A contextualised online writing support system: Creating the links between generic skills and the discipline

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This paper describes an ongoing research and development project aimed at providing contextualised, individualised online writing support for postgraduate students. It is the result of a collaboration between UK and NZ academics who share similar challenges and concerns. The massification of higher education globally means that many tertiary students drawn from non traditional or second language backgrounds struggle to master the academic literacy requirements of particular discipline areas. These writing difficulties can, and often do, impact negatively on their academic success. Universities attempt to address this problem by providing online generic resources for students. Unfortunately research indicates that students are not successful in transferring generic concepts to their own discipline. We are attempting to devise an online programme where lecturers will be able to draw on these generic resources and, following models provided, construct a link between the specific and the generic in their own discipline area.

Background

There have been many changes in higher education over the past decades and one of the most influential of these factors has been the massification of institutions (Guri-Rosenblit, _ebková& Teichler, 2007; Tynjälä, Välimaa & Sarja, 2003). At the start of the 20th century there were only half a million students worldwide in tertiary institutions as opposed to the approximately 100 million at the start of this century (Guri-Rosenblit, _ebková & Teichler, 2007). Massification has brought with it many challenges not the least of which is the difficulties students face in demonstrating their knowledge and insights in academia. Goodfellow (2004) notes that although the world is beginning to embrace multimodal literacies, at tertiary institutions literacy practices are, for the most part, in writing. Students for whom the language of instruction is not their home tongue, and others drawn from non-traditional backgrounds are probably most at risk but lecturer unease with student academic writing is focused on students in general.

In order for students to make the most of their educational opportunities they need to master the genre requirements of their subjects and discipline areas. Subject-based teachers, however, often do not have the time nor the expertise to support students in developing their writing. One solution employed by universities has been to use generic workshops or lectures or courses on academic literacy. In these, skills such as 'writing the Literature Review', and 'writing the Conclusion' are addressed. Students are then expected to take this generic knowledge and apply it to their own discipline area. This has proved problematic. Lea and Street (1998) argue that writing in the academy is strongly contextualised and certain ways of writing are acceptable in certain disciplines but not in others. Concepts such as structure and argument are not "generic and transferable" (ibid., p.162) but rather specific to a certain discipline. James (2009) in his research on writing courses at universities attempted to stimulate the transfer of this generic genre knowledge by asking students to focus on the similarities between the generic and the specific. He found that despite raising student awareness they had little success in applying the concepts of the writing courses to their own practices. Current research (Lea & Street , 1998, Hyland, 2002) indicates strongly that discipline-specific writing instruction is far more beneficial to students than generic courses. Students need assistance to move towards the independent application of the writing conventions governing the particular genre of their discipline area.

However such a discipline specific approach is costly as it is labour intensive. To complicate matters further more and more universities are moving toward online teaching (and two of the current authors work at a university where most teaching takes place in a distant or online environment) where students are not able to attend generic workshops let alone discipline specific offerings.

Using online facilities to teach writing is not a new phenomenon (Harris and Pemberton, 1995), and these facilities are, of course, ideally suited to online or distance students. Wingate and Dreiss (2009) note that the creation of such a course is labour intensive but that once it is completed maintenance is not as demanding. However such centres offer the same generic advice found in face to face writing support. Wingate and Dreiss (2009, A-14) argue that while the discipline specific and the online approaches to teaching academic literacy are not new "a combination of both seems rare". There are however a few researchers who have attempted to address the issue of discipline specific academic literacy in an online environment (Clerehan, Kett and Gedge 2003;Goodfellow, 2005; Wingate and Dreiss ,2009) Clerehan et al. developed a Web based academic literacy tutorial for first year computer science students. while Wingate and Dreiss designed a course for Pharmacy students. Goodfellow described an outline academic writing resource developed to support masters-students.

The online environment can contribute to the development of more contextualised writing support by bringing together a wide variety of resources from different contexts into a repository that users can search for materials that are adaptable to their own specific needs. There are many excellent generic online resources for academic writing support (see , for example, the 'Online Writing Labs' at Purdue University http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/, and the Chinese writing centre http://www.cc.nctu.edu.tw/~tedknoy/html/lla_eng.html). But as we have noted, students may have difficulties in the transfer of the concepts addressed in these resources to their own areas of study. What is missing is a link between the student's context and the generic advice. If, instead of asking students to construct such links for themselves, teachers could select the ones relevant to their own teaching, and then record the ways in which they have applied them to the writing tasks their own students are engaged in, then over time the repository would become more contextually relevant. If it were possible to support lecturers in doing this relatively easily, and to accumulate the selected resources together with information about their application to course and/or subject-specific contexts, in a searchable database, both lecturers and students would eventually have a large support resource on which to draw.

