Innovative Ideas to Facilitate a Modern Approach to Writing

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Abstract

With the expansion of digital tools developed for language learning environments, new instructional practices are available that enable students to engage in more robust writing experiences. In the following paper, several instructional practices are introduced that enhance learning in a university level writing course. Digital tools such as Google Docs and Google Drive are highlighted to create better feedback opportunities; ones that allow students and teachers to be more efficient and collaborative when commenting on essays. Other digital tools like Google Hangouts and e-rubrics can be used to minimize misunderstandings on what is being evaluated, and build better rapport during teacher-student conferences. Lastly, online reflective journals are introduced to illustrate how students and teachers can participate in a community of learning and inform each other to minimize redundancy and create better learning opportunities. If teachers can incorporate digital tools that encourage their learners to develop digital literacy skills, a more efficient and accessible learning environment can be created for students.

With digital tools and electronic resources becoming increasingly pervasive and influential (Buckingham, 2008), there is a high pedagogical need for students to develop digital literacy skills. Digital literacy not only refers to the technical competencies and the ability to think critically about information, it includes the awareness, attitude, and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and synthesize digital resources. This allows learners to construct new knowledge, be more expressive, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations; and to reflect on the learning process (Martin, 2005). The pedagogical endeavor of attending to digital literacies in the classroom is to integrate technology into instruction, and, more importantly, to mentor students to create rich learning systems. The purpose of this essay is to explore how English language teachers can enhance reading and writing instruction in a university-level writing course by offering instructional practices that integrate digital tools.

Digital tools offer the opportunity to change the nature of writing instruction. Sadly, much of this technology is being used to facilitate low-level tasks such as posting syllabi, distributing class materials, or administering exams (Cummings, Bonk, & Jacobs, 2002). The focus of this paper is not to deter teachers from using a traditional method of instruction or using technology to complete simple tasks, but to introduce the current innovations, or "outliers" in digital technology that have revolutionized education and created a new kind teaching methodology - one that can no longer be ignored.

Changing of the Guard

Digital technologies can significantly influence how teachers and students exchange writing assignments and collaborate inside and outside of class. The availability of digital tools, in fact, is making the traditional brick-and-mortar style of submitting assignments in face-to-face settings or via mailboxes appear outdated and inefficient. For instance, teacher offices or essay repositories are typically located in buildings removed from the center of learning. For students to drop off or pick up their essays, they would have to travel to remote locations. This can be a time-consuming endeavor and a disadvantage to those who do not live on or near campus. Also, numerous issues can arise if a physical mailbox system is used. This arrangement lends itself to students losing or not ever receiving their essays, which can result in complications and disputes about grades. Finally, the paper-based approach makes it difficult for students to collaborate in peer groups outside of the physical classroom environment, as it requires problematic scheduling arrangements.

Electronic services, notably Google Apps for Education, are now available in Japan that can improve time management and create more opportunities for collaboration. First, instead of relying on a paper-based approach to submitting essays, instructors can use Google Docs, an Internet-based application in which files and documents can be created, edited, and saved online. The advantage of using Google Docs is that students can share their documents with their peers electronically. Moreover, Google Docs allows for asynchronous comments and synchronous chats. Secondly, instructors can offer more efficient arrangements for distributing drafts and managing feedback by using Google Drive—a cloud service that provides online storage and apps for producing data. Since Google Drive is online, teachers and students can access and work on their essays easily from a computer with an Internet connection.

This idea of accessibility is one of the main advantages of using Google Docs for writing essays. A better learning environment is created because collaboration, peer work, and submissions are not limited to one's geographical location (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Since some students in Japan have to commute as long as four hours a day, the possibility of peer editing outside of class hours is hard using the paper-based approach. With Google Docs, students can easily work on essays while commuting using smartphone devices online or offline. Crowded buses and trains make the traditional paper-based approach to essay writing cumbersome if not impossible. Although users may be limited to certain features (i.e. not be able to comment) on their smart devices, they can nevertheless get a head start on reading their classmates' essays or composing their work. Working offline makes it possible to reduce the use of bandwidth on smart devices; once in a Wi-Fi environment all work is uploaded immediately and saved in the cloud. Google Docs has a commenting feature for asynchronous use and a chat feature for synchronous communication that is best used on a laptop computer.

The advantage of the asynchronous method of commenting on Google Docs instead of face-to-face peer editing is that it affords the learners more time on reflection and refinement before sharing feedback (Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijselaers, 2014; Huang & Hsiao, 2012). In a content-based course using materials that are not designed for English as a foreign language (EFL), students often struggle to communicate their thoughts using new concepts and vocabulary in the target language. Asynchronous commenting in the online mode provides time for students to coordinate their expressions thoughtfully (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Some research recognizes that the absence of non-verbal language and other paralinguistic features including eye contact and facial expressions may detract from effective communication (Garrison,

Anderson, & Archer, 2000); moreover, the use of a second language to comment on metalinguistic features of writing may lead to misunderstandings. Nevertheless, with proper scaffolding and support, a persistent and patient teacher can expect students to become used to communicating via this medium. Students learn to reach a consensus over disagreements as they construct knowledge together (Zher, Hussain & Saat, 2016). In their development of the Community of Inquiry framework for improving online collaboration between students, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, (2000) describe the importance of social presence—a construct that explains the social relationships and collaborative climate between learners as they work together to achieve success in learning objectives. Since teaching presence facilitates the development of social presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), a teacher's asynchronous contributions on Google Docs can reinforce the learners' reliance on each other to mediate misunderstandings and gain confidence.

