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Project Web 2.0
The Use of Blogs to Improve Writing Skills

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Introduction

The purpose of this project is to design an online essay-writing course where students use blogs as the primary means to develop ideas for essays, respond to readings, and explore and respond to each other's writing. Specifically, this project is developed for ENG 950: Essay Writing at Central New Mexico Community College (CNM).

Analysis

Learner Analysis

The learners are CNM students enrolled in an ENG 950 Essay Writing class.

- Education: Learners are attending CNM in pursuit of an associate's degree, certificate or vocational training. Most learners are taking this class as a pre-requisite to a mandatory college-level writing class ENG 1101 (ENG 100 at UNM). Learners are placed in this class based on their Accuplacer scores. Since this is a developmental English class, it can be assumed that most learners need a refresher in English composition.
- Knowledge: The learners' knowledge about the topic varies. A few learners enroll in the class because they prefer to take a refresher course; most learners must take the class because they lack the skills necessary to college writing. Overall, the learners' knowledge about the writing process as well as important concepts related to grammar and punctuation is poor. Learners do bring a variety of life experiences to the class as well as previous exposure to writing, which can be beneficial for their learning. Most learners, however, lack adequate academic writing skills and many of them exhibit poor reading skills as well.

- Adult Learners: these are adult learners. Based on what we know about the needs of adult learners we can assume that the learners like to be involved in the planning and execution of their own learning. As a result, they will be interested in a course that:
 - defines objectives clearly;
 - connects to their previous knowledge and life experiences;
 - teaches academic writing skills that can benefit them in their studies and careers;
 - provides opportunities for practice and meaningful interaction;
 - allows for individual work as well as group discussions;
 - respects their cultural beliefs, but provides intellectually stimulating discussions;
 - accommodates their learning preferences as much as possible given the course objectives.

- Specific entry competencies: successful completion of ENG 750 or appropriate score on the Accuplacer. Learners must have a high school diploma or GED before they can enroll in this class.

- Motivation: most learners are motivated to succeed in this class because they need the writing skills in higher-level college classes as well as in their careers. The instructor can improve student motivation by delivering an engaging course (Young, 2006). It is expected that the use of blogs will increase student engagement and interaction; therefore, students will be more motivated to stick with the class and complete it successfully.

- Attitude and learner expectations: generally the learners want to succeed in this class; unfortunately, they bring a host of negative attitudes and memories of prior failures to the class. Since this is a developmental writing class, students are taking it because they lack proper writing skills. Previous failures in English writing classes can negatively impact student attitudes and expectations in this class. Often students believe that they are the only ones suffering from poor writing skills. The use of blogs will allow students to see each other's work and will provide opportunities for more interaction and engaging dialogues as well as meaningful reflection on the readings and writing assignments. The assumption is that this can improve students' attitude and feelings of accomplishment in the class. Consequently, the course ought to satisfy their hopes that the class will be meaningful and useful to them; that they will learn the skills needed to write college-level essays; that the course will allow for much interaction and communication with lots of opportunities for writing and reflection rather than a series of lectures and handouts to read.
- Computer literacy skills: Prior experience with CNM's distance learners suggest that not all students have sufficient computer literacy skills to succeed in an online class. Students take an online class because they cannot attend face-to-face classes due to their busy work schedules and family obligations. These learners take an online class because often this is the only way for them to continue their education, not because they are a good fit for online courses. Many CNM students are ill-prepared to take online courses; yet they have no alternative. This causes a lot of anxiety on the learners' part, which can be alleviated by providing good

tutorials for all the tools used in the course and assuming that many of the technology applications used in the course will be new to the students. Generally, learners are able to use email proficiently and are comfortable with searching the web for information and student resources. However, the learners are often new to online learning and need scaffolding in developing self-directed learning skills and understanding how the course works. Most students are ill-prepared for the challenges of a fully online course; thus, the instructor must anticipate these needs and provide ample built-in support.

- Language proficiency: The course is taught in English. The majority of learners are native English speakers although there are some learners whose first language is not English. These students can benefit from additional information on English grammar and usage. The presence of learners who speak English as a second language (ESL) will have an impact on the online interaction. Generally, the ESL speakers' command of English is very good although they need extra help with grammar and usage. These students can benefit from the use of blogs by having the opportunity to read other learners' blogs. Native English speakers will model correct language use for the ESL speakers. Asynchronous online interactions will aid some ESL speakers in giving them extra time to express themselves. A live audio chat on the other hand may rob the ESL speakers of critical visual clues and their peers may have a hard time understanding them if their accents are strong (especially when there is only sound). On the other hand, live audio interactions will only serve to aid students in understanding the course material and will not be

- evaluated or graded. This should decrease students' anxieties in using the live conferencing tools.
- Gender breakdown: Female students account for the majority of online learners at CNM. According to CNM's Fact Book, 69% of online learners are women. Given the topic and the nature of the course, female students will benefit from using blogs in this course since research shows that female students highly value interaction and need learner-learner as well as learner-instructor interaction (Sullivan, 2001).
 - Ethnic/Cultural background: The learners come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds— although the majority of them are White or Hispanic. 42% of online learners are White, non-Hispanic and 37% are Hispanic.
 - Learning Styles: the learners represent a multi-modal group. Generally it can be assumed that the learners have poor academic skills and need a lot of instructor feedback as well as opportunities to access course materials in different formats (print, audio, multimedia). The course must be designed with multiple learning styles in mind as well as with the awareness that many students have poor reading skills as well.

Pedagogical Considerations

ENG 950 is a developmental English course, which prepares students for first-year college composition by providing practice of the rhetorical and grammatical skills necessary to write purposeful, reader-centered essays. The course covers the effective

use of the writing process in out-of-class essays and in timed situations, and it incorporates readings for discussion of ideas and for information to be used in students' writing. The primary purpose of ENG 950 is to prepare students for college writing and composition.

The challenge in delivering this course online is to create an engaging course where students feel comfortable exploring and improving their writing skills and receive instruction, which helps them in acquiring college-ready writing skills. Students need to do two important things in order to succeed in this class: 1) write weekly and reflect on their own writing; 2) acquire specialized knowledge about the writing process as well as English grammar and punctuation.

The goal is to teach grammar and composition rules in the context of the students' own writing, thus making concepts more meaningful and accessible to students. The use of blogs in the course was proposed because it will allow students to "publish" their weekly writings and share it with the class, not only the instructor. The blogs will be used in the weekly writing assignments where students reflect on and respond to the weekly readings (mostly essays on various topics) and begin drafting their essays. The use of blogs will create a sense of audience, which is more meaningful to adult writers than writing for a grade only.

Another goal is to create a sense of ownership in the students, as they tend to their blogs, and provide an opportunity to write for a purpose: to engage each other and the instructor in writing. Students will become authors as they publish their blogs, and the assumption is that this genuine sense of authorship will motivate them to be more engaged in the writing process than simply writing for the sake of submitting an

assignment. This approach will hopefully result in better student engagement, as students will be able to read and respond to each other's ideas. The goal is to move the learner-instructor interaction to include the multi-directional learner-learner interaction.

Students often remark in their feedback that certain concepts “click” after a peer review activity, after they reviewed a particularly good or bad essay. Having a model (both positive and negative) and learning from each other's accomplishments as well as mistakes is a powerful learning tool.

Theoretical Perspectives

The pedagogical considerations discussed above imply certain theoretical perspectives. First and foremost among the underlying theoretical perspectives are the principles of andragogy as described by Knowles (1973). Using blogs in an online writing class makes sense if we want to

1. empower students to be in charge of their own learning;
2. allow students to experience the “real thing” (or as close as we can get to the real experience of being a writer who communicates ideas);
3. provide students with the opportunity of evaluating their own writing through the feedback they receive from peers;
4. allow students to tap into the vast reservoir of prior life experiences through writing and individual blogs.

At the same time, students will learn from each other more effectively than they would from lectures or feedback from the instructor. Obviously, feedback from the instructor is still being used, but something even more powerful emerges in this situation:

social learning as defined by Bandura (1977). Social learning theory proposes that people learn from each other by observation, modeling, and imitation. Writing one's own blog as well as reading other people's blogs will provide students the opportunity to observe and learn from each other's mistakes as well as accomplishments. They can find powerful models worthy of imitating and observe how to write or not to write. Being exposed to both positive and negative examples will strengthen concept formation.

Finally, in line with the social learning theory, the hope is that through blogging, students can form a learning community, where students are engaged and participate in various dialogues that are meaningful to their learning (Wenger, 2006). The idea here is that blogging adds a certain authorship and ownership to the writing experience that is beyond the classroom experience; it happens outside the classroom walls and provides students with writing experiences that mimic real life interactions.

Delivery

The main course will be delivered via Blackboard. The weekly modules and other content will be available in the course management system (CMS). Students will leave the CMS only to post to their blogs and to read and respond to other students' blogs. At this point two blogs are considered for the students to use in the class: Edublogger (www.theedublogger.com) and Typepad (www.typepad.com).

The students will have a choice between the two. Tutorials in how to set up and run the blogs will be provided as part of the course. These two sites were chosen because of ease of access and the availability of student control over who can access the site. Members of the class must have access to the students' blogs, but students will have the

option of limiting their blog to the outside world if they wish. Typepad is the simpler site, which is convenient for students who want an easy-to-use blog that does not require a lot of technical expertise. Edublogger is a bit more complex and offers more options for those who wish to have access to more features.

Project timeline and checklist

	<i>Task list</i>	<i>Due Date</i>
1	Add blog information to the syllabus and make it part of the weekly assignments for the course	8/1/2010
2	Incorporate blogs into the curriculum and decide what content will be delivered via blogging	8/1/2010
3	Create tutorials for blogs	
	Create rubric for evaluating blog entries; specify frequency of peer responses	
4	Design evaluation tool for student feedback regarding the usefulness of the blogging experience	
5	Monitor and document student progress throughout the course	
6	Design tools and feedback opportunities for both formative and summative evaluation	

Design

Learning Objectives:

By the end of the course, an ENG 0950 student will be able to

- Demonstrate effective use of the writing process in out-of-class essays and in timed situations.
- Demonstrate an ability to understand readings and to use ideas or information from these readings within the student’s writing.
- Write an essay that
 1. has a clear main idea that focuses the essay and is meaