

Online Writing Tutoring: Its Potential in Southern African Education

Fiona Cameron-Brown, Elspeth Proctor, Andrew van der Spuy

WritingLab S A

fcc@micron.co.za

eproctor@worldonline.co.za

a.vanderspuy@imaginet.co.za

ABSTRACT

The cognitive process is an effective basis for using electronic means to aid students in improving their writing. This paper presents a practical example of an e-based writing tutorial, and an analysis of the tutor's remarks and of the student's response as evidenced in a second draft of the essay, in which improvements were already evident. The paper concludes with a brief assessment of the potential value of online writing tutoring in South Africa, suggesting that it could relieve the pressure on educators in higher institutions, and be as effective as face-to-face tutoring for students who require help with their writing.

Keywords

Academic support, composition, e-learning, online tutorials, process theory, virtual writing tutorial, writing support.

INTRODUCTION

Students at academic institutions are expected to produce well-written assignments, containing sophisticated analysis and argument. Underlying this expectation is the assumption that, once they reach tertiary level, students have mastered the skill of writing. Regrettably, this is generally not the case: few courses other than language courses facilitate the development of skills that help learners to articulate ideas and arguments through logical, coherent writing. This is challenging for most learners, particularly those disadvantaged because English is their second (or third) language: in addition to the expectation that they present ideas in eloquent written English, they are also expected to conform to the accepted mores and norms of academic writing and discourse.

It is because the reality falls short of the underlying assumption that writing courses have become mandatory in the US undergraduate curriculum. On-campus writing centres are expected to support students from all departments in the university, but because of limited resources (human and financial), these centres are often restricted in terms of the quantity (and quality) of support they offer. Consequently, virtually every major university in the United States also has an online writing laboratory, providing asynchronous writing tutorials for students. These laboratories offer a service not constrained by time and space. Furthermore, the e-based medium gives the student a sense of anonymity, which helps to overcome the reported stigma attached to traditional academic support services.

With the above in mind, online writing tutoring must apply the same techniques that are used in any coaching or mentoring interaction—putting the learner at ease and providing constructive support that foregrounds students' texts, unlike the mediated face-to-face relationships between tutor and student. In virtual writing tutorials, dialogue is text-driven, which eliminates situations where the tutor provides subtle voice and body clues to the composing processes. Consequently, more responsibility is put on students, forcing them to begin assessing their own writing, and rereading and revising their assignments. A process approach (Kennedy and Nelson, 1998), informed by genre theory (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993), develops the student's awareness of linguistic, rhetorical and semantic markers in the appropriate academic literacies (Street, 1984; 2001). Writing skills and grammar are taught in context and the tutor scaffolds developing competence. In addition, students learn an explicit language for talking about the writing process and grammatical errors in their writing (see Van Wyk, 2002), which in turn allows them to access their other writing support resources, either through the university library or the Internet.

THE PROCESS APPROACH TO WRITING

It is generally understood that writing involves complex cognitive, social and cultural processes through which people articulate ideas, or “make meaning” (Flower, 1994). Texts are shaped by and in turn shape these processes—to understand writing is to understand these processes (Kennedy and Nelson, 1998). The process approach to writing therefore assumes that writing is more than the sum of its formal textual parts, that is, more than its lexical, syntactic and semantic structures. A process-orientated pedagogy emphasizes the developmental aspects of the writing, especially through scaffolding techniques that build on and extend the learner’s own writing skills. Within this approach, writing tutors have come to understand their task as that of introducing students to academic discourse. This has led to the modern trends of cross-disciplinary writing programmes and “writing across the curriculum”.

The most enduring cognitive process theory is presented in the work of Flower and Hayes (1981), which assumes that writing involves three thinking processes: planning, translating and reviewing. These processes are constrained by the writer’s task and environment (topic, audience and genre) and also by the text that is produced. Cognitive process theory draws attention to the relationship between the individual writer and others in the sociocultural world and discourse practice.

Criticisms of Flower & Hayes (1981) relate largely to their assumption that ideas exist before they are transformed into language, i.e. the model does not allow for the distinct probability that language itself is generative. It also emphasizes process in the writer’s mind at the expense of context (Geisler, 1994; Kennedy and Nelson, 1998). Nevertheless, the process approach to writing offers an immediate and practical platform for developing strategies for supporting aspirant writers, who need feedback that can be applied immediately, rather than having to wait for a broad theoretical understanding of the context in which they operate.

