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Writing instruction online: 
a case study from a first year philosophy subject

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Abstract: The study reported in this paper investigated the effectiveness of an online academic writing resource available to first year philosophy students. Data used were questionnaire responses from users of the resource, as well as assignment grades collected from both users and non-users. The study’s findings suggest that the resource was generally useful for students. It was noted however, that it had a tangible benefit only for those who used it in a sustained way. The paper concludes with suggestions for how online academic writing resources might be utilised effectively on university programs.

Introduction

There is a general consensus in university education nowadays that courses of academic study need to involve more than just the teaching of disciplinary content. Students also need to be taught about the discursive means by which this content is communicated (Swales, 1990). For example, in a course in philosophy, students will ideally learn not only about the ideas of selected philosophers and schools of philosophical thought, but also about how they should go about researching and writing about these ideas.

The need to include teaching about academic discourse has seen the development of a number of curriculum models. These include ‘dedicated’, ‘adjunct’, and ‘integrated’ approaches (Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989). Briefly, the ‘dedicated’ approach involves writing instruction offered as a separate course of study, often for credit; the ‘adjunct’ approach involves writing instruction provided as extra sessions accompanying a content course; the ‘integrated’ approach involves writing instruction provided within a content course. A common problem however, with all approaches is that there is often so much content to get through in a course that the discourse issues can receive no more than superficial coverage (Taylor, 1994).

This research paper reports on an approach that has sought to deal with the problem of the ‘overcrowded curriculum’ by making writing materials available to students in an online format. The research was concerned with the issue of whether such an approach seems broadly to be an effective one; and if so, how it might be best implemented in academic programs. The specific research questions were as follows:

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i) Did students who made use of the online resource feel that they understood writing requirements in their subject better than those who did not?

ii) Did student users of the resource achieve better grades than non-users?

iii) How useful did users find the resource - including its different sections?

**The resource**

The online resource - called *Writing in subject areas* ([http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/subjects.html](http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/subjects.html)) - consists of self-instructional writing modules in ten first year subjects at Monash University (business law, economics, education, history, legal process, literature, management, marketing, philosophy and sociology). Each module is made up of three sections:

i) **Lecturers’ advice** consisting of information provided by lecturers about writing practices specific to the discipline. Topics covered are ‘citation practices’, ‘the nature of argumentation in the discipline’ etc.

ii) **Skills for writing** consisting of information and practice activities, covering a range of researching and writing processes in the discipline eg. ‘interpreting essay questions’, ‘structuring essays’ etc.

iii) **Sample assignments** consisting of a selection of past student essays in the subject, with both hyperlinked lecturer commentary on the work, and audio student protocols outlining how the essay was researched and written.

The present study investigated the responses of philosophy students to the module in that particular subject. Early in the semester, these students were told of the availability of the writing module and were encouraged to make use of it, especially if they were experiencing difficulty with the writing demands of the subject. Use of the resource was thus optional, but recommended. Those students who made use of it did so out of class hours. Of the different curriculum models mentioned above, such an application of the resource conforms most to the ‘adjunct’ model.

**Method**

Data in the study were questionnaire responses from students enrolled in the first year philosophy unit ‘Science, Religion and Witchcraft’ (PHIL 1010). Two questionnaires were used. One was distributed to all students in the subject (120) with a total of 65 returned (54%). In this questionnaire, respondents indicated whether or not they had accessed the writing resource and how much they felt they understood the writing requirements in the subject. The second questionnaire was distributed to those students who had accessed the resource prior to writing the main essay in the subject. Here respondents indicated the length of time spent on the resource, how useful they found the resource overall, and how useful they found each of the resource’s sections - ‘Lecturer advice’, ‘Skills for writing’ etc. On both questionnaires, students were also invited to provide responses of a qualitative nature. The grades students obtained on the main essay (those of both users and non-users of the resource) were also collected².

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1. Note the sample here was confined to those essays marked by a single tutor in the subject. Several other tutors also marked essays, but to avoid issues of inter-rater reliability, it was thought sensible
Results
The first question was concerned with how well students felt they understood what was required to successfully complete the main essay in the subject. Students rated their understanding on a Likert scale from 1 (not well at all) to 5 (very well). The different responses for users and non-users of the resource are shown in Table 1. A Mann-Whitney test between the two groups was carried out and found to be significant (\(p < .01\)). In other words, those students who made use of the resource felt they had a better understanding of the subject’s writing requirements than those who, for whatever reason, did not. This is an encouraging result, although a not altogether surprising one. In class time there was little explication by tutors of the subject’s writing requirements. Thus, the differences in perceived levels of understanding were between a group who were provided with minimal information about writing and a group who had access to quite comprehensive information about it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Significance levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-users (NU)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>NU&lt;U ((p = .002))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users (U)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A more telling question was the second one; that is, whether accessing of the resource translated into enhanced student performance on the essay task. Table 2.1 shows the comparative performance for user and non-user groups. It is interesting to note here that whilst a higher mean grade was recorded for the user group, a sample \(t\)-test (two-tailed) found this difference not to be significant (\(p = 0.098\)). Thus, on its own, accessing of the resource would appear not to have had a significant bearing on how well students wrote their essays.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean*</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Significance levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-users (NU)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>NU&lt;U ((p = 0.098))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users (U)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12.07</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Essays marked out of 20

It was thought useful however, to investigate the essay performance of the user group a little further. On the questionnaire distributed to this group, students were asked to indicate how long they spent using the resource. Thus, it was possible to distinguish between a Low User group (LU) spending up to 30 minutes on the resource, and a High User group (HU) spending more than 30 minutes. Comparative results for the three groups (NU, LU, HU) are shown in Table 2.2. A one-way ANOVA test was carried out and found to be significant (\(p < .05\)). A post hoc comparison of means was used to locate where the differences occurred. A Tukey test revealed significance at the 5% level between the NU group and the HU group, while confirming that the LU group did not differ significantly from the NU group. Thus, the decisive factor would appear to be not whether students used the resource or not, but whether they used it for a sufficient length of time for it to have any effect on their subsequent writing performance.