Video Chat Services: Synchronous and Asynchronous Modes of Learning

In many writing courses, students meet for face-to-face instruction several times a week in a traditional classroom with a chalkboard. To develop digital literacy skills, however, some classes could be held in a computer-mediated classroom and additional outside time could be reserved for teacher-student conferences. Teacher-student conferences can be one-to-one and arranged in time slots when students are available. Synchronous communication using two-way video conferencing can be offered during the teacher-student conference time slot. Many video-conferencing platforms, such as Skype or Google Hangouts, offer a video chat service where users can share documents, scratchpads, images, and online videos with other users. This is beneficial for several reasons. First, research has shown that students' online learning outcomes improve when they are offered a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes for tasks and activities (Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijselaers, 2014). Moreover, synchronous communication can offer additional opportunities to build rapport in the community, to provide another channel for direct dialogue, to reduce the barrier of misunderstandings in the asynchronous mode, and to be used as a tool for troubleshooting problems with technology (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). The videoconferences could be by appointment and students have the choice of *meeting* the instructor face-to-face or online. Screen-sharing options are possible during the video-conferencing so the learners can talk about their essays; taking notes and making edits to the document could be encouraged throughout the session.

Transparency through Communication and E-rubrics

In addition to two-way conferencing, the chat feature on Google Docs is a useful tool for communication and clearing up misunderstandings. Although some researchers suggest that students are not as inclined to use chat features for learning (Huang & Hsiao, 2012), it can facilitate communication during two-way video conferencing or during transitional shifts from asynchronous to synchronous use of Google Docs (i.e. when two or more users start viewing the same document online). A typical strategy instructors use to create teaching presence is to use rubrics (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Rubrics help scaffold the writing process, which reduces misunderstandings and provide structure for online discussions via peer editing on Google Docs

(Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Zher, Hussain, and Saat (2016) observed that students provide enriched comments during peer review if they were engaged in a feedback/feed-forward process of information exchange.

Rubrics are useful for setting up models on how to write and for helping students focus on particular areas of writing development; letting the students know what they have to provide feedback on in advance is know as the feed-forward process (Duncan, 2007). Rubrics facilitate grading and provide transparency for feedback and the learning process. If students score low on a writing assignment, they can resubmit where they have made changes based on reasons from the rubric, and the teacher can use the same rubric to re-assess and re-grade. One app used for distributing writing assignments is Doctopus; it gives teachers the ability to mass-copy (from a starter template), share, monitor student progress, and manage grading and feedback for student projects in Google Drive. The Goobric Chrome extension ("Doctopus - CloudLab," n.d.) works alongside Doctopus to enable rubric-based grading of Google Docs right in a popup browser window when using a rubric. Teachers can customize their rubrics depending on their learning objectives.

Improving Efficiency

Teachers often complain about excessive online workloads using asynchronous tools (Gedik, Kiraz, & Ozden, 2013; Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Gaining full knowledge of the features of any electronic tool in use can mitigate that problem. For example, teachers and students using the Google Docs system will receive an email into their Gmail account every time a peer (or the owner) creates comments or suggestions. Collaborators receive emails regarding changes to the Google Doc after a 10-minute period of inactivity. That means, if students stop adding comments for more than ten minutes, an email will be sent to those that shared the document (e.g. instructor and peer reviewers). While this feature benefits users by informing them that their documents have been reviewed, the potential downside is that it can fill up a user's inbox with the multiple emails when drafts are revised. Knowing that Gmail operates on a *conversation* concept, it can be set for aggregating separate snippets of conversation into one coherent *dialog*. Aggregating emails would make it far more efficient and easier for the teacher and the owner of the document to read all relevant details of changes to a document for the day; thus, facilitating what issues need to be addressed—one student at a time. Aggregating chat messages operates on the same principle.

Troubleshooting via Reflective Journals

There are also tools available to facilitate communication in the writing environment. Writing instructors often answer questions from students in class and in conferencing sessions, or via email. While it is important for instructors to help students and to provide guidance about the writing process, there may be a more efficient practice particularly if students are asking the same questions. Writing emails to an instructor to clarify a misunderstanding might be a resourceful strategy, but it is far from efficient if several students are asking the same question. A weekly reflective journal posted online (either on a personal blog or a message board) can be implemented to address the challenges of online learning adequately, to maximize everyone's

knowledge base, and to circumvent the influx of emails in a both students' and instructors' inboxes. Reflective journals are essential for the learning process and can concomitantly be used to strengthen self-directed learning in the learning community. Kim (2015) conducted a study with Korean students in a blended learning higher education EFL writing course. The use of reflective journals provided both teachers and students valuable insights into how the learners were learning. What students knew (or did not know) was more transparent, and helped the teacher to target gaps in learning. In Kim's study, the students answered the following questions:

1. What did I learn this week?
2. What did I find most and least helpful for learning academic writing?
3. What were the challenges about this week's lessons?
4. Any difficulties (a) in a face-to-face classroom? or (b) online?
5. Any recommendations for better [sic] class? (p. 67)

Lee and Lee (2013) found that reflective journals are not as efficient if students only write them for themselves; therefore, a more effective approach would be for everyone to write weekly reflections on a blog or message board. If students know the answer to a question, they could provide a reply. The teacher could collate any outstanding questions and troubleshoot problems in the following face-to-face class session.

