

Contextualising Generic Online Academic Literacy Support: towards an open resource for student writers and their teachers.

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Literacy Support: towards an open resource
for student writers and their teachers

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Collaboration between OU FELS & IET and AUT looking at creating a resource to support academic writing on online Masters courses.
(The cow will be explained later!)

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Online Distance Learning at OU & AUT

Learners:

Part-time (12-20 hours a week)
Very diverse, including NNS

Tutors:

Part-time (6-12 hours a week)
Subject-specialists

Tutor groups:

12-15 learners per tutor
Almost never meet except through email and online forums

Assignments:

In printed (or online) study guides
2 weeks to mark - 2000-word assignment takes 30-60 mins
Tutor writes in-text comments on the assignment itself
The grade, together with feedback, sent back to the learner online

Writing development:

With other study skills on generic websites

Some characteristics of the context:

Part-time learners – many ages, many backgrounds
NNS – not beginners

Part-time tutors – Education and Adult Literacy/Numeracy
Not writing specialists

Very little time for actual teaching
Encourage peer collaboration

6 + written assignments – essay, reports etc.
Little time to mark – focus on subject content
Feedback given in writing

No time for writing support – considered less important at M level.
Generic university study skills sites mainly targeted at UGs.

So what's the problem?

Informally known across the U's Masters courses that writing is an issue – because of high proportions of learners with occupational and non-academic backgrounds, and NNSs.

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A survey of OU Masters in Education tutors' perceptions of student writing needs. Marianne Puxley (Open University) July 2008 (N=91)

4-5 learners per tutor group identified as having difficulties with 'expression suitable for masters level' essays and reports (approx 30%)

3 learners per tutor group were identified as having difficulties with 'basic written English'

64% said learner problems with basic English and Academic writing meant that Tutors have to spend extra time on marking and written feedback.

Marianne's survey set out to formalise this.
Tutors on MEd courses (about 170) sent survey asking for perceptions of support needs for student writing – 91 Responses

Main findings:

30% of learners considered to need additional support (about 600 learners)

Majority of these diagnosed as problematic re: basic written English: sentence structure, grammar & syntax, spelling, vocabulary...

These problems cause marking & feedback to take longer – distract from subject-focused feedback.

Almost all thought that learners should be put through a course in EAP that was specifically tailored to the MEd, either before coming onto the programme, or in parallel with it. This was included in the survey report's recommendation to the Faculty.

Guess what the Faculty said?

~~93% thought that a structured course in EAP specifically tailored to the OU Masters in Education programme would be helpful.~~

No time to make it

Too expensive

Learners won't do it

...send them to the study skills website

They did respond to the complaint from the MEd course teams that the study skills sites were too generic/wrong level by setting up a little research project based around some work that I was doing with Pat Strauss – visiting academic from AUT – looking at ways of using the open educational resources on academic writing that can be found all over the internet, tailored for all sorts of levels and all sorts of subject-areas. Our approach was founded on EAP research that has foregrounded the importance of the 'specificity' of writing contexts (Hyland 2002), as opposed to the generality of universal writing 'standards', in determining the characteristics of successful writing in those contexts. Specificity includes features such as: disciplinary conventions, learner characteristics, and reader community

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Research questions for this project:

Tutors' assessments of learners' writing problems are intuitive and not informed by specialist insight. Rhetorical and communicative issues (such as register, voice, orientation to audience and subject etc.) are often confused with 'basic English' ones (syntax, vocabulary etc.). The tutors need help in diagnosing learner's problems in relation to the specific task they are engaged in (rather than in terms of generalities such as 'cannot write a proper sentence'), in describing these problems back to the learner, and knowing what kind of support materials to recommend for specific problems.

In the absence of the time and funds to create writing courses tailored to a specific subject programme, we need to find ways to utilise the generic resources that are available, both inside and outside our own university intranets, in a more contextualised way – to match bits of those generic websites and collections of materials to the specific problems that the tutors are identifying, on the fly. This implies a database of links to online resources, with individual links indexed to the specific kinds of writing problem that tutors are identifying, so that the tutors are able to lay their hands very quickly on support materials that are relevant to the specific problem in hand.

Once tutors have at their disposal support materials that are at least broadly relevant to a specific learner's problems in a specific task, they then need to encourage the learner to use these materials, and help them to focus more closely on what they can expect to get out of it. The materials therefore become the focus of feedback aimed at raising the learner's awareness of the nature of the problem, rather than as a kind of punishment or remedy.

