WIKIS AND BLOGS: CONSIDERATIONS AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATION ISSUES FOR ONLINE COLLABORATION IN A WRITING COURSE

Jasmine Selvarani Emmanuel[*]

Abstract

In an open distance English Language learning classroom, teaching writing to a group of adult learners with very minimum exposure to academic writing skills can deem a great challenge for many facilitators. Many of these learners come back to school after long periods of absence and to teach them the sophisticated skills of writing can be an arduous task for many facilitators especially to enable them to participate in communicative interactions and receive constructive feedback on online forums which they are not used to doing. To overcome the documented lack of participation in large forums, the course team decided to look for other asynchronous tools to encourage greater collaboration. This paper discusses the use of Wikis and Blogs in different phases of the writing course and the potential implication issues that need to be considered in the implementation process.

Keywords: Academic writing, collaboration, wikis, blogs

Introduction

The writing course entitled 'Writing Skills for University Studies' was introduced as a compulsory subject to teach introduce student how to write at university in their various disciplines. During their secondary school, most students are not exposed to the type of writing that is required of them in undergraduate years as they are more used to school writing tasks that required them to offer and support opinions, with a secondary emphasis on summarizing and synthesizing information.

[*] Wawasan Open University, Penang Malaysia

Students are very rarely required to criticize an argument, define a problem and propose a solution, design their writing to meet their readers' needs, or revise their writing based on feedback. As a result, students have not had enough practice to develop a set of sophisticated writing skills. Furthermore, an important component of classroom learning in any course especially in a writing course is the social and communicative interactions between student and teacher, and student and student. A student's ability to question, share opinions, or disagree with a point of view and receive constructive feedback are the very basic cornerstone of learning activities in any course.

Hence, the key challenges at WOU are helping students learn vital basic writing skills in an online environment with limited face-to-face interaction and helping students adapt to the communicative interactions taking place online. The very first assignment for this course requires them to discuss an essay outline as given in appendix 1 and they are required to do this using the online forums in the Moodle based Learning Management System. But getting the students to work in groups online has been a great challenge. This could be due to the fact that in threaded discussions, students have to read all the posts to get an idea of what is being discussed. This can be tedious as the number of posts can be substantial and many of them may not be very relevant. Wang and Chen (2008) support this by saying that research suggests online discussions often are shallow, superficial, fail to engage students and result in frustration for students and the course instructor. Therefore discussions need to be properly planned and related to the course outcomes and assessment.

Beaudoin (2003) has shown that 'witness learners', those who never participate in large group discussions, *almost always* actively participated in smaller study group activities even when the group work is not graded. It could thus be concluded that some students prefer small group interaction to interaction within larger class forums. The other factor to consider is that that although students may have the desire to participate in collaborative group projects, the skills and behaviour to effectively engage in online collaboration may be found lacking. According to Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, (1998), students may have reservations about their ability to work as part of a bigger group. Considering these factors, the course team had to look for other avenues of collaboration in smaller groups of four or five so that the online interaction would be deemed less intimidating. Many asynchronous

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communication tools were discussed thoroughly and the usage of wikis and blogs seemed the natural answer.

Why use Wikis and Blogs

The two communication tools of choice that were deemed suitable in meeting the learning outcomes of the course as well as the learners' needs are wikis as well as blogs. As stated by Kirkup and Jones (1996) "students need dialogue with their teachers and with other students in order to consolidate and check on their own learning". Though the forums in the Moodle Leaning Management system provide avenues for interaction in order to consolidate their learning effectively as in the case of essay writing, wikis and blogging encourage dialogue in a different manner. These two activities help to promote a greater social presence and create a sense of classroom community.

The term 'wiki' is derived from the Hawaiian phrase, wiki-wiki, which means 'quick'. According to Chao (2007) a wiki is a collaborative web site whose content can be edited by visitors to the site, allowing users to easily create and edit web pages collaboratively. Lamb (2004) supports this statement by adding that wikis enable teams to create outlines, have brainstorming sessions and capture suggestions very quickly. This can be done in the various tutorial groups that exist in this course. These groups can even be further divided into smaller groups and access can be granted to only members of the group although others may view it. This can also help to facilitate student assessment.