Kilfoil (1997) points out that students’ socioeconomic and political contexts interact with the four key factors that must be considered when offering academic support for learners at tertiary level. These factors are:

- the levels of proficiency in language learning (ordinary competence, cognitive academic language and discipline-specific language);
- the development of cognitive skills;
- the ability to engage in critical discourse;
- provision of interpersonal support.

This illustrates a paradigm shift away from thinking of academic support as mere language upgrading to one where language provides the foundation on which to scaffold a range of academic skills and learning strategies (Kilfoil 1997; Van Wyk, 2002). This is of particular significance when dealing with adult students who can learn abstract rules: providing grammatical rules might scaffold developing competence, or at least allow students to monitor and edit their own work. This can be facilitated through the support offered in online writing tutorials, thus helping writers to develop a monitoring inner ear.

Writing in the academic context is a powerful gatekeeper to education (see Delpit, 1989), and this is particularly true of higher education in South Africa, where educators are often heard to remark that students who are particularly articulate in class are often unable to produce the simplest written assignment. This returns us to the expectation that learners should produce assignments that use the rhetoric of assertion, and the role of the writing tutor is to provide explicit tuition in academic discourse. This has the added advantage of overcoming the often erroneous supposition that poor language use means lesser intellectual ability.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE—WRITING TUTORING

The process approach to writing teaching stimulated the growth of writing centres (laboratories) on university campuses in the United States, as it was required that writing instructors should be available to help students through all the stages of the writing process.

A writing tutorial can focus on any of the four main stages of the writing process: pre-writing, drafting, writing, as well as revising and editing. Usually, writing tutors work with students on drafts of their essays (the three last stages). For an early draft, the tutor will focus on higher-order concerns (fluent idea

development, logical organization and structure); after the student has revised the draft, the tutorial will focus on lower-order concerns (emphasis, conciseness, grammatical correctness, mechanics and appropriate academic/professional style). While different students require different types of support, one generalization that holds true is that second-language students tend to be preoccupied with lower-order concerns. Without negating concerns about these, it often happens that these problems are sorted out as one encourages them to think more logically about their ideas.

THE EFFICACY OF VIRTUAL WRITING TUTORING—A “BEFORE AND AFTER” EXAMPLE

The discussion in this paper is confined to writing tutorials using text-based, electronic media. While e-based communication has no face, it is very intimate, because communication is through PCs. This means that virtual writing tutors can be professional and empathetic without necessarily being personal, simply by writing in the first person and addressing the student in the second person. This allows tutors to be human; they can respond to points that they find interesting, without becoming personal.

There are, undoubtedly, differences between face-to-face tutorials and asynchronous tutorials (see Inman and Sewell, 2000). One of the major benefits of face-to-face tutorials is the opportunity for students to discuss the assignment with their tutor and immediately clear up any misunderstandings. With asynchronous tutorials, there is a time lag in the interactions between tutors and students, and the process of achieving clarity and “dialogue” requires more skill than conversing across a desk. On the other hand, a disadvantage of face-to-face tutorials is that students and their writing instructors need to meet in the same place and at the same time, which can be difficult to arrange. A solution is offered by the fact that universities are moving beyond the traditional classroom towards a blended model that includes to e-learning. Yet, notwithstanding the change in medium, the methodology is a dialogic one, which is recognized as the key to success in any coaching situation (Carlson and Apperson-Williams, 2000; Castner, 200; Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw, 2000). The tutor uses his/her own writing as a model in the dialogue. “E-speak” (i.e. the conventions of e-mail and chat rooms) is not used, and in fact is actively discouraged.

VIRTUAL WRITING TUTORIALS: THE RESULTS

Below we discuss an excerpt from a student’s writing submitted to the online writing laboratory of an American university. To save space, only selected parts of a single, representative essay are presented, but no other element of the writing has been changed. The tutor’s comments appear in bold italics in square brackets, to differentiate them from the student’s text. In the comments, reference is made to *The Handbook*, which is that university’s writing text – the numbers in brackets refer to sections of this book that deal with the specific problem mentioned in the comment. The tutorial has a clear opening that clarifies what the student should expect (not an editorial service), and the conventions that the tutor uses. In the body of the tutorial (comments embedded in the paper), the tutor makes use of questions to encourage clarity, and points out problem areas. The tone of the comments is one of advice rather than admonishment, thus encouraging the writer to develop a monitoring ear, as referred to earlier. The last part of the tutorial consists of more detailed explanatory notes appended to the student’s text, pointing out pattern errors and providing strategies for dealing with them. The tutorial closes with a positive comment. Throughout, the tone is informal, and the language correct but conversational.

