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Location Matters: Using Online Writing Tutorials to Enhance Knowledge Production

L'emplacement est important : utiliser des didacticiels d'écriture en ligne pour améliorer la production de connaissances

Ilka Luyt

Volume 32, 2022

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094266ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.31468/dwr.965

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing

ISSN

2563-7320 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Luyt, I. (2022). Location Matters: Using Online Writing Tutorials to Enhance Knowledge Production. *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, *32*, 405–417. https://doi.org/10.31468/dwr.965

Résumé de l'article

Les étudiants inscrits à des cours en ligne asynchrones explorent une grande partie du sujet par le biais de discussions assistées par ordinateur. Dans ce contexte, les étudiants doivent souvent négocier des facteurs complexes tels que le contenu du cours, les objectifs du devoir, leur public, les attentes disciplinaires et le processus d'écriture. Les centres d'écriture offrent aux étudiants des services de soutien pour les aider à réussir dans ces cours à forte teneur en texte. En règle générale, les étudiants viennent en personne aux centres d'écriture pour obtenir de l'aide dans leurs travaux critiques de lecture et d'écriture; cependant, de plus en plus, les tuteurs sont invités à participer à des paramètres en ligne pour aider l'apprentissage des élèves. Une question associée aux pratiques de tutorat en ligne est de savoir si les étudiants améliorent leurs compétences en écriture lorsqu'ils ont la possibilité d'obtenir des commentaires d'un tuteur et de leurs pairs. Comment une approche pédagogique coopérative et collaborative du tutorat assisté par ordinateur peut-elle soutenir les étudiants et améliorer l'enseignement? Cet article examine une exploration pédagogique où un tuteur a interagi de manière asynchrone avec les étudiants en affichant des activités d'écriture hebdomadaires. Les élèves ont été invités à répondre individuellement et en collaboration à chaque activité. Je soutiens que lorsqu'un tuteur dans un cours en ligne fournit des commentaires, la collaboration crée une nouvelle écologie en ligne de réflexion et de collaboration qui peut profiter aux étudiants dans leur croissance en tant qu'écrivains. Cette exploration peut être une pédagogie d'écriture utile qui peut aider les instructeurs en établissant des liens plus solides entre les connaissances en écriture des élèves et les pratiques d'écriture.

Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie
Volume 32, 2022
http://journals.sfu.ca/dwr

Article

Location Matters: Using Online Writing Tutorials to Enhance Knowledge Production

Ilka Luyt

Royal Military College of Canada

Abstract

Students enrolled in asynchronous online courses explore much of the subject matter through computer-mediated discussion. In this context, students must often negotiate complex factors such as the course content, the assignment goals, their audience, disciplinary expectations, and the writing process. Writing Centres offer students support services to help them succeed in these text-heavy courses. Typically, students come to Writing Centres in person for help with their critical reading and writing assignments; however, increasingly, tutors are asked to participate in online settings to assist student learning. A question associated with online tutoring practices is whether students improve their writing skills when they are given the opportunity to get feedback from a tutor and from peers. How can a cooperative, collaborative pedagogical approach to computer-mediated tutoring support students and improve teaching? This paper examines a pedagogical exploration where one tutor interacted asynchronously with students by posting weekly writing activities. Students were asked to respond individually and collaboratively to each activity. I argue that when a tutor in an online course provides feedback, the collaboration creates a new online ecology of reflection and collaboration that may benefit students in their growth as writers. This exploration can be a useful writing pedagogy that can assist instructors by making stronger connections between students' writing knowledge and writing practices.

Introduction

Collaborative learning and dialogue-based inquiry hinges upon a longstanding assumption that students learn best when they have positive interactions, share ideas, and create knowledge together (Flower, 1994; Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). Frameworks for shared learning also exist in online settings

when students interact to solve problems, when meanings are co-constructed (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014), and when computer-mediated collaboration facilitates the social construction of knowledge (Keengwe, 2013). Some students may not contribute to knowledge building (Nistor & Neubaurer, 2010) and this resistance may be tied to motivation, language ability, or ethnic/social background (Goggins & Xing, 2016; Cole, Lennon & Weber, 2021). These challenges are heightened in classes where reading and writing are emphasized. Postsecondary instructors often expect students to write clear, concise, and correct English (Romano, 2019), yet some students do not understand these expectations or how to write for a specific audience. In response, Writing Centre (WC) tutors offer help to all students: students with diverse backgrounds and abilities, in in-person or online courses. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, 2013) emphasized inclusivity and accessibility in its Online Writing Instruction Principle 1, which affirms that a positive writing classroom should be flexible in its teaching approach and use "multiple teaching and learning formats." One aspect of flexibility is for WC tutors to engage with students in online settings (in addition to meeting them in the more traditional in-person WC spaces).