As a wiki is primarily text based, it can be organised in many ways. In the case of this course on writing as students need to work on an essay outline as part of their assessment, wiki can be used to help the tutor and students to participate in "mind mapping using keywords" (Fountain, 2005).The wiki used can be edited by the students and tutor. The history of the various edits can also be tracked easily. Another feature present is a discussion board which can be used for comments and suggestions, fact checking and sources of information. Hence students can play diverse roles as co-author, editor etc. Barton (2004) suggests that while participating in a wiki, the processes of reading and editing are combined as students observe and participate as the edits progress. This results in the strengthening of students' critical and creativity skills.

Another key element in participating in a wiki is that it enables reflection. As students get more feedback by a wider audience and not just the tutor, they are exposed to multiple perspectives on content, new ideas as well as language, hence promoting active learning. Students also take ownership and responsibility for their own learning as well as for others in their group. All student voices can be 'heard' online as even the more quiet ones begin to surface and state their opinions because the environment is seen as non-threatening. In short, a wiki is co-constructed and shared socially resulting in a learning environment that produces "overlapping of communities of interest (virtual), cross-pollinating with each other, constantly evolving and largely self-organising." (Brown, 2002 reported in Duffy, 2008).

The other e-learning tool found suitable in addressing this issue is blogging. Blog is short for 'web log' and can be called an electronic journal. According to Williams (2009) blogs use technology that can offer practice, feedback that is insightful and well thought out revisions. These are appropriate because they are the fundamental steps in the writing process that enable improvement in student writing. Blogs also expand writing time in a virtual environment and provide feedback from all members in a group and hence they can be considered a collaborative social communication tool that is powerful in building writing ability. Similar to the wiki, blogs also can promote critical and analytical thinking and combine the benefits of reflection and social interaction.

Richardson (2006) indicates that blogs are a constructivist tool for learning because students construct knowledge, share ideas and build upon each other's work. Blogs, just like wikis enable students to learn 21st century skills that are necessary in a globalised world. Another component shared by wikis and blogs are that simple versions of both can be launched using the Moodle based learning management system. Hence it enables easier navigation for the students who are currently using the Moodle as their LMS. Ferdig and Trammell (2004) suggest the following advantages of using blogs:

- Commenting and hyper linking components of a blog help push the boundaries to extend beyond basic publishing
- The commenting component helps the "scaffolding of new ideas".
- References, visuals and hyperlinks related to the topics can be incorporated into blogs. These links can also provide students opportunities to check other viewpoints and verify content. This

creates interest and helps students to take ownership of their learning process.

In addition to the above advantages, Zhang, et.al (2006) indicated from their research that blogging helped to integrate literacy and technology without compromising educational goals within a reasonable time. Richardson (2006) emphasises that while with other tools, the user needs to check occasionally for new postings, blogs use the "publish-subscribe" model where the users receive notifications when new postings are made. Besides, blogs are considered as pedagogical tools because they can replace the steps used in writing an essay: brainstorming, writing, submitting, receiving feedback, revising and re-submitting. Furthermore, when students start their careers, the bulk of their writing will be done on a computer. Hence, writing classes ought to be set in a realistic environment of the computer world.

To select the most appropriate tool of the two for the different parts of the writing course, there is a necessity to compare both tools. According to Doyle (2006) there are a number of notable differences between wikis and blogs in the way information is organised, the number of contributors and what they aim to do and achieve. Given below are some of these differences.

- Many people generally design Wikis for collaborative authorship, while blogs are usually more personal and written by a single author or sometimes a small group.
- In wikis, information is organized by topics while blogs organize information in reverse chronological order. Due to this factor, information in blogs is more of a historical record and changes are rarely made. However, discussions in wikis are expected to change, grow and expand.
- According to Woolf (2006), the reverse chronological order of blogs is a hindrance to finding all postings on a certain topic, and to go through all postings on that particular topic. Although wikis do not show as easily when a certain piece of information was documented or its hierarchy, they portray the information that is related thus making it simpler to browse.
- Mader (2006) explains that wikis receive feedback by allowing the group to edit the discussions directly, while blogs provide a means for readers to make comments .In blogs the contents are the propriety of the owner where else wikis encourage the sharing of knowledge on a particular topic.

