Chapter 6
Serving Nontraditional Students: Meeting Needs through an Online Writing Program

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ABSTRACT

The role of technology and educational media in supporting nontraditional adult learners is growing. One key area in which more research and development is needed is the improvement of writing, especially writing that is related to formal education. This chapter presents findings related to the use of online writing modules developed to support English as a Second Language and nontraditional English speaking college students. Participants reported improved content-specific writing skills, transfer of writing skills to other content areas, and increased self-efficacy in writing. Differences continued to be noted by key student characteristics. The study has implications for continued development and use of digitally supported writing tutorials for nontraditional adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

As the availability of educational media resources and their functionality grows, their inclusion in meeting the needs of diverse students from dissimilar backgrounds is increasing. Technology is frequently recommended and used as a way to close the access and accountability gaps between these diverse learners’ needs and their presence and performance. Progress in learning domains related to English Language Arts (ELA) education, including reading, comprehension, and writing are particularly vulnerable for these at-risk populations. Although a great deal of research investigates reading literacy development, instructional strategies, and language learning on sub-populations of diverse students—non-native English speaking students or English Language Learners (ELL) at
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the K-12 level (e.g., August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006; Graham & Perin, 2007)—there is a dearth of research regarding writing development and non-native English speaking students in higher education (Danzak, 2011). Even less research exists on writing development for diverse populations of adult learners, both non-native English and English speakers.

Writing, particularly academic writing, is complex in nature. Writing requires authors to express their thoughts and ideas digitally or on paper to communicate to others. In addition to expressing thoughts and ideas, academic writing requires the use of correct grammar, spelling, and an organizational format that is logical for conveying the message at hand. The ability to produce quality academic writing demands a wide array of skills in: 1) mechanics (e.g., handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and syntax); 2) the processes surrounding writing (e.g., language generation, planning, organizing, and revising); and 3) abstract components (e.g., voice, and audience) (Camhi & Ebsworth, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Olive & Kellogg, 2002).

Many adult students are institutionally-excluded from learning advanced skills and knowledge because of limited writing and reading fluency. One especially vulnerable high-risk group consists of adults for whom English is not their native language. For these students, learning to write in a second language requires them to do double the work. For example, students for whom English is a second language have to focus on not only learning the course content, but also on learning the writing processes and skills required for communication in the English language. These adult learners, who are continuing their education, need to possess proficient reading and writing skills in English if they are to be successful in higher education settings. Crandall and Sheppard (2004) noted that one in four enrollees in community colleges falls in this category, and that the adult English as a Second Language (ESL) population is the largest and fastest-growing segment of adult education. In a national study, Tucker (2006) found that ESL courses are overcrowded, overbooked and generally unavailable to those most in need.

A second underserved adult population of students consists of nontraditional English speaking students who are returning to the higher education classroom; according to the National Center on Educational Statistics (2010), enrollment of students ages 25 and over increased by 42% between the years 2000 to 2010. These learners are frequently mis-served by direct instruction due to financial, family, career or learning style preferences. Kim, Sax, Lee, and Hagedorn (2010) noted that it is important to recognize the needs of these unique U.S. educated students, noting that their reasons for wanting to learn indicate high motivation and commitment, but require accommodations to instruction.

As a result of these needs, digital technology and media resources including webinars, tutorials, online assistance, and blended instruction, are being used to address nontraditional learner instruction. Newman and Murphy (2011) note the importance of these methods in meeting the ELA needs of “special” or “nontraditional” learners and providing preliminary success of media and digitally enriched instruction; the authors indicated, however, that further research on specific approaches and populations should be conducted.

To determine the overall impact of using technology to meet the needs of nontraditional students, learning and variables related to learning must be taken into account. In its broadest sense, learning is defined as acquiring new knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, or preferences and involves synthesizing different types of information (Mayer, 2001). Both learning style and learning self-efficacy serve as confounding variables that result in different approaches or ways of learning. When students also are learning in an unfamiliar setting, the role of these variables places even more demands on learner control; demands that may be magnified again when technology and multimedia are involved (Lee, 2000). Although much is known