Example: Excerpts from a Virtual Writing Tutorial

[Thank you for using the Virtual Writing Lab. The purpose of the Writing Lab is not to correct or edit your assignment. The comments and suggestions in your paper (in square brackets) are designed to help you to write good, grammatically correct papers. Please refer to the Handbook (HB) to see why suggestions are made (the specific section number is provided in parentheses throughout your paper).]

Initial Business Research Proposal

Problem Statement [**←Are these subheadings required by your instructor?**]

This study will provide information on different commercial locations on which to build my New York Burrito. The problem statement that this study will answer is where is the best location to build my New York Burrito. [**←Look at ways of linking some of these sentences together (16f)**][**←Look for ways of avoiding unnecessary repetition, and cutting empty words (16b and c).**] In order for this question [**←Antecedent reference problem (27)—what question?**] to be answered, the researcher will provide an in depth look at the relationship of average daily traffic count and average household income versus the amount of the lease for the building. [**←Reword for clarity... Reading the sentence aloud may help.**] The researcher will examine the relationship of [**←Check preposition choice (17)—between**][**←Missing an article/determiner here (29f)**] number of businesses and the number of homes in an area to see which one is the better fit for a New York Burrito. And, [**←Avoid starting sentences with and and but in formal writing. These words make your writing too informal and conversational.**] finally, the researcher will compare the location against the criteria that the franchisor wants in a location.[**←Reword for clarity and avoid colloquial language (14a)... Reading the sentence aloud may help.**]

Background Information

It is the opinion of this researcher that there will never be a perfect spot on which to build his New York Burrito Restaurant. The researcher has been looking for this perfect spot for over a year now, and he has found that there is always something that makes it imperfect. [**←Look at ways of linking some of these sentences together (16f)**] The rent may be more than the researcher can afford. There may not be enough businesses around to support a lunch crowd. [**←Look at ways of linking some of these sentences together (16f).**] On the other hand, there may be enough or too many businesses around for lunch, but there is not enough residential development around to support the New York Burrito into the evening hours. [**←Reword for clarity... Reading the sentence aloud may help.**] Another problem has been that the landlord of the complex does not want to have a New York Burrito in his/her complex for one reason or another. A final problem that this researcher has run into [**←Avoid colloquial/conversational language— consider tightening it up a bit (14)**] is that the location does not meet the franchisor's minimum qualifications, whether it be in daily traffic counts, average household income, or population base, for them to approve the site. But the researcher will determine which site will be the best location for the restaurant. [**←What is the point of this sentence? Its contents are implied throughout your proposal.**]

Scope

The scope of this research will be five commercial real estate brokers, whom I [**← Avoid using I, we and you in academic and professional writing.**] will find from the district manager of New York Burrito, my personal contacts, and by researching different commercial real estate brokers on the Internet. Another scope of this research will be to research two landlords of commercial property. [**←Reword for clarity... Reading the sentence aloud may help.**] The first landlord is a family member of this researcher, and the other landlord is a neighbor of this researcher. [**←Reword for clarity... Reading the sentence aloud may help.**] Some of the commercial real estate organizations that will be studied are: Professional Brokers, Prime Commercial, and NAI [**←Use abbreviations only after writing the term or name in full, with the abbreviation in parenthesis (45).**] Utah Commercial. The landlords' organizations are: Barlow & [**←Is this symbol used appropriately?**] Nielsen and Oliver Investment Company. [**←Needs transitional phrase (6b).**] The study should only take a maximum of three weeks, since all of the contacts are local to this researcher. [**←Start a new paragraph here.**][**←Needs transitional phrase (6b).**] This research will not delve into the management concepts. This will have to be saved for a later research project. The results of this study will probably be biased towards the individual's organization, but should give this researcher some good insight on which to make his decision.

[You have clearly put a great deal of effort into this assignment. Please remember that because we comment on an error only once, you need to check through the rest of your paper to make sure that you have not made the same mistake again.]

Before closing, some other comments:

- *An introduction is a vital component in any piece of writing. It*
 1. *Identifies and narrows the subject*
 2. *Makes a claim or an assertion about the subject*
 3. *Sets the tone of the writing*
 4. *Often indicates the order of main points.*

It may be helpful to review the Handbook (4a and 59a).