- Blogs are considered a better tool of communication for spreading information to people and getting feedback while the original version is maintained. Wikis are more suitable when the intention is to see information modified and augmented in a collaborative effort.

Since (WOU) uses Moodle, using the wiki or blog available in the Moodle system would be appropriate as students will not need to log into a different site like Wiki Spaces or create a blog at another blog site like wordpress.com. To make the final choice, the structure of the wiki and blog in Moodle 2.0 needs to be looked at to ascertain the suitability for discussing the essay topic outline. The blog in the 2.0 version is more individual based, similar to a question and answer forum in that students must first post before they are allowed to view the posts made by others. Hence, its capabilities are limited. On the other hand, the wiki is more appropriate for collaborative work as students can see what has already been edited and make further contributions. Based on this and the fact many students in this course are first time open distance learners, it has been decided that wiki be used for the first part of the writing course and for the latter part, the students can be encouraged to delve into the world of blogs as they will then be more technologically and socially prepared for the experience with increased comfort levels.

Potential Implementation Issues

As with any new and evolving technology, it is important to give serious consideration to the challenges and potential implementation issues. The main challenges would be pedagogical beliefs, the learning curve in the area of technology for students and staff, students' trust of a collaborative environment' as well as assessment formats. Switching to a student-centred approach requires a change of mindset for learning settings even in blended learning. This involves a learning curve for both students and tutors. This is because enabling students to create content, shifts the ownership of the content base from the tutor or the course coordinator.

Some tutors may have difficulty with this concept depending on their beliefs on how writing can be taught. Ertmer (2005) describes the "final frontier" of successfully integrating technology to the point where "teachers hold personal beliefs aligned with constructivist pedagogy". But dealing with the learning curve in the area of technology for both for

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staff and students can be an uphill task. Many a time, faculty want to do the minimum that they can do to get by as their workloads can be very heavy. Facilitating the Wiki or blog and making sure students remain active and are on the right track requires increased moderation and preparation time. Therefore, the learning curve for tutors will depend on their attitudes to technology and the willingness to adapt to the constructivist, student-centred teaching approach.

Students too may have limited bandwidth or internet access in various regions of the country. They will also require training in navigating the wiki or blog space. This can be a challenge for older students and others who may not be very technologically savvy. Therefore the choice of tool will need to take into consideration the background of the students in this area of technology and also equip them with the skills that are deemed necessary for effective navigation, purposeful revision, editing and feedback strategies.

One of the other implementation challenges where students are concerned is trust in a collaborative writing environment. Students may be resistant to the idea of collaboration in the first place as they have been very used to a teacher-centred and led model of teaching and assessment. Often students do not want to share their content for fear that others will copy their work or it may be over-edited or deleted, resulting in them obtaining lower grades. As Davies (2009) indicates, "some group members may be reluctant participants in assessment tasks and be uncommitted to the aims of the group - and the subject, for that matter."
 Furthermore De Pedro et al. (2006) asserts that one of the drawbacks of writing documents collaboratively is the students' ability to overcome their reluctance to allow others to see their unfinished working documents, and their willingness to let others contribute changes. Students may also be concerned about 'free riders' both apathetic and self-inhibiting. The apathetic riders may not be interested to contribute and the self-inhibiting ones do not participate because they think they are not knowledgeable or lack confidence. This can only be overcome if the assessment component is carefully crafted and marks are awarded for their effort. Class wiki or blog etiquette should also be developed, clear writing guidelines given and group numbers limited so that students don't experience cognitive overload. Rubrics and standards for assessment must also be clarified at the start of the activity. Regular monitoring of student postings must be carried out to ensure quality and understanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though there are a full range of both synchronous and asynchronous tools vying for the attention of staff and students in open distance education, it is important that careful consideration be given to pedagogy before technology and the benefits of starting with the simple and moving on to the more challenging is carried out by providing sufficient training and support. The effectiveness of each tool and its usage to meet the learning outcomes of the course must also be taken into account as well. Hence, it is important that the course team be familiar with a variety of online tools, evaluate them and make decisions with regards to how the chosen tools can be integrated into the curriculum effectively and new teaching paradigms created to enhance the teaching and learning process

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