genuinely stimulating and offered within a supportive, non-competitive environment. Tasks designed to engage students in problem solving, real-life simulations and the process of judgements are likely to invoke commitment in students, and assist them in differentiating between ego and task, such that academic failure does not infringe on self – efficacy.

This all sounds very challenging for students, and also for the staff working within the assessment framework. But can things be different? We worked to ensure that the workload of students was not over burdened by yet another initiative. Hence we designed W2L to *assist* students with the development of their academic writing within the context of their studies. We wanted to model to students that the assessment system need not be threatening and anxiety-provoking, and to harness intrinsic motivation by devising assessment tasks that resembled 'real world' activities and met the learner's own needs. As Laurillard (2002: 181) comments, 'the design of learning materials for any medium should begin with the definitions of objectives and an analysis of student learning needs'. We encouraged active engagement by providing a choice of tasks and allowing for learning at the student's own pace within a space and time of their own choosing.

Application of the model in two contrasting departments

Write2learn for Business studies
Whilst the student can be expected to slowly develop a graduate persona and an academic voice over space and time, we felt that our students would benefit from an interesting and innovative approach that might de-mystify and facilitate the process early on. The web package design aimed to engage both staff (as a key point of student referral encouraging students to locate the site) and students in a meaningful learning dialogue. In traditional campus-based universities it is recognised that one factor for student success is that students are physically present, and that therefore one way of encouraging student involvement is to attract them to spend more time on campus. Our students cannot be expected to be on campus physically due to their multitude of commitments, and the tight room resourcing of an inner city university. But it is possible for them to engage with university life virtually (see Collis & Moonen 2001) and in terms of mobility, where a student can stay at home, or another location of choice, to access materials.

This resource was embedded with a number of Reusable Learning Objects as part of a website supporting students in the Business School taking a compulsory Higher education Orientation Module. All the resources were developed and tested in Autumn 2005 and were then piloted on two modules in Semester B 2006 with 120 students, 70 from 'Studying Marketing and Operations' and 50 from 'Studying Business'. Both modules were offered on two geographically separate sites, and well received by students. The learning resources were introduced to students in lectures and seminars, and students could use them in their own time to help them

complete the module and their assessments. There was a link from the departmental website to an online module plan, which has an outline of what is being covered each week and links to relevant learning resources.

Although it was not possible to isolate the student uptake of the W2L resource, for the first time tracking was used on the website to see exactly when students used resources outside the usual University timeframes, namely weekends when formal classes were not running. The project team anticipated usage of the website during usual 'office hours', when students were able to access the technology building – up to 6pm most days, with a few hours available up to midday Saturday. The graphs showing patterns of use did not reflect this expectation, however – the peak was Saturday afternoon, with another series of access by students on Saturday night (for more details see Holley & Dobson 2008). This does not fit with commonly held perceptions of unengaged, demotivated students doing the minimum required, suggested in much UK literature around retention.

Write2learn for Early Childhood Studies
The Early Childhood Studies' (ECSS) programme has developed its HE Orientation module to incorporate a generic study skills' focus alongside an introduction to some key issues in the field. The W2L project was important as all ECSS students have worked in the field for at least 3 years (or part time equivalent) but may not have any formal qualifications. Alongside this, the portfolio of work offered within the ECSS team is broadening as a response to the government's drive to develop the early childhood workforce into one where there is at least one graduate in every setting by 2015 (see Ten Year Strategy for Childcare; HMT, 2004). For some time now, there have been calls within the profession for it to be made a graduate profession in order to raise the knowledge and skills of practitioners working within a field that has traditionally been undervalued (Fawcett and Calder, 1998).

At London Metropolitan University, ECSS students can study as distance learners or as taught course students and many choose to study in what we term a 'mixed mode' of delivery. We have students studying with us in many countries and all ECSS students study part-time whilst they work in a paid or voluntary capacity. The vast majority of our students are women, who have family responsibilities. This reflects the early childhood workforce as a whole. Flexible modes of delivery have been important to develop in order to support these students with studying alongside family and paid work responsibilities.

A key issue for the ECSS team has been addressing the pedagogical inequities that exist between the taught course and distance learning modes of delivery and, more recently, improving opportunities for engaging with the University 'virtually' at the time and place of the student's choosing. As ECSS students join the course at a range of entry points, such as certificate, intermediate and honours' levels, W2L offered huge potential as a resource for supporting students' differing needs, as and

when they feel the need to access the resource – both in the HEO module as well as throughout their studies. However, the possible barriers to the success of this tool relate to the difficulty in inducting students into using this resource independently, especially when many ECSS students' experience is not through face-to-face teaching. Moreover, recent research carried out via a questionnaire to ECSS students indicates a wide range of competencies in the area of ICT, although there seems to be a predominantly positive attitude to the development of on-line resources to support their studies. This is something we wish to build on.

Conclusions

In terms of the two departments who took part in piloting the development of W2L, it is interesting to note many similarities about the nature of the student. The gender issues raised by Early Childhood Studies are not confined to this course – many female business students report that they are negotiating for access to a family computer at weekends (Holley & Dobson 2008). Another issue across the two departments is a lack of student self-efficacy, of self-belief – and this cuts across gender divides. From feedback obtained during interactions with them, it became evident that our students still have the perception that they are somehow individually lacking – that 'everyone else' is making good progress; 'everyone else' has made friends and 'everyone else' is coping with the demands of an undergraduate degree.

What needs to happen, it seems to us, is a re-emphasis:
- that developing writing skills is the responsibility of *all* involved in teaching, not just student learning support services;
- on the place of IT as a support tool but not a substitute for teaching;
- on listening to students, keeping *their* needs central to educational practice.

Subsequently, it is becoming clear in retrospect that the W2L resource was rather narrow in application, by being focused chiefly on HE Orientation modules and not able to do things that are now possible via Web 2.0 technologies. A new initiative is the 'Thinking & Writing @ London Met' site that will have truly interactive elements (the Note Maker and the Free Write tools), and discipline-specific entry points to help subject academics harness resources and activities for their own subjects and their own students.

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