Engaging directly with students in online spaces creates an ecological (Cooper, 1986) writing space where students' exploration and understanding of the subject matter is experienced collaboratively. An ecological view of writing is one that tracks how complex social and cultural variables combine to influence how individuals interpret, use, and shift their language use based on the writers' connections to other individuals in a learning space (Kapler, 2004; Cooper, 2011). A question associated with online tutoring practice, viewed ecologically, is whether students improve their writing skills when they are given the opportunity to experience feedback from a tutor and from peers. How can a cooperative, collaborative pedagogical approach to computer-mediated tutoring promote reflection among students and strengthen online community-building in a course? How can one or more tutors embedded in a course improve learning through writing-related activities? I argue that when students participate in writing activities facilitated by a WC tutor, students are offered opportunities for reflection, meaning-making, and collaboration that can generate the same confidence as in-person tutoring experiences.

This paper examines a pedagogical exploration where one WC tutor was embedded into two asynchronous online courses and interacted with students by posting weekly writing activities. First, I describe the learning space where students experienced these activities. Second, I discuss how a view of writing as socially constructed within a complex ecology productively challenges traditional assumptions about academic writing and the siloing of rhetorical skills. Third, I consider how this

teaching approach fosters an ecological writing space that encourages reflection and meaning making. Finally, I support my assertion that online tutorials can be a useful pedagogy to enhance student learning because such interactions ask students to consider the rhetorical situation and make connections in their writing.

The Learning Space

Early in 2019 I was a WC tutor, and I was asked to facilitate the communications lab of an undergraduate business course in a small Ontario college for the upcoming fall term. Historically, these labs were taught in-person, and I suggested a new approach to facilitating this lab which involved embedding tutor-led writing activities into the digital learning space. This course focused on critical reading and writing for business contexts and students had to write a final research paper. The instructor delivered 85% of the course content, and the lab portion consisted of 15% of the students' final grade. That spring, the WC Director and I created 11 weekly activities related to the writing and research process that focused on both higher order and lower order research and writing concerns. My role as an embedded tutor was to facilitate these weekly activities, some of which required group work and others required individual submissions. Participation in each week's writing activity was mandatory. Midway through the fall term, another instructor invited me into her upper-year leadership course to offer similar activities for the remaining five weeks of the semester. In this second course, participation was voluntary.

The weekly labs offered writing activities for the essay-specific goals of the course. In each course, I created activities that asked students to think critically about their rhetorical choices such as their purpose, audience, and writing strategy. The 11 weekly threads scaffolded the recursive writing process, with early activities focused on deep reading, annotation, and narrowing a research topic. By mid-term, the activities shifted, and students were asked to present research questions related to the final paper, create mind maps, and synthesize information. The last third of the semester focused on higher order writing concerns such as crafting arguable thesis statements, peer reviews of working outlines, introductions, conclusions, revising for ideas, as well as lower order concerns related to common grammar and punctuation problems. Each thread began with a brief learning objective, linked resources, and specific instructions for the students.

The embedded writing activities occurred within the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS). This LMS followed a hierarchical layout where a tutor or instructor could initiate a lecture or discussion by starting a new post. Students then responded to these threads in chronological

sequence, and all student replies were visible. Below are sample summarized activities for the business course:

Week 4 – Learning Objective: Practice deep reading and critically analyze a peer-reviewed article.

Task: Identify two of the following elements in the article and explain how to recognize them (e.g., claims, evidence, assumptions, persuasive techniques). Read and annotate a section of the text that explains each of these elements.

Week 9 – Learning Objective: Create a detailed alphanumerical outline for the final project.

Task: Organize one or more group work sessions in which you share your thoughts and comments and discuss the various mind maps. Each person should come to a group session with a working outline based on their own understanding of the readings and project. Then, as a group, study these separate outlines submitted by your classmates and organize exchanges to arrive at a single, detailed outline that the group will adopt for the final project.