- *The conclusion is similarly important and draws together your thinking, often summarizing what you've said, making a final point for the reader to think about. Please review section 59 in the Handbook).*
- *Furthermore, it is not clear who your audience/target reader is, and this may influence your writing style, which is often informal, and would normally be unacceptable for an academic paper.*
- *I also noted in your paper that you should look at ways of linking sentences and paragraphs together with transitional phrases as this would help your reader move with you from one idea to another. Think of paragraphs as pieces in a jigsaw. The first sentence must ease snugly into the previous paragraph: the two sentences need to be connected to help your writing to flow.*

Short sentences demand attention, so use them sparingly, and mainly for emphasis. Try combining ideas that relate to each other in longer sentences.

Look at this example:

Your job duties decrease since you do not possess additional education. There are job-related demands such as company restructuring or cutbacks. Your work performance suffers. These are all reasons to pursue another degree.

Versus:

Reasons for pursuing another degree can range from a reduction in your responsibilities at work because of lack of education, company restructuring and poor performance.

You can get help on this from the Handbook (11), (12), and (13).

- *It appears as though you have used one or more professional sources in writing your paper, yet there are no in-text citations or listings on your reference page for your sources. It is extremely important that you cite any and all sources used in your papers. Otherwise it is considered plagiarism, which carries serious consequences. Contact your instructor if you have questions on how to cite sources.*

I trust these comments are helpful. Thank you for using the Virtual Writing Lab, and good luck with this assignment.]

The reviewer's comments start with higher order concerns, moving to lower order ones and are made as suggestions rather than as directives. This is noticeable in the vocabulary: the phrases "look at" or "look for" are used, rather than "do" (giving the writer the option of making his/her own choices about which form is the best to use); "avoid" is used, rather than "don't", leaving the writer with an option, as "avoid" does not necessarily have a meaning of absoluteness. Optionality is also suggested by use of the modal "may", as in "Reading the sentence aloud may help"; "It may be helpful to review The Handbook (4a and 59a)." The direct imperative is also avoided in two other ways. The first is by means of questions such as "What is the point of this sentence?", which again encourages the student to engage with the text rather than slavishly making corrections as directed by the tutor. The second is by use of the indicative form, making statements from which the student can draw his/her own conclusions, for example "An introduction is a vital component in any piece of writing"; or the partial (indicative) clause "Needs transitional phrase". Of course, a fair number of the comments are straightforward imperatives: these are actually discouraged in e-tutoring, but it should be noted that in several cases the imperative is modified by

the word “Please” (“Please review these...”). It could also be argued that the “ordering” tone of the imperatives is softened by the use of the other devices mentioned in this paragraph. A full and explicit analysis of the tutor’s use of language is unfortunately not possible here, given the length constraint on this paper.

Student's second submission

This sample contains relevant excerpts from the second draft of the essay, which the student submitted after receiving the tutorial above. The student’s rewordings and additions are numbered for reference in the analysis that follows the essay.

Final Business Research Proposal

Executive Summary

Introduction and Relevant Details

This study will provide information on different commercial locations on which to build this researcher’s New York Burrito. The problem statement that this study will answer is where is the best location on which to build (1) this researcher’s fast-food restaurant, (2) how to hire and motivate the best employees, and how to finance the business. In order for the question (3) regarding the ideal location to be answered, this researcher will provide an in-depth look at the relationship of average daily traffic count and average household income versus the amount of the lease for the building. This researcher will examine the relationship (4) between the number of businesses and the number of homes in an area to see which one is the better fit for a New York Burrito. (5) Finally, this researcher will compare the location against the criteria that the franchisor desires in a location. (6) In order for the questions (7) about hiring and motivating employees and financing of the franchise to be answered, this researcher will search the Internet for articles that deal with information about these subjects.

(8) The methodology that will be used for collecting the research will vary for the different parts of the problem. In order to find the best location for the New York Burrito franchise, the researcher will combine personal interviews with commercial real estate agents and with landlords of commercial properties. The researcher will also continue to look and drive about during the normal course of the day (9) to scope out prime locations. The (10) methodology that will be used for the financing portion of the business will primarily be the Internet. The researcher will search for different sources of lending to new businesses, and then he will try to (11) apply on-line with those sources. If on-line applications are not available, the researcher will call these different institutions of lending to apply. For the last part of the problem, the hiring and motivating of the employees, the researcher will draw upon his previous experiences at Bradley Candy Company.

Results of Data Analysis and Conclusions

(12) Analysis of the interviews of the commercial landlords and real estate agents provided this researcher with invaluable information regarding where to build his New York Burrito. This researcher also learned answers to his questions about the correct mix of business and residential traffic, and at what level the average household income should be so that the residents are likely spend \$5-\$7 for a gourmet wrap. He also found very good information on the Internet to help him with hiring, and then motivating, the very best employees. This researcher is also going to be taking two classes at the University of P—, Employment Law and Human Resource Management, to help him further his knowledge in dealing with employees.