In this we are following the model of the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement (see the OER commons at http://www.oercommons.org/) which is attempting to open up online access to learning resources which have previously been restricted to internal students at colleges and universities across the world. Currently, OER Commons has 25 entries under 'academic writing', linking to a variety of sources including: MIT OpenCourseware, the Connexions repository, and the Open University's OpenLearn initiative. Many of these resources are descriptive of approaches to academic writing, rather than materials to assist in its development, and most are specific to courses in the social sciences and sciences. Whilst such contextualisation is potentially useful for our project, the lack of support for adapting or developing the materials to alternative contexts renders them unsuitable for our purposes. The Open University's OpenLearn project labspace (http://labspace.open.ac.uk/) provides tools and structures to help users adapt materials that have been produced in other contexts, but the repository currently contains only 2 resources focused on academic writing: 'Essay and report writing skills', a 15 hour course (http://labspace.open.ac.uk/course/enrol.php?id=3460) and 'Effective use of English', a 10 hour course (http://labspace.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=5182). Self-contained courses such as these do not lend themselves to speedy application to specific learner problems either.

As we have already noted, there are a lot of writing support materials freely available on the internet. A free text google search under "academic writing", however, produces very many sites, mainly focused on EAP and ESL learners, offering free exercises and other materials from a variety of providers, including LearnHigher, Hong Kong Poly, Victoria University of Wellington, the University of Sussex and the University of Melbourne to name only a few. It is therefore on this dispersed repository of online writing support that we are focusing, looking for ways to assist teachers (in the first instance) to identify specific resources that are useful in their own teaching contexts, and attempting to design a system that will enable them to return the adapted resources they have found useful, to a developing repository of semi-contextualised materials.

The development of the support system

This is the background of an ongoing research and development project which involves collaboration between three lecturers at two very different universities. All three work at postgraduate level, primarily on programmes with an education focus. The first author is based in New Zealand at an institution which was granted university status at the beginning of the millennium. The main business of the university remains face to face teaching but there is rapidly growing interest in the online environment and a move to blended learning is being strongly encouraged. The other authors are employed at a very large and established British university where the core business is distance learning. The authors all share the conviction that a discipline-specific approach to academic writing is essential if students are to understand and successfully incorporate the literacy conventions governing their particular discipline areas.

The project is focusing on the problem of customising the wide range of resources and materials for academic writing support that are available on the internet as open educational resources (OERs), to the specific requirements of students and teachers working on specific courses at Masters level

We set out to test the feasibility of this proposal in a project entitled "Contextualised Online Writing Support" (COWS), focused on online Masters courses in Education and Distance Learning . We consulted with course developers and tutors to identify the issues and problem areas in academic writing which the materials would need to address, and to describe the way in which these materials could be employed by lecturers and students. We agreed that the process would have two stages: firstly, a core of 'universal' (generic) online resources would be assembled, focused on an agreed set of issues or problem areas affecting students' writing on these courses; and secondly, the generic resources would be integrated with sample texts taken from course materials, students' essays, and other sources of writing on the courses in question.

Evidence that lecturers perceive Masters students to be increasingly challenged by the conventions of academic writing on these courses was provided by a survey carried out by Puxley (2008). 91 tutors on Education masters courses were asked about their perceptions of the academic writing problems and needs of the student cohort. The issues they identified ranged from the linguistic ('inappropriate lexical choices', 'not full sentences'), to the conventional ('problems with reference list and in-text citations', 'inappropriate genre'), to the epistemological ('questions/ assignment topic incorrectly interpreted', 'too great a reliance on personal experience'). These issues and problems provide us with one 'view' on to the database of resources. Clearly it would be useful for both lecturers and students to be able to search for material that addressed a specific problem, and for the material they found to be linked in a meaningful way to texts from the course or subject in which the problem had arisen.

The first step in making a connection between problem and resource was to categorise the long list of problems under a smaller number of 'core topic'. 11 such headings were developed, as follows:

- 'Answering the Question'
- Academic Vocabulary
- Argument
- Critical Evaluation
- Cultural Difference
- Quoting, Referencing & Attribution
- Sentence Structure
- Style & Register
- Summarising and Paraphrasing
- Thematic structure
- Voice

These core topics are not exhaustive – they reflect a decision to focus, for the moment, on higher level issues of discursive writing thought to be more appropriate for Masters teaching. Each topic together with its specific set of issues and problems was then indexed to a set of items of generic advice and support related to problems categorised under that topic, found via a search through existing study and writing support resources inside and outside the university courses under investigation. A bank of text extracts (contexts) from the course materials was assembled , and a number of short 'explanations' were written, which used the contexts as exemplification for the problems addressed in the resources. These components: problem list, topic categories, resource lists, context texts, were then mounted on a website,

which also had facilities for users to upload new contexts and explanations and link them to the resources, and to comment on the contents of each page in the site. (See Figure 1)