Every application of a specific support resource to a specific learner problem creates an opportunity for an enriched description of the context. Not only 'who the learner is', 'what is the task', 'what kind of problem are they having', but also 'what support have they been given', and ultimately 'how they responded' and 'how useful the resource was'. The next time this teacher, or another on a similar course elsewhere, identifies a similar problem, such an enriched context description could make it even easier to find a relevantly contextualised resource. How can we ensure that every individual's experience can enhance the collective wisdom available?

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And so we come to the cows!



The COWS resource is an interface to a selection of open-access writing support materials currently provided on the internet by universities and writing centres around the world.




They are an acronym for the project: Contextualised Online Writing Support.

A website that makes links between 11 (currently) 'topic areas' of student writing problems derived from the descriptions given by the tutors who responded to M's survey - and small sets of generic 'resources': links to individual pages on writing support websites that we have initially assessed as potentially relevant to these kinds of problems as experienced by learners on M courses in Education-related subject areas (22 in total).

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General Academic Writing topic	Particular student's problems	Resources to refer them to
Argument Style & Register Academic vocabulary Critical evaluation Quoting, referencing & attribution Summarising and paraphrasing Sentence structure Thematic structure 'Assessing the question' Cultural & linguistic differences Voice		

The general topic areas are linked to the generic resources by lists of 'typical problems' for each topic.

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General Academic Writing topic	Particular student's problems	Resources to refer them to
Argument The overall 'story' authority convincingness logical structure use of evidence claims made conclusions reached		

For example: for the 'Argument' topic – (glossed as you can see) – particular problems identified as follows..

General Academic Writing topic	Particular student's problems	Resources to refer them to
Argument The overall 'story' authority convincingness logical structure use of evidence claims made conclusions reached	Claims too general – Claims too strong – Sweeping statements. Too great a reliance on personal experience Argument not logically structured Points not linked Points not properly sequenced Claims not supported by evidence Addressed to inappropriate audience	Open University Generic: hedging Open University course-specific (MA Education) Claims and use of hedging University of Sussex Generic: What is an argument? University of Melbourne Generic: Quiz on essay structure.

Tutors should be able to look at the particular assignment they are marking, and which they think is problematic, and make a judgment about which of these 'types' of problem they are looking at.

The resources available to help address the problems identified are then accessed via the links given.

2 OU resources (requiring OU IDs) + 2 open access ones

One of the OU ones is course-specific – written for this course, the other is on the generic study skills website.

Similar small sets of resources identified for each of the 11 topic areas.

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Evaluating the COWS



Do the Tutors find it useful ?

Would they incorporate it into their teaching and marking practice?

How do they think this might best be done?

Pilot: 3 OU tutors on MEd foundation course
November 2009 paid for 1 day extra when marking
TMA01 (an essay about Educational Research)

2 hour online audio focus group with the 3 tutors
and 2 other interested tutors (June 2010)

Evaluation (proof of concept) via a small pilot study aiming to find out how COWS might be incorporated into OU tutor practice.

MEd tutors asked to add 1 day to their marking time for 1st assignment to explore the COWS resources, consider their relevance to the work they were marking, and complete a feedback form for each learner they had used the resource with, to be returned to us:

1. Look through the **Problems** column in the feedback form and familiarise yourself with the problem types. Whilst you are marking the assignment look for any of these problems.
2. explore the links relevant to that problem set, in the **Resources** column
3. Make a decision whether to send any of these links to the student, with advice on using the material to help develop their writing.
4. Note in the **Comment** column whether you will send any of these links to the student.
5. Make a note of any response you get from students to whom you have sent links to these resources
6. use the **'add a comment'** facility for open-ended comments

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Tutor	Argument	Style & Register	Critical Evaluation	Summarising & Paraphrasing	Quoting, Refs & Attribution	Resources recommended
CP	Claims too strong (3)	Too personal (1)			Technical problems with reference list and in-text citations (4) No referencing (1)	Open University hedging Academic Editing Service Incorporating the words of others University of Melbourne Academic Style
LG	Not logically structured (2) Points not properly sequenced (1)	Too colloquial (1) Too personal (2)	Only one viewpoint presented	Inadequate summary (1) Over reliance on quotes (1) main points of a text not identified (1)		University of Sussex What is an argument? University of Melbourne Academic Style Coventry University Integrating sources, summarising and paraphrasing Monash University Paraphrasing and summarising
JB	Not logically structured (1) Points not linked (1) Points not properly sequenced (1)					-