Week 11- Learning Objective: Identify the characteristics of a dynamic introductory and concluding paragraph and explain how they "frame" the essay.

Task: Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the introduction and conclusion.

Week 12- Learning Objective: Understand how revision and editing are part of the writing process.

Task: Submit a draft paragraph for the final paper. Immediately after the paragraph, revise for content and edit for grammar and punctuation.

In the second online course, I created weekly activities geared toward two major essay assignments in the course. These activities were offered twice, each iteration occurring two weeks before the paper was due. Each activity asked questions related to students' writing process (e.g., about drafting a thesis statement, writing the introduction, writing claims, checking grammar, or providing documentation). Students were asked to submit drafts of their work for peer review and for my own feedback. Students were strongly encouraged to engage in these threads. If they felt uncomfortable sharing their ideas online, they could send me a private email or book an in-person appointment at the Writing Centre. As both courses ended, students were asked to reflect on the online activities and their personal growth as novice writers. Additionally, we administered an informal survey that asked students in both courses to reflect on the writing activities and their own writing experiences.

Rhetorical Silos

Composition theorists (Bizzell, 1994; Dolmage, 2009; Thieme, 2017) consistently argue that writing should be taught in collaborative, inclusive ways where diverse students can share ideas and engage

with one another. Despite these pedagogical approaches, students must still confront the "language of university discourse" (Bartholomae, 1986), where many disciplines remain entrenched in their respective silos of thinking and writing practices. Despite instructors who promote diversity and inclusivity in the classroom, many program standards and learning outcomes emphasize writing that is produced by a single author who writes in isolation and produces texts that offer deductive, arguable, formal, and grammatically correct writing, as demonstrated in Ontario's EQAO (2020) standard setting document. Often, college instructors also favour rhetorical writing practices that prioritize objective and neutral writing that separates the writer from the text (Sword, 2012; Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). Adhering to these traditional writing habits can hinder students' ability to feel confident as novice writers in post-secondary settings and can separate students from meaningful discussions related to their writing practices.

Asynchronous online learning, where electronic discussion is used to support student learning, aligns itself with composition pedagogy in that it emphasizes collaborative pedagogical practices and active learning (CCCC, 2013; Veletsianos, 2016). As with live instruction, online educators use computer-mediated technology and collaboration to situate students with other learners to think critically and create new meanings. Marilyn Cooper's (2011) ecological view of composition considers the entire context of writing (e.g., LMS, computer-mediated discussions) and links the writer with other writers, as well as the historical, social, contextual, and cultural power relations in any given group (e.g., tutor, instructor, diverse learners). As Cooper (1986) insists, "An ecologist explores how writers interact to form systems: all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems" (p. 368). Online tutoring can create new ecologies of exploration and understanding where formal learning is juxtaposed with informal computer-mediated learning, which, as Blackburn (2010) suggests, allows students to connect with other learners in an online space that is similar to live interactions, complete with new and complex meanings and contradictions.

Discussion

Computer-mediated embedded writing activities align with the social construction of knowledge and allow students and tutors to share ideas, provide support to one another, and reflect on the recursive nature of the writing process. Whether responding individually to an activity or working in a group, students construct knowledge based on their own past experiences. The written comments

interweave student-authored texts and peer-reviews with tutor feedback to create a rich online discourse community. As with live instruction, although students come with varied language skills and abilities, the online exchanges can generate new ideas about academic expectations and foster a supportive learning environment that encourages students to acquire new writing strategies.

Reflection and Meaning-Making

Simply put, writing is an act of reflection. Vygotsky (1986) argued that "[t]he relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought" (p. 218). As with in-person instruction, sharing words and ideas with other students can offer new ways to create meanings. Early in this embedded teaching exploration, I posted writing activities in the LMS discussion area that focused on some part of the writing process (e.g., brainstorming, critical analysis of readings, creating thesis statements, outlines), and students posted a response consisting of a few sentences or paragraphs. As these responses appeared online, other students read and responded in writing to other learners. New understandings and meanings emerged as students made sense of the comments; meanwhile, I continued to ask probing questions. Later in the term, I included generalized activities (e.g., how have you problem solved; how have you grown as a writer; what have you discovered about the writing process), and students reflected on their writing process but not necessarily on the subject matter of the course. Asking such reflective questions required students to think deeply about their written communications and to engage in discussions with classmates and the tutor.

