

WWW: WEB- BASED WRITING WORKSHOP

FACILITATING ASSIGNMENT WRITING FOR ADULT LEARNERS
AT THIRD LEVEL.

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NAME OF MODULE: Online Learning Environments

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Introduction:

I studied for my Bachelor of Arts degree and Higher Diploma in Education, while working full-time. My career path has brought me in contact with mature students through distance education, lifelong learning and active-retired learners. The critical issues for these mature students are time-constraints, managing academic responsibilities with other commitments, gaining access to relevant information and support from fellow students and lecturers.

I have being a tutor and student-advisor for third level students through Distance Education in DCU. Many students are very daunted by their first task on entering third level. This is usually on the successful completion of an assignment. The educational question which I asked and researched was “How can mature students be facilitated in writing assignments through online learning?”

I used Moodle (Modular Object Dynamic Learning Environment) as an online medium to demonstrate the benefits of collaborative learning, which gives access to information for students.

The main focus for my research is:

- (1) To develop the use of on-line learning as an asynchronous form of learning suitable for adult students who have many other responsibilities.**
- (2) To design online learning in order to encourage students to become involved in a learning organisation which fosters support from other students, tutors or lecturers.**
- (3) To integrate the dissemination of knowledge, theories, experiential learning and knowledge construction through synchronous and asynchronous learning.**

My use of online learning is to create a Writing Workshop specifically designed

for assignment -writing. I called this “The Writing Toolkit.” This I consider to be a “Pilot” phase which has future potential.

DISCUSSION:

My own professional learning has been very much influenced by Dewey and Vygotsky. Both theorists uphold the Constructivist view that “people learn best not by assimilating what they are told but rather by a knowledge-construction process.” (Bielaczyc K & Collins A:272) Online learning is a medium which enables a “knowledge-construction process” to occur in a very student-friendly way. It fosters a culture for learning as students can log on at their ease.

Reigeluth (1996:5) looks at the need for “a paradigm of training and education in which the learner is at the top of the organizational chart rather than the bottom.” By recognising and accommodating the adult student’s environment, this puts the student “at the top...rather than the bottom.” Many part-time students are juggling other activities with study.

The use of the WEB as an asynchronous medium for learning, facilitates the learning needs and values the time restraints placed on mature students. It acknowledges the diversity of both the students and their learning needs.

Reigeluth’s says that “an instructional design theory is a theory that offers explicit guidance on how to better help people learn and develop. The kind of learning and development may include cognitive, emotional, social, physical and spiritual.” (1996:5) I have embraced some of these elements within the Web-Based Writing Workshop.

The group of students were the first-year students on the Masters in Education and Training Programme. The pilot scheme was introduced over a four week period in December and January. I initially sought a model by researching the Open University “First Class” Model. This is a web-site established by the OU to facilitate mature students in academic and assignment writing.

It has many helpful ideas and information with hypertext links to other relevant

pages. There is a conference facility which enables students to engage with fellow students in the transfer of useful texts, online papers and problem-solving queries. I spoke to a family member who frequently used this site as a “dip in/dip out” website depending on his own learning needs and educational requirements.

I adopted some of these elements for my workshop. For example Bullet-Points which encouraged a “dip in/dip out” facility which were visually clear and concise to read. I researched and evaluated quality contemporary resources which I believed would be very beneficial for the students. Crème P and Lea M (2003) have recently published a very useful textbook “Writing at University.” (Open University Press:2003).

I incorporated these within a variety of forum’s. I encouraged students to set up a Study Schedule online to organise the time available to them. I provided helpful hints and ideas through a Resource Forum. I integrated these resources as an integral part of The Writing Toolkit. There were approximately ten students who participated. I encouraged synchronous learning by providing the opportunity for students to communicate with each other through two chat sessions. I designed this forum to develop a learning organisation between the students.

O’Hara , J and McNamara, G define a learning organisation in Senges (1993) words as “a place where people are continually discovering how they can create and change their reality.” They say that “this reflects a learned attitude where learning is viewed as a lifelong and co-operative process which emerges from discussion and dialogue.” (2000:319)

The discussion and dialogue which developed and emerged from the two chat sessions proved very interesting as it provided the students with an opportunity to discuss the issues of concern for them while preparing for and writing their assignments . One student commented “I think these sessions can be very worthwhile. They are a great place to share ideas, and maybe get inspiration.”

(see Appendix). What is most significant is that they were actively engaged in a “learning organisation” through this forum. Although I was the facilitator, my learning was also very much as a student. I could empathise with the issues voiced by them and try to enhance the collaborative learning process by drawing on my own experience.

The blend of cognitive learning with social interaction was part of the overall intended design .I wished to adopt the model of the IT Schools 2000 outlined in Charlotte Holland’s paper(DCU Conference Proceedings:1998)which is to “improve the quality of the educational experience by providing rich, exciting and motivating environments for learning.”(1998:105)

I integrated quotations and advice as a way of bringing to online learning the usual dialogue which occurs in tutorial/lecture groups and also as a way to inspire students who can feel isolated through the use of online learning. I used Oscar Wilde s humorous quote “I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never any use to oneself” (Parker:2001) as a way of using humour to make students feel at ease with this new medium. This also had the intended aim of making the learning “rich, exciting and motivating.”

CONCLUSION

The learning outcomes are very interesting as a result of this project. It required me to work collaboratively with my fellow students in second year. This occurred when I wrote in The Learning Journal regards my intention to set up this online Writing Workshop. The response was very positive and it provided very useful ideas as to what should be included. Most significantly, through the use of WebCT, the participants on the second year of the programme were able to contribute to the learning process for first year students through their suggestions and ideas.

My own enquiry has moved forward. I have designed The Writing Toolkit, I

would like to develop it as a very beneficial medium for mature students. What initially started out as an idea has now become a reality. I have reflected on the potential of the Web-based Writing Workshop for mature students. It enables them to access third level courses with ease and to show they are valued by accommodating their needs.

The chat forum lends itself to the development of students collaborative learning and the enriched experience of evolving into a learning organisation . In Kahlil Gibran's words "Knowledge is a light, enriching the warmth of life, and all may partake who seek it out." (Wolf:1974) The use of the Writing Toolkit would enhance the confidence of mature students to start and successfully complete their assignment.

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**SEE APPENDIX ATTACHED WHICH IS A HARD COPY OF THE CHAT
SESSION FOR THE 11TH DECEMBER 2003 (WRITING WORKSHOP
SESSION).**