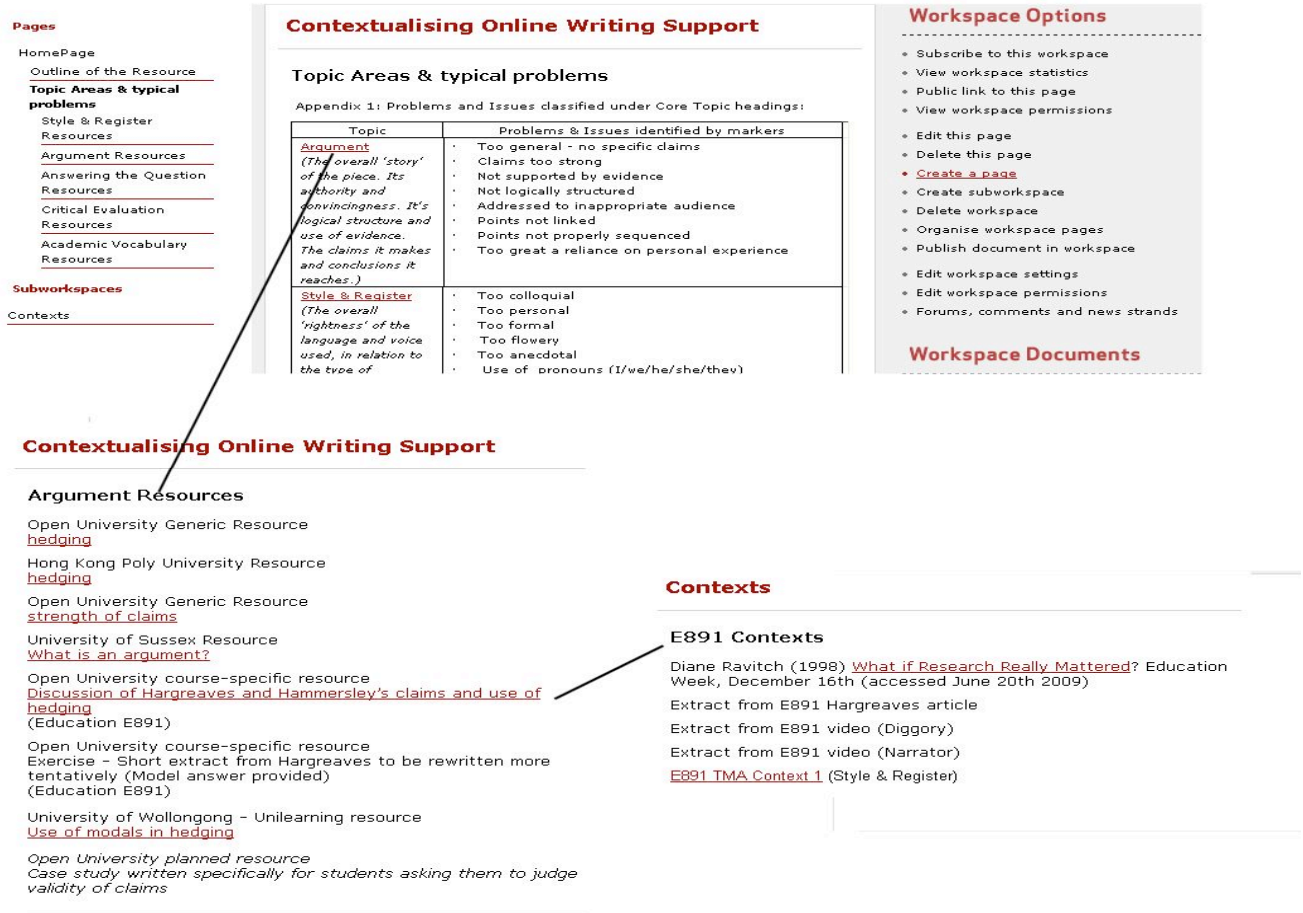

Figure 1: The COWS system

The trialling of the system

This system is being piloted on three online Masters courses in Education and Distance Learning in the Autumn of 2009. The pilot is intended to establish the kinds of use that the teams, lecturers and students would require from such a system, and the functionality it needs in order to support the incremental growth that the model envisages.

Researchers such as Wingate and Dreiss (2009) have concluded that online subject specific repositories were successful in increasing students' awareness of the writing conventions necessary for their course. However, Wingate and Dreiss also conclude that support additional to self-access online materials is needed for students to become literate in their discipline. Therefore, in addition to providing online course and generic support materials for students to access it was decide to focus on the following areas :

1. Course teams producing course-specific advice on writing and support for student writing activity, in study and assignment guides and websites
2. Lecturers exploring generic support resources for ideas on supporting students' writing
3. Lecturers giving students course-specific advice on writing in assignment feedback

Following an evaluation of the pilot, the system will be developed around a number of use scenarios that encapsulate the advantages of bringing together open generic resources with contextualised explanations and supporting the development of a database of examples generated by users. For example: one scenario might be where a tutor is marking a student's essay and has identified several issues which they need to give feedback on. By selecting the relevant issue in the database and locating a set of resources that have been identified as relevant to that issue, for that course, the feedback can be enhanced automatically with

a list of links to these resources, that the student can follow independently. The tutor's feedback and the extracts from the student essay could then be added to the database for future users who are working in related subject areas or on similar writing tasks.

The pilot study will be discussed in greater detail in the presentation.

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Please cite as: Strauss, P., Goodfellow, R. & Puxley, M. (2009). A contextualised online writing support system: Creating the links between generic skills and the discipline. In *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009*. https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2009.2250