When constructed to facilitate rich interactions and deep reflection, online spaces become a public display of meaning-making that is open to discovery and commentary. Thomas Deans (2014) emphasizes "…how the technology of writing engenders certain kinds of thinking and reflection in both individuals and a culture" (p. 416). While Deans also addresses silence as a by-product of writing, this silence is not negative, but creates "parallel phenomena" that highlight the power of silence to have both "cumulative and complementary effects" (p. 421). Silence contributes to the ecology of writing by how words are included or excluded in a response, which can lead students to pose related writing-based questions. Kapler (2004) notes, "Writing attunes us to our possible selves as we contribute to our emerging pattern of experience" (p. 46). As with in-person teaching, asking students to both produce writing and reflect on their writing habits requires that students think about how they use language and consider how they are growing in their own intellectual autonomy.

Embedded online WC tutors serve an important role in supporting students as thinkers and writers. As with in-person sessions, online tutors provide students with individualized attention to help them focus on their writing challenges. Students respond to writing activities and co-create new learning spaces where student ideas and examples are elevated and valued, thus reconfiguring meaning-making from disciplinary "silos" into personal, individualized understanding. Also, tutors are generally viewed as encouraging helpers who use dialogue to establish rapport with students and re-position the student at the center of knowledge (Aldohon, 2021). In both live and online settings, learning occurs through conversations between a tutor and a student where the tutor focuses on attentive listening, providing supportive comments, understanding the students' concerns, and helping the student to think about how they use their language in the context of their purpose and audience. When students' needs become the focal point of learning, a pedagogical shift occurs which is more in line with a feminist rhetoric that relies on inclusive, non-linear meaning-making and values non-traditional writing products typically disregarded by the larger academic discourse community (Stenberg, 2013). Elevating students' thinking and writing in online tutorials can promote students' feeling of competency and engagement. Students might perceive any feedback from a course instructor as mandatory rather than optional. However, the ongoing conversations between students or between a student and a tutor can help focus the instruction and clarify meanings. While some (McIntrye & Hall, 2017) suggest that online asynchronous tutoring is less valuable than in-person tutorials because it limits the emergent, real-time interactions that happen, online tutors can encourage students in different ways. Denton (2017) claims: "The end goal remains the same: the tutor wants to help the student beyond the paper in front of them, and so their challenge is to both engage the student within the asynchronous tutoring format and to concurrently help the student to arrive at insights applicable beyond the given writing situation" (p. 189). Creating online activities specifically linked to coursework allows students to pose real-world problems and to seek help to resolve these issues.

Collaboration and Community

Computer-mediated dialogue enhances active attention to the ecology of the writing space by establishing a community of collaboration based on transparency and shared goals. In this pedagogical exploration, the first writing activity briefly introduced students to the course, and students were asked to introduce themselves, and to explain why they enrolled in the course, what they hoped to gain, their future goals, and how they might apply what they would learn towards

achieving those goals. This early self-disclosure about personal information and goals can encourage students to interact socially, find shared values, and build an online community. As Kehrwald (2008) maintains, an online social presence that emphasizes personal experiences as a primary means of knowledge-building places students in relation to one another and builds cohesion and satisfaction. Community building provides students with an opportunity to enter a discourse community and feel more comfortable in this space.

Similarly, the tutor's presence is essential in building an online community and fostering collaboration. Early in the course, I also introduced myself by writing about my teaching background and how I valued an inclusive online space. In my role as a WC tutor, I wanted everyone to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts in writing, so I stated that all students would receive *open and honest* feedback in a caring, supportive setting that focused on dialogue and collaboration (Lopez, 2018; Moussu, 2013). Building this familiarity with students strengthened my online presence which may have caused students to participate more and to experience increased satisfaction (Lim et al., 2021).

I was also intentional about explaining academic writing norms (e.g., thesis, evidence, logic, style) and reminded students that the academic discourse community is different than other learning communities. Clearly stating academic writing expectations fosters understanding, particularly for novice writers new to this discourse community. Swales (2011) points out that "we need then to clarify, for procedural purposes, what is to be understood by discourse community and, perhaps in the present circumstances, it is better to offer a set of criteria sufficiently narrow that it will eliminate many of the marginal, blurred and controversial contenders" (p. 469). Encouraging students to dialogue with one another expands the group's ecology when knowledge is created by all its members. As Gillam and Wooden (2013) argue, "We also want students to be conscious of the ecological work they are doing, what it means to write *from* a nearly infinitely complex ecology of ideas and information but *to* a specific discourse community and *with* a specific purpose" (p. 35). As with in-person instruction, my goal was to build confidence in students' writing skills and broaden their view of academic discourse through positive interactions, collaboration, and problem solving. I resisted the solitary author/text paradigm inherent in academic discourse and prioritized student concerns. Through these collaborative online activities, students strengthened their own voices as novice writers and ideally, will transfer their new knowledge into future academic contexts.