To draw on the results of only one marker. The group of students selected was from the tutor who had the highest number of student users of the resource.
Table 2.2: Comparison of performance on essay task by level of use of web resource

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Post hoc comparisons (Tukey)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-users (NU)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low users (LU)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.07</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High users (HU)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>HU &gt; NU (p&lt;0.05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings provide some evidence for the resource’s efficacy. The final investigation was concerned with finding out which sections of the resource seemed to students to be the most useful. As described above, the online resource is divided into three sections - ‘Lecturer’s advice’, ‘Skills for writing’, ‘Sample essays’. Students rated the usefulness of each section on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all useful) to 5 (very useful). An overall rating was also obtained by aggregating the means for the three sections. The different responses for Low users and High users of the resource are shown in Table 3. As can be seen, the resource was felt to be more useful by those students who used it longer (HU group). This is of course not a surprising result; indeed it is difficult to disentangle the dependent and independent variable in this relationship. If a student used the resource for an extended period and accessed a greater amount of information, one would expect them to find it more useful than those who engaged with it only briefly. Similarly, if a student found the resource to be useful, it follows that they would be inclined to use it for a longer period of time.

What was of principal interest in this part of the study was whether students identified any section(s) as particularly useful. As Table 3 shows, the low user group discriminated little in their assessment of the three sections. In contrast, the ratings of the high user group showed a greater spread, with the ‘sample essay’ section receiving the highest mean score. A Friedman test found the differences in the HU ratings to be just short of significant at the 5% level (p=.067). Paired comparisons were also made between section ratings from the LU and HU group using a series of Mann-Whitney tests. Of these comparisons, it was only the difference in the ratings for the ‘sample essay’ section that was significant (p=.005). These results - both the HU intra-group comparison and the LU-HU inter-group comparisons - suggest that the opportunity to view sample essays was seen by students as the most useful form of writing assistance.

Table 3: Comparison of rating of sections of web resource (Low users, High users)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Overall rating</th>
<th>Lecturer’s advice</th>
<th>Skills for writing</th>
<th>Sample essays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low users (LU)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High users (HU)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paired comparisons (Mann-Whitney) .073 .085 .261 .005*

* HU>LU p<0.05

Discussion

The results of the present study are encouraging, and suggest that online resources may be an effective way of providing students with discipline-specific writing
assistance. As noted, those students who made use of the resource felt they had a clearer understanding of writing requirements in the subject. Furthermore, those who worked on the resource for a more extended period achieved higher grades overall in their essays.

But any enthusiasm for this type of assistance needs to be measured against students’ qualitative assessments of the resource. Whilst a number of students recorded very favourable responses (It was most helpful, I found it extremely useful etc.), others struck a more sceptical tone. Apart from the inevitable technical problems in accessing the resource, students’ main criticisms were focussed on the online material operating as a substitute for in-class instruction by tutors. As one student noted - It was good, but would be better if the tutors themselves were able to provide advice on essay writing. Another student was more blunt - Less computer, more tutorial. Such responses to online methods of instruction are not uncommon. Kling and Hara (2000) for example, in an evaluative study of web-based distance education, note that students can often become frustrated from the difficulty of locating relevant information, as well as a lack of assistance from instructors (p.10).

The results of the study - both its quantitative and qualitative findings - suggest a number of implications for the use of online writing materials. The first is that if such resources are provided in courses, students need to be encouraged to engage with them in a comprehensive way. It has been noted that online interaction can often involve ‘fragmented’ and ‘unsustained’ engagement by users (Burbules, 1997). This seems to have been the case to some extent with the philosophy module, with half the students who accessed the resource doing so for no more than 30 minutes. As was noted, minimal benefit was derived from such limited use. One way of encouraging students to engage more extensively with materials would be to incorporate use of the resource into the assessment requirements in the subject.

A second implication, which follows on from the first, is that online writing assistance is less likely to be effective if it is presented to students as an element separate from the main teaching program. In other words, such materials are probably better utilised not within an ‘adjunct’ framework, but within a more ‘integrated’ one. Accordingly, there should be opportunity for consideration of the materials in the classroom (or other interactive settings), so that the specific concerns of students can be addressed directly.

A third implication is that if priority is to be given to any particular type of writing assistance, it should be that which focuses on samples of student writing. As mentioned, this was the section of the resource most valued by students. Such a response is consistent with the findings of much writing pedagogy research which suggests that exposure to and explication of appropriate generic models is often the most effective form of instruction for students (eg. Johns, 1997). Whilst such instruction is by no means dependent on an online environment, there would seem to be within the new educational technologies the potential to apply genre approaches in quite interesting and innovative ways.

In assessing the effectiveness of this form of writing instruction, the present study has relied on one particular methodology - namely the analysis of rating and score data.
from a self-selecting group. In further evaluative work, it would be interesting to apply a more 'experimental' approach, comparing the relative efficacies of online instruction with more traditional face-to-face modes (see Rohrbach and Stewart 1986, for an early example of this type of research). There are also a range of less quantitative methods that could be drawn on to good effect, including i) ‘observation’ and ‘protocol’ studies - to find out more about how students actually engage with such resources; ii) ‘textual analysis’ studies - to find out more about the ways in which this engagement might translate into actual writing practice (the ‘input and uptake’ question). These are important matters to investigate. With the increasing shift to forms of computer-mediated learning in universities, it is essential that decisions regarding their use be based as far as possible on informed understandings of their likely educational benefit.

References


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