A New English Writing Curriculum for Tertiary Students: The Use of MOODLE to Construct a Community of Learners

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Abstract: This paper presents the new pedagogical possibilities opened up by integrating advanced technology into the English Centre's first undergraduate English academic writing course - *Professional Media Writing*. The course was successfully piloted in January 2006, aiming to introduce journalism students to the generic and linguistic features of print news reports and provide students with opportunities to engage in news story writing and editing. A three-tier English course of 30 hours was delivered via plenary sessions, seminars, small group tutorials and the web.

The course involved three groups of students working with online materials and using both in-class and outside-class time to enhance task-based learning on a *MOODLE* platform. The idea was to allow flexible delivery by offering more choices for intensive online learning. The course was made more user-friendly and interactive by utilizing *MOODLE* features that range from discussion, assignments, teacher feedback, journal writing to vocabulary building and corpus-based work.

An effective online learning community was developed using *MOODLE*. The rationale for this is the underlying pedagogical principle of Social Constructivism which asserts that a social group constructs knowledge for one another collaboratively. For instance, students were asked to write three journal entries in the in-class forum to reflect upon individual learning experience at the end of each module. While giving comments and reflecting on their own learning, students could interact online with their peers in the other two classes during the lessons. Within the community, teachers could always give immediate and detailed feedback to their students, thus prompting better student-to-student interaction and teacher-student dialogue.

By discussing the challenges involved with making the *MOODLE* site a component of the course curriculum, this paper will provide teachers with practical experience of online course web as a collaborative learning platform.

Keywords: writing, MOODLE, task-based learning, constructivist learning

A.   Introduction

One of the key principles behind our new English writing curriculum for tertiary students of journalism has been flexible delivery. Flexible delivery of learning programs can be interpreted differently by different people. The concept can mean "the provision of resources and application of technologies to create, store and distribute program content, enrich communication, and provide support and services to enable both more effective learning and better management of learning by the learner … [It] allows the maximum number of students to participate effectively in learning" (Learning Connection, 2006). It has also been interpreted as "an approach to vocational education and training which allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interest and needs, and variations in learning opportunities" (ChallengerTAFE, 2006), including online course delivery, the use of computer-based course management systems such as WebCT and MOODLE, and classroom-based interaction.

Current literature suggests that university teachers' beliefs can have an impact on the success of such innovation in tertiary teaching and learning (Errington, 1985). Educators who subscribe to flexible learning practices are open towards innovation in their beliefs on engaging them in more *flexible* forms of learning delivery. 'Teacher dispositions constitute: a "personal set of guidelines for professional practice" (Combs, 1982), provide the substance of teachers' "personal practical theories of teaching" (Marland, 1997), and inform "personal practical knowledge" (Haigh, 1998, as cited in Errington, 1985). Whatever the definition of flexible delivery is, when it comes to delivery, *flexibility* is the key.

In our pursuit of flexibility, we have been working to develop an innovative English enhancement course at the English Centre of the University of Hong Kong. The course, *Professional Media Writing,* was successfully piloted in January 2006, and it aimed to introduce journalism students to the generic and linguistic features of print news reports and provide students with opportunities to engage in news story writing and editing. We subscribe to the view that a course should be offered in such a way that all students regardless of their backgrounds or learning preferences have an equal opportunity to learn in various modes in accordance with the aims of the course.

Flexible delivery on this course has incorporated not only traditional face-to-face (i.e. 24 class hours) and print based delivery (i.e. course booklet), but an online course web (i.e. *MOODLE*) as a collaborative learning platform. A three-tier English course is delivered via plenary sessions, seminars, small group tutorials and the web. The course is divided into 4

modules of 3 sessions each. One teacher takes charge of the plenary session with all students while the other two teachers can monitor the class. In the seminar and tutorial sessions students are divided into three groups and can receive intensive feedback from teachers. Multi-media learning centers are used as class venues to enable students to have full access to online resources. Flexibility has also been achieved by providing four modules to target these learning goals: news story writing, vocabulary building, and development of a news broadsheet. Each module comprises a series of tasks. The core of flexibility is integration with technology with the use of *MOODLE* as a learning platform in class and after class.

Aiming to tailor courses to the diverse needs of learners in the field of journalism, we have actively involved students in the learning process through a range of flexibly delivered learning options by creating a *MOODLE* community. This free courseware provides a consistent online learning environment that can be accessible with a basic web-browser and Internet connection from anywhere at any time. It enables the delivery of cutting-edge online teaching and learning to students regardless of space or time, and offers variations in learning opportunities, ranging from discussion, assignments, teacher feedback, journal writing to vocabulary building and corpus-based work.