The Tutor's Role

WC tutors are familiar with the "language of the university" (Bartholomae, 1986) and can help students understand how clear writing depends on a specific purpose and audience. Whether in-person or online, tutors invite students into a conversation about academic writing by asking them questions, solving problems, making decisions, and clarifying meanings related to their writing. Using a collaborative, inquiry-based model, I asked open-ended questions about students' writing practices and products. Whether a student posted a few sentences or a lengthier paragraph, I offered students support in the form of encouraging words about the strengths and weaknesses of the writing. In my lab, I celebrated clear writing with comments such as "Excellent analysis!" I steered the discussion of unclear texts using comments such as "I'm having difficulty understanding how this example relates to the topic," and I asked students to clarify their logic with questions such as "What evidence supports this idea?" I wanted students to experiment with language as they responded to online comments. By asking probing questions, I challenged students to rethink their assumptions about writing for an academic audience.

Since the activities were open for all students to read, caution was needed to ensure that no student appropriated another person's text. To prevent this, I communicated that all writing must be original and self-authored. Many instructors at this small college require students to sign an academic honesty waiver stating that the paper is original. I also reminded students that Moodle provides a digital footprint of all written work.

Another concern regarding my role in this online space was the participation of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Some ESL students may feel uncomfortable sharing their writing online for others to view. If this is the case, WC tutors can work alongside instructors to encourage ESL learners to post comments in order to demystify academic writing. Tutors can remind ESL students that the goal is to participate in the writing process, collaborate, and contribute to knowledge-building activities rather than to achieve impeccable accuracy or grammatical correctness. As Moussu (2013) suggests, tutors can quickly address common grammatical errors while focusing on the student's specific purpose for writing, all while emphasizing to the ESL student that "writing skills are acquired, not innate" (p.62), thus encouraging students to seek further support in the WC individually. Through discussions, personal reflection, and brainstorming, WC tutors can contribute to improving the ecology of online writing spaces by socially constructing dialogue in a way that welcomes all students to become active writers in the academy.

Conclusion

Embedded tutors in asynchronous online courses can help students in their thinking and writing habits and can expand the role of WC tutors in postsecondary classes. The weekly writing activities described in this paper provided students with new opportunities to preview, draft, write, revise, and edit individual responses and think deeply about their academic writing practices. While some activities were individual submissions, other activities were collaborative and socially constructed. Depending on the type of collaboration, students adopted diverse roles and assumed more ownership over their learning when they were responsible for giving and receiving feedback from other students. The resulting computer-mediated responses produced texts that shed light on academic writing. Moreover, the presence of a designated tutor to facilitate learning, field questions, engage with students, and explain discussions about how to negotiate the expectations of higher education provided a positive learning experience. Based on the informal surveys of the two courses, I found that most students felt positively about the writing activities and appreciated my contributions. Students indicated that they gained greater knowledge about the writing process, synthesized this knowledge, made connections between scaffolded assignments, and applied new skills to their next writing assignment, which are long-term goals of any WC tutor. Some students admitted that a few activities were unclear to them, especially when submitting a collaborative text, but by seeking clarification with me, they were able to recognize errors in logic, an abandoned thesis, or weak support. Students largely felt confident submitting their final papers knowing that the skills they practiced in the tutorials allowed them to present more polished essays.

By facilitating how students read and respond to scaffolded writing activities, embedded online tutorials can be a useful pedagogical tool that produces clearer texts in line with academic expectations. As with in-person tutorials, online writing activities facilitated by a WC tutor help students see the intersections between their academic assumptions about knowledge and meaning making and their own understanding of the writing process. In this way, tutors can serve as a bridge for students who have limited understanding and fluency in a dominant academic discourse. Facilitating student learning through such online tutorials meets students where they are—online—and encourages students in their own learning by providing them with more opportunities to strengthen their writing and build on their future writing success.

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