Chapter 14
Critical Issues in Online Resourcing for International and Local Students’ Academic Writing

Rosemary Clerehan
Monash University, Australia

Ian Walker
Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the proliferation of web 2.0 modes of text production, the traditional essay or report remains a key component of learning and assessment in higher education. As such, it can pose problems for diverse cohorts of local and international students. In stage one of the current research with a large first-year marketing subject, a substantial proportion of students reported that they felt unprepared and did not fully understand the assessment requirements. Key issues identified were research, writing, and understanding assignment guidelines. The second stage involved the building of a website to address the identified needs and provide support, based on a contextualised view of writing as social practice. In stage three, students were surveyed to assess the helpfulness of the resources and the site was revised. It was concluded that, with appropriate research-based development, one resource can serve both international and local students, but questions remain regarding the future sustainability of such a resource.

INTRODUCTION

Some years after the adoption of the ‘student-centred learning’ mantra of the 1990s, web 2.0 technologies now provide learners and teachers alike with the necessary affordances (Prensky, 2001). Wiki writing, blogging and other new online environments allow the possibility of student-centredness becoming literally – or at least virtually – a reality in many universities worldwide. Imaginative teachers can build for learners communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) which have almost infinitely inter-connecting circles of networking capability via web 2.0. In the domain of student writing, the landscape has seemed to shift inexorably towards digital literacies, with...
collaborative and co-constructed work becoming commonplace (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Thompson, 2008; Gray, Thompson, Clerihan, Sheard & Hamilton, 2008). From this view, the traditional essay as an evaluation of student knowledge and understanding would appear to be becoming a creature of the past (Jones, 2007; Thompson, 2007; Traphagan, 2007). The drivers for these developments range from the sheer availability of the new technologies to the enthusiasm of web-savvy academics and the development of off-campus curricula, to the perceived requirements of the workplace (Collins, 2008). These shifts notwithstanding, it is likely that text-based forms of assessment of one kind or another will persevere. At our own university, a casual perusal of assignment tasks across fields of study suggests that the written assignment is persisting, and with it the need for students to understand and participate in the relevant disciplinary discourse.

This chapter reports on a project to provide academic writing support materials for students which was developed by the university’s then language and academic skills staff, Language and Learning Services, in cooperation with staff of the Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics. This project formed part of a larger university Strategic Innovations Grant. The aim of this part of the project was to identify and address the problems students were encountering with an assessment task in an introductory marketing subject, worth 25% of the total grade for the subject.

Over a number of years, the quality of the major marketing assignment submitted by the diverse cohort, as observed by the course coordinator and confirmed by tutors, was highly variable. Students were required to synthesize specific areas of marketing theory studied, apply the theory to a particular Australian industry and then apply it to two specific organizations. It was unknown whether the research and writing problems experienced by the large cohort of international students and by the majority local students were similar or not. The staff teaching the course wished to persevere with prescribing the task, but wanted to be able to identify the nature of historical problems identified from previous students’ perspectives so that suitable student-centred resources could be developed.

The chapter charts the trajectory of this substantial project, commencing with stage one wherein the issues of the two groups were identified by use of a survey of students; stage two which involved the development of the web resource; and stage three where a questionnaire on the resource’s usefulness completed the project loop. We assumed that the online support website would continue to be relevant to students’ needs, as we had based it on sound writing theory and researched it comprehensively. We also believed that written assignments would continue as an assessment requirement into the future. We had not expected that organisational and evolutionary curriculum change would raise questions about its role.

BACKGROUND

Whether face-to-face, online, or both, supportive learning environments which are sensitive to both the strengths and the weaknesses of learners’ ethno-cultural contexts will surely increasingly become a hallmark of quality higher education. In the case of online learning devised in Western institutions for diverse student audiences, the design models themselves, however, may be the product of a particular culture (Henderson, 1996). The dominant cultural literacy can unwittingly disadvantage a student if the curriculum materials lack sociocultural responsiveness (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003), to the point where there is potential for mediated education to become another form of neo-colonialism (Lauzon, 1999).

Academic integration and progress in a new educational context can be facilitated by all students feeling able to meet the learning and writing
Related Content

Online Metacognitive Reading Strategies by Internal and External Locus of Control
[www.igi-global.com/article/online-metacognitive-reading-strategies-by-internal-and-external-locus-of-control/210434?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/online-metacognitive-reading-strategies-by-internal-and-external-locus-of-control/210434?camid=4v1a)

Usability Evaluation of an Adaptive 3D Virtual Learning Environment
[www.igi-global.com/article/usability-evaluation-adaptive-virtual-learning/76371?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/usability-evaluation-adaptive-virtual-learning/76371?camid=4v1a)

Effects of Virtual Manipulatives on Student Achievement and Mathematics Learning
[www.igi-global.com/article/effects-of-virtual-manipulatives-on-student-achievement-and-mathematics-learning/95162?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/effects-of-virtual-manipulatives-on-student-achievement-and-mathematics-learning/95162?camid=4v1a)

The Online Seminar as Enacted Practice
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/online-seminar-enacted-practice/23881?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/online-seminar-enacted-practice/23881?camid=4v1a)