In this paper we shall first briefly examine *MOODLE*'s four major philosophies: *Constructivism, Constructionism, Social Constructivism and Connected and Separate behaviours*. Next, we shall discuss how the new English writing curriculum was developed for tertiary students of journalism, and the pedagogical implications of using *MOODLE* to construct a community of learners. We shall then move on to present the challenges involved with making the *MOODLE* site a component of the course curriculum.

B.   MOODLE

MOODLE is a free downloadable software and a platform of online knowledge construction for educators. It was created as a Course Management System by Martin Dougiamas in the 90s' when he was a webmaster. Our project adopted the main features of MOODLE, including the discussion forum, assignment, resources, glossary, journal and calendar. The following details the features of MOODLE in our English course.

● **Assignment**: In our course, students were asked students to submit two news stories for grading. Teachers set a due date for assignment submission, so that students could upload their work online. Late submissions are not accepted and teachers can grade students' assignments online.

● **Resources**: Teachers made use of this feature to provide students with some

supplementary information and online resources for their independent learning or revision. The weekly PowerPoint slides/notes were uploaded to the site. Students could also suggest other sites to share with the whole class.

- **Glossary**: In the course, each student was asked to upload to the glossary 10 new words that had been identified when learning about or reading news stories. This enables students to share words that they have learnt and could be said to have an advantage over a teacher-selected lexicon. They can revise anything any time which is good for self-learning.

- **Journal**: Students had to complete 3 journal entries after each learning module to reflect upon their learning experience. Their comments and feedback are useful for course development and revision.

- **Calendar**: Instructors kept updating the calendar to remind students about due dates of assignments and enable students to plan ahead their schedule.

C.   Integration of MOODLE into the academic English writing course

According to Dougiamas, there are four main pedagogical theories that back him up when he first created MOODLE. They are *Constructivism, Constructionism, Social Constructivism and Connected and Separate behaviours*. When we designed the course, we tried to design tasks that are based on these theories and can cope with students' needs in developing skills for professional journalism writing. *Constructivism* holds the view that new knowledge will be constructed by people if they interact with their environment (MOODLE Homepage, 2006). In that case, if students can have a platform or any channels to interact, exchange ideas with others, they can then create new knowledge which in a sense facilitates teaching and learning. *Social Constructivism* further builds on this concept that if 'a social group constructs things for one another, collaboratively [they will] create a small culture of shared artifacts with shared meanings' (Ibid). Therefore, the *Forum* feature is included in nearly every class. The forum enables the whole cohort of teachers and students (in different class groups) to view and show responses posted by the participants within the same learning community. More specifically, the students themselves could help others to construct new knowledge through online discussions.

Here is an example taken from the Forum section of the course site. The students and the instructor exchanged views on the analysis of two news stories writing:

Student A: The style of Story 2 is more informal than story 1, with the use of words such

as "bumpy" and the short form such as "he's been". This gives readers a more relaxing feeling. The words used in story 1 on the other hand sound heavier.

Story 1 uses less emotional adjectives and the words are quite neutral. While for Story 2, the words like "angrily" are used. The sentence structures appear to be simpler than those in Story 2.

Student B: Adding onto what student A said … story one is more factual and thus any connotated words such as "ambush" and "wounded seriously" were used to emphasize the situation. Story two however, plays more on emotion to engage with the reader in the long anecdote.

Instructor: I think all of your annotations are quite right. What we want to draw your attention to through these tasks is that when you write for a different purpose, the language changes. If you want to appear objective, you may use more passive constructions as you can hide the subject. If you want to express your emotions or feelings, you can use more descriptive words, such as adjectives or adverbs.

The above example illustrates how students contributed equally to the construction of new knowledge. When student A presented the analysis of the news writings, student B added other points and later proposed new perceptions of the news stories. Then the instructor joined the discussion. The students, in this instance, took the role of knowledge builders and MOODLE gives them a platform on which to interact.

D.   Collaborative learning

Dillenbourg and Schneider (1995) state that collaborative learning occurs in situations "…in which two or more subjects build synchronously and interactively a joint solution to some problem". Interactions among individuals make positive contributions to their learning. Three examples of assessed tasks below are illustrations of how *MOODLE* fits with such learning theory.