Collating their returned f/b forms:

1 tutor did not find the time to do it – 3 learners considered - all under Argument topic

Other 2 addressed 18 problems for 12 learners. Both identified problems under Argument and Style & Register. Each identified problems under Quoting and Critical Evaluation and

Summarising. These 2 identified 6 useful resources (both using Uni of Melbourne Academic Style site).

Open-ended comments provided examples of tutors' insight into the nature of the problems they were identifying, and the means they used to feed their recommendations back to the learners.

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In-text comments (written on student's assignment)

This sounds a bit bold and it is important to suggest or propose. You would probably find the following link interesting in developing a tentative tone
http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/activities/english/hedging_or_using_language_cautiously.htm

Open-ended comments on Evaluation feedback form

I wanted to get across adding to a body of knowledge
I wanted to get her to use the breadth of her sources to support her ideas. My in-text comment linked the student to the OU Masters Handbook and to Monash University generic resource [Why do we reference?](#)

Both tutors gave us examples of the kinds of thing they wrote as in-text comments in the learners' assignments. Here is one addressing the problem of a writing style that she considered 'too bold'. This tutor gave the recommended resource link in the in-text comments. The other saved the links up and gave them altogether on the summative feedback form.

This signaled an important issue for us re: the way that these recommended links can best be a) communicated to the student, and b) recorded as useful, by both tutor and student.

Both tutors commented helpfully in the evaluation feedback form, on their reasons for recommending a particular resource to the students. In this case, a wider contextual issue around the role of sources in social scientific research is being raised – this is the kind of crossover between writing and subject-related issues that we wanted to pinpoint.

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Summarising findings from the pilot & focus group

Most of the learners required 1 or 2 interventions needing additional resources - if tutor had to provide customised additional help for all these students it would be very time-intensive. COWS should help with this

Importance of knowing the content of the resources in advance in order to contextualise, even then had to continually check focus (5 mins per resource)

Time issues (10 mins to find a link on referencing, 8 mins to decide between 2 links on Hedging, 'took forever' to check appropriacy of 2 resources on Hedging and Academic Writing etc.)

Increased familiarity would reduce time needed

Our summary of the findings from this little project focuses on the issues that impact most on the likelihood of us getting any more funding from the OU to continue this work.

We believe that there is some evidence that this resource would be useful for many tutors and learners on the MEd – it fills a gap.

However, there is a workload issue for the tutors arising from their perceived need to know all the resources themselves before they recommend them to learners, in order to pick the best one for the context.

These tutors would want more familiarity with the overall set of resources in order to be able to deploy them quickly.

There is a tension between providing too many resources (which will take the tutor time to check for suitability to context) and too few (which might mean that the tutor doesn't find a resource appropriate to the particular problem).

This is the issue that we would most like to address through an open educational resources approach: would a tutor need to be personally familiar with a particular resource, if they could see that it had been used successfully by other tutors addressing similar learners' problems in similar contexts? Suppose another tutor on the same course has rated a particular section of the University of Melbourne 'Academic Style' resource as 'excellent for addressing the need to write more tentatively' – would you need to assess it yourself before you recommended it? Suppose it was another MEd tutor in another university's course that had made the recommendation? What if there were ratings attached to this particular resource from M students in other parts of the world, but with similar language and cultural backgrounds?

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The Future for COWS?

Opening out the resources to global access:
<http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/workspace.cfm?wpid=9178>

The website: design wish-list:

- More attractive design
- Support the creation of permanent pages of links for individual users
- Systems for annotating and rating resources to help selection for particular contexts

Further research on subject-based tutors' approach to learners' writing problems:

Bid to British Council ELTRPA to research COWS at OU and AUT



What is the future for COWS?

Working on opening existing OU-specific resources (licensed from Southampton) to general access – or replacing them - so that AUT can run a pilot

Developing the website (unfinished and very much a pilot)

Researching the underlying pedagogy

Reference:

Hyland, K. (2002) Specificity revisited: how far should we go now? *English for Specific Purposes*, 21, 385-395.