OWls in Flight: Online Writing Labs for Distance Learning

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Abstract

The online writing lab (or OWL) has emerged in the past decade as a major use of technology for the student; however, rarely does it serve the distance learner.

This paper considers (1) the needs of distance learners for academic support systems, (2) the failure of these services to be extended to technology-dependent students, and (3) the advantage of technology-mediated writing tutorials over face-to-face tutorials.

This topic demonstrates one instance in which technology-mediated instruction is advantageous, not compensatory, for distance students. It feeds a major concern (writing competence) in many schools as seen in remedial programs and Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives.

1. Introduction

Online writing labs (OWLs) provide composition tutoring that is directly related to course work and academic writing. OWL web sites offer handouts, style and grammar guides, and links to reference works. The Purdue University OWL has almost 4000 such pages; however, tutoring to individuals who cannot, or choose not to, access face-to-face services is the heart of the OWL. In the past 20 years, composition pedagogy and electronic communication have advanced in complimentary ways. Yet, most OWLs serve on-campus students and neglect distance education. This paper reports on the OWL phenomenon, considers the failure to expand OWLs to technology-mediated situations, and seeks to encourage OWLs for distance learning.

2. Need

Distance education students tend to fall into two groups: sophisticated adults continuing their learning and the educationally disadvantaged, who are marginalized by geography, part-time study, family and employment duties, and poor experiences in formal education. Such learners enter distance programs to change those experiences, yet cannot access the on-campus support systems (academic advising, study skills, adequate library services). Karuth [1] and Bates [2] argue that technology-based programs must integrate support services. The writing lab is a primary support for students, introducing the tacit conventions of academic, professional, and business communication.

3. Writing and Computers

Most writers build judgement and improve manuscripts through comments from readers and editors. Computers offer a convenient mechanism for this feedback and revision. While electronic communication no more ensures academic literacy than blackboards guarantee good lectures, computers encourage activities that were previously cumbersome: peer reading, co-authoring, tutor embedded comments.

Although the visual and interactive possibilities of technology are often emphasized, text continues to assert its power. Andrew Feenberg, a pioneer of internet education, has reflected on this phenomenon:

Could it be that our earliest experiences with computer conferencing were not merely constrained by the primitive equipment then available, but also revealed the essence of electronically mediated education…For after all these years, the exciting online pedagogical experiences still involve human interaction and for the most part these continue to be text based. [3]

In the 1980s, composition theory rejected the atomized knowledge of behaviourism (drillpads and programmed materials) to focus on the writing process. More recently, constructivist pedagogy emphasizing audience and communication has become popular. OWLs apply these pedagogies, through electronic networks, to concentrate on the interactive tutorial.

4. Distance Education

OWLs develop from strong on-campus writing centres, rather than distance technology initiatives. The UK Open University provides “English Effectiveness” Web pages, but no interactivity or messaging. Canada’s Athabasca University offers online writing courses for credit only. Deakin University in Australia supplies students with an essay writing video. In the U.S., some schools (such as Texas Tech) built OWLs for non-traditional and distance students, but dropped the off-campus service.

I have found only two services aimed at distance students and only one article discussing distance delivery.
The sole documented effort, at the University of Alaska, uses NetMeeting, for which students must book lab time at a regional centre—far from ideal for independent learners in remote locales. Unfortunately, “student interest and retention have languished...[and] the on-site computer support staff is often learning NetMeeting with the student” [4].

The reasons for this neglect are murky, but I can suggest possibilities: (1) both distance education and writing labs are marginalized and shy away from alliances with those similarly positioned; (2) both writing centre and distance students are somewhat suspect in the academy, thought of as unprepared or uncommitted and therefore undeserving of special effort; (3) the great success in technology-based learning has been professional continuing education, which can require minimum competencies; (4) academic support for distance learners is meager—without equal bridging programs, an essential goal of education. Thus, writing instruction offers only lip service to writing with acumen.

But the minimalist technology used in OWLs makes an accessible, communicative application of an essential goal of education. Thus, writing instruction benefits from grounded pedagogy, relevant student practice, and accessible technology.

This article is based on a technical report, Wired Writing: Issues in Electronic Writing Labs, which can be found at www.extension.usask.ca/Staff/Spore/final%20Wired.pdf.

6. Conclusions

An OWL demands resources and commitment without many assurances. It merges the difficulties of distance learning—missing physical cues and spontaneity, onerous preparation and self-discipline, organizational and personal adjustments—with the imperfections of writing centres—learner confusion, inadequate time; a culture that offers only lip service to writing with acumen. The isolation of reading and typing a response seems to encourage reflection.

As we all know, email is replete with poor phrasing, awkward grammar, and typographical errors; it resembles early drafts more than a finished text. By asking for, and commenting within, electronic drafts tutors can enter the writing process rather than comment on the (literal) margins. Papers can become communication, rather than the display of knowledge and the conventions that we usually see in the academy. If we want students to revise, perhaps every composition need not be judged by a single standard.