1. Peer editing of news writing

Hanson-Smith (2001) suggests that in collaborative learning "learners take an active role in helping each other to accomplish a task that is a vehicle for using authentic communication" (p.6). She also supports the view that "technology-enhanced collaboration" facilitates task-based learning in an effective way. Similar to the use of a technological platform, MOODLE in the English course for the Journalism students in this study, students can view each other's work in the course webpage through MOODLE and make suggestions.

2. Student presentations of vocabulary

Group collaborative learning is also achieved through another assessed task in which students present new items of vocabulary through roleplay. Roleplay is used to foster active participation of students through collaborative learning (Cope, Staehr, & Horan, 2002). Visual aids support their presentation. Cooperation among students is needed because they are required to use a thematic approach and link the selected items of vocabulary in the roleplay.

3. Poster session

Another key assessment in the course is the poster session which requires students, working in groups, to bring their news articles (one from each student in a group) together and create a poster (i.e. in a newspaper layout) for display. The poster session gives students a sense of satisfaction and achievement in the group project and helps foster high personal commitment to the project work.

The assessed tasks in the course have shown how different kinds of student achievement in oral and written English communication can be successful outcomes of collaborative learning.

E.   Challenges

The course has involved three groups of students working with online materials and using both in-class and outside-class time to enhance task-based learning, collaborative learning, and social constructivism on a *MOODLE* platform. The following will discuss the challenges involved with making the site a component of the course curriculum from two perspectives: *teachers* and *learners*.

1. Learners' perspective

First, **student-teacher or student-student interactions have been fostered** and students have been given opportunities to take more control of interactions among participants. A strong communicative setting has been developed where students can spend a lot of time *communicating*. The communication takes place through initiating in-class discussion, exchanging ideas in the discussion forum, and receiving teachers' feedback on their journal writing.

Next, **more learning choices** have been offered to our students. A natural context has been created through the students' experiences with the language, which is more personalized and relevant to the students themselves. Through collaborating with other members in groups, students have developed news broadsheets on their own and have them displayed in a poster exhibition at the end of the course. Each broadsheet is unique and personalized to the students'

learning experiences. On the other hand, through collecting new words/phrases in the journalistic discipline from their learning experiences, students have learned to use the new words in a newly created verbal context to illustrate their usage. Besides, the course has given students a more varied exposure to language. Through the use of a news corpus, students have learned to recognize a range of lexical phrases, collocations and patterns as well as language forms.

Significant attention has been paid to the **diachronic and interactive dimensions of learning**. For example, the course is divided into four modules, adding from one lesson to the next through diversified assignments. In module 1, students learned to write a structured news story focusing on genre features. In module 2, students learned to write a structured news story focusing on appropriate tense use. In module 3, students enriched their vocabulary knowledge. And in the last module, things were put together so that students could create a broadsheet by putting into practice what they had learned throughout the semester. Furthermore, the concern to engage students in interactive learning has been embedded within the particular mode of delivery. The course has provided students with an environment to practice news writing through the use of *MOODLE*.

All in all, the distinctive features of *MOODLE* have allowed us to incorporate more flexible learning choices. We have combined the use of both innovative and traditional approaches to maximize student learning.

2. Teachers' perspective

In the pilot course, three teachers were involved: one teacher took charge of the plenary session with all the students, and three teachers took the seminar and tutorial sessions in which the students were divided into three groups. Preparation time for each session was cut down; marking was reduced due to small class size and short written assignments; teachers were able to provide immediate online feedback to students on their in-class tasks. While having an instructor take one out of the three plenary sessions can help to alleviate work load, it is not an easy task for us to find a venue provided with enough computers for all students. In the first year, the workload was heavy due to material for the new course.

F.   Ongoing work and further research

The development of an online community of learners with the use of *MOODLE* has resulted in positive and encouraging student feedback. The journal entries appear to indicate that students genuinely enjoyed the integration of technology: better student-teacher interaction, detailed teacher feedback, variety of activities, and cohesive course structure. A larger part of ongoing work is the revision of the first-year materials in accordance with our

in-class observation and student feedback. The compilation of a learner corpus of students' online submitted news stories is also on the way. The corpus and the journal entries can be a valuable resource to identify learning difficulties and devise appropriate course materials. Key considerations in future will include how to apply this modular approach to larger courses, the design of more self-access learning materials for students, and the allocation of teachers who are prepared to take on the challenge of teaching discipline-specific courses such as this.

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