Building Quality and Redundancy through Reflective Practices

According to research, model (i.e. exemplar) replies by the teacher on Google Docs and Blogs can increase the quality of discussion in which students engage (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Practices related to critical thinking and deep reflections are part of the cognitive presence construct; and teaching presence can improve the cognitive construct in the learning community (Cunningham, 2015). One approach is to have students write weekly reflections with a deadline for all students to write in response to the questions (e.g. 9 am on Saturday). Students would then be notified of a deadline for submitting comments on their classmates' thoughts. Responding to students' comments online this way may sound labor intensive, however, it can potentially eliminate many personal emails from students to the instructor because the problems that other students experience are being asked and answered along the way. Students recycle advice given in subsequent weekly entries. As a result, not only will the quality of the comments increase, but also students can develop a stronger sense of community and confidence in the face-to-face and online modes of learning. For a blog or message board to be successful, teachers need to stress the importance for students to meet deadlines and engage with other students' comments promptly on time. It is also important to explicitly tell students that learners who responded to self-reflection prompts outperform those who do not (see Rowe & Rafferty, 2013).

Targeted Models to Encourage Robust Commenting

Similar to writing reflective journals online, it is important to consider the value of e-rubrics. One significant advantage of e-rubrics is that they allow learners to access quickly the information they need. Instructors can scaffold learning in progressive steps with guided learning to ensure a more successful writing experience. E-rubrics can have links to model essays for students to reference during peer review. Writers and peers once familiar with the expectations

of the rubric/writing task can tell each other explicitly what needs to be changed when conducting peer review. Instead of making general comments like "great paragraph", students should be more specific about something the author wrote that they liked (e.g. "I liked how you use transitions to tie your paragraph together"). Additionally, each writing assignment could be designed for a specific writing goal and distributed to each student using Doctopus with deadlines. A rubric can be attached to the Google Document for students to read and follow. The rubric can have links to other material that can scaffold a particular feature of writing (e.g. developing a thesis statement). Once writing assignments are completed by a particular time, the peers review the assignment and comment. The Google Document can be set up in such a way so that each reviewer grades the writer on an item in the rubric and adds comments if they feel the author fails to achieve a learning point. Students can be reassured that if there is no response from the instructor, then they can assume the peer advice is accurate; thereby reducing a teacher's workload.

Expect Bumps along the Way

As with any new tool—traditional or trending—students and instructors alike need to be realistic in their expectations with their proficiency in using digital literacy practices to achieve learning objectives. It is reasonable to expect technical issues to appear as additional tools are incorporated. Novice users should take solace in the fact that learning curves gradually disappear; with time and patience, more proficiency will be achieved. More importantly, reflection, for teachers and students, plays a major role in deciding if the learning benefits outweigh the time and energy devoted to tool and technique. Be it a computer-mediated classroom, online, or in the face-to-face classroom, the learning community should be proactive in taking control of their learning. If something is not working, then one should reach out to the community for assistance by any means that aligns with their preferred mode of communication. Conversely, if a fellow learner is in trouble, offering support is not only good academic practice, but speaks to the collaborative nature of the learning process. Teachers should keep in mind that using technology is neither a placebo nor a replacement for weak teaching methodology. Once they gain confidence in using the technology, they can focus on using both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to enhance learning that would have otherwise been limited to the confines of a brick-and-mortar classroom.

Conclusion

In summary, the restructuring of the university-level writing courses, including the array of tools, and the rationale for doing so is as follows: given the limitations of time and space of the traditional, face-to-face mode of learning, synchronous and asynchronous online learning tools can supplement the learning outcomes of the course objectives. Instead of distributing essays in face-to-face classrooms or mailboxes, Google Drive, and other apps can be used to facilitate collaborative learning. Within Google Drive, Google Docs, Doctopus, and Goobric are innovative tools to guide learning and to make learning objectives transparent. Within this framework, students can actively construct knowledge as a group and share their thoughts on the learning process with each other using online video conferencing for synchronous

communication. Two-way web-conferencing may foster better use of the teacher-student conferences, in particular for those students who do not live close to campus or suffer from scheduling conflicts. The use of blogs or message boards for reflective journaling should not only increase social and cognitive presence but also increase the quality of critical thinking and essay writing throughout the term. Students should be proactive in helping each other and using community's knowledge base as an educational resource and not depend exclusively on the teacher. By combining these modern resources traditional means of learning, both students and teachers can benefit from a more engaging learning experience, one that appreciates the strength of transforming the experience from an audience one to a community of learning for all.

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