Background

It is the opinion of this researcher that there will never be a perfect spot on which to build his New York Burrito Restaurant. This researcher has been looking for this perfect spot for over a year now and has not found one yet. (13) There is always something that makes it imperfect. (14) For

example, the rent may be more than he can afford, (15) or there may not be enough businesses around to support a lunch crowd. On the other hand, there may be enough or too many businesses around for lunch, but there is not enough residential development around to support the New York Burrito into the evening hours. Another problem has been that the landlord of a particular complex does not want to have a New York Burrito in his/her complex for one reason or another. (16) Another problem that this researcher has run into is that the location does not meet the franchisor's minimum qualifications, whether it is in daily traffic counts, average household income, or population base, for the site to be approved.

Scope

The scope of this project will be five commercial real estate brokers, whom this researcher will find from the district manager of New York Burrito, from his personal contacts, and from researching different commercial real estate brokers on the Internet. Another (17) scope of (18) this project will be to interview and gather information from two landlords of commercial property. The first landlord is a family member of this researcher, and the other landlord is a neighbor of this researcher. Some of the commercial real estate organizations that will be studied are Professional Brokers, Prime Commercial, and (19) NAI Utah Commercial. The landlords' organizations are: (20) Barlow & Nielsen and Oliver Investment Company. The study should take a maximum of three weeks, since all of the contacts are local to this researcher.

The student's writing shows an overall improvement, and fact that this is a second submission shows that the student is aware that he/she still requires more writing support. Below is a brief analysis of the student's response to the tutorial as shown in the second submission. The numbers refer to examples in the student's text, above.

The most salient changes have been made in response to direct prompting by the tutor: the substitution of "this researcher" for the first person pronoun (1); the clarifying phrases (2) "how to..." and (3) "regarding the ideal location"; the substitution of (4) "between" for "of"; and the removal of "And", and the substitution of (5) "Finally". The added sentence beginning at (6) is grammatical (though slightly clumsy), and gives the reader additional information. At (7) "about ...", which follows the model of (2), the student shows that he/she has learnt to be more explicit. The new paragraphs beginning at (8) and (12) are logical and clear, though again, slightly clumsy. The student has begun to use more linking and signposting words and phrases as at (14) "For example", and (15) "or".

As can be seen, and as would be expected with an inexperienced writer, there are still problems with the student's second submission. There is the inappropriately colloquial register of (9) "to scope out". The writer is still unsure in his/her use of prepositions, as at (11) "apply ... with those sources". In certain instances he has simply ignored the tutor's suggestions, for example at (13) the sentence has been broken up, rather than joined; at (19) the acronym has not been explained, and the "&" has been retained at (20). Ideally, the reasons for this should be established: perhaps the student did not understand what was required. The student has also made some unprompted changes, of "a final question" to (16) "another question", and (18) "this research" to "this project". These would be addressed by the tutor in the second tutorial as part of the ongoing dialogue.

Overall, the style of the second submission is far too formal, an effect created by the use of passives, and of the phrase "the researcher". The tutor did not address this in the first submission as he/she wanted the student to concentrate on avoiding an overly informal style. The student also misuses vocabulary, for example (10) "methodology" and (17) "scope". These problems would be addressed in later drafts and later assignments, as part of a process of encouraging the student to engage with his/her own writing.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN SITUATION AND VIRTUAL WRITING LABS

Writing centres have been established on a number of South African campuses, but these are either overburdened or under-resourced (or both). This, coupled with the universal acceptance of the electronic medium as a support for the traditional classroom, lays a firm foundation for the use of virtual or online writing laboratories.

The concern that learners at tertiary institutions are not computer literate, nor have access to workstations, appears to be unfounded. Increasingly, learners are expected to be computer literate and some universities list a PC as a standard requirement. It would seem that most tertiary learners know how to access information from the Internet, or quickly learn how to do so in their first year of study.

Virtual writing laboratories therefore offer Southern African students the opportunity to be coached and mentored in writing skills in large numbers. Experience in the USA, as illustrated in the example above, has shown that the writing of both first- and second-language students improves with this kind of mentoring and guidance.

Within this context the efficacy of virtual writing tutoring in Southern African tertiary institutions needs to be tested. This would enable the development of both an indigenous model, and writing support materials geared for the sub-continent's second language English writers in an academic context.

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