

Chapter 17

Online Support for Students' Writing Skills Development in a Technical Communication Introductory Module

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the development of online support for writing skills in one technical communication module taught at the University of Limerick. It demonstrates the need for writing support by exploring the many complexities of teaching and learning writing skills. Central to the discussion is the principle of process, rather than product, orientation. Students on the module have been surveyed over the past two years to determine their attitudes to, and perceptions of, their writing strengths and weaknesses. The chapter outlines and exemplifies the types of writing-problems students and instructors identify. Online support is posited as an intervention which facilitates autonomous learning. The chapter concludes by discussing how online resources, and especially the university virtual learning environment, Sakai (called Sulis at University of Limerick), can support students. It also suggests related research opportunities, especially in the area of using Web 2.0 technologies to foster autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Limerick (UL) is unique in Ireland in offering programmes and modules in Technical Communication. Writing style is an important aspect of all Technical Communication modules, but is a central focus of one introductory module, *Principles of Professional and Technical Communication and Information Design*. Un-

dergraduate, postgraduate and distance-learning students take this module. Quite strong differences in their performances are evident, however. Many undergraduate students, especially, and for several reasons, have underdeveloped writing skills and lack a basic understanding of writing-related concepts. It is clear writing skills need to be an essential component of their curricula, however, since written communication skills consistently feature high in lists of transferable skills valued by employers (see for example Curry, Sherry,

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& Tunney, 2003). Our own surveys and needs analyses of students on the module, conducted over the past two years, demonstrate that students are aware of their writing problems, but are often at a loss as to how to fix, or even describe, these problems. In part response to these challenges, we have in recent years used the University of Limerick virtual learning environment (VLE), Sulis (the UL name for Sakai¹), together with other tools, to support writing skills development on this module.

The mission of this chapter is to explore the development of online support for writing skills, and to demonstrate the application of ICT support to the initiatives on this introductory module. The first section of the chapter demonstrates the need for writing support, and posits online support as an intervention which facilitates autonomous and creative learning. The second section describes the module, and outlines and exemplifies the types of writing problems students and instructors identify. The chapter goes on to discuss use of online resources, and especially the university VLE, to support students and address some of the problems highlighted in previous sections. Finally, conclusions and directions for future research are posed.

BACKGROUND: SUPPORT FOR WRITING SKILLS

This section explores the complexities of writing instruction and examines strategies that may address the challenges.

Why is Writing Instruction Problematic?

Most research on teaching professional writing emanates from the United States of America, where writing instruction has been an area of curricular and research interest for the past century. Much of the literature on the subject of writing instruction identifies problems with how students

learn to write and practise professional writing.

Several traditional models of writing instruction have complicated students' ability to articulate their writing concerns, and undermined teachers' efforts to help students produce better work. Writing instruction has historically focused on mechanical and grammatical error correction (Elbow, 1999), often to the detriment of strengthening or evaluating fluency or value of content (Santa, 2008). The ambiguous and often esoteric definition of error in grammar and punctuation causes confusion about, and resentment of, error correction among students. The objectives of a piece of writing may be ignored at the expense of technical correctness. These objectives might include, for example, clear, coherent, cohesive expression, or the development of a persuasive argument. Elbow (1999) describes the frequent tension between meeting these objectives and writing 'correctly'.

During secondary school, we begin the process of learning to write discursively. The school system privileges articulate style, often over invention, sometimes even over content. We make the inductive leap as apprentice writers, therefore, that we are rewarded for how we say something, rather than what we say. In a provocative article on the subject, Edmund Weiss (1995) argues that many of us learn at an early age to use words to create an impression of, rather than demonstrate, understanding. He suggests that much writing that is valued (by educators and/or employers) is often the most mendacious, because the writer has managed to create a false, or at least exaggerated, impression of understanding, knowledge, or expertise.

Many teachers charged with teaching and assessing student writing focus almost exclusively on the product, rather than the writing process. Hairston (1982) suggests that we often assume that 'competent writers know what they are going to say before they begin to write; thus their most important task when they are preparing to write is finding a form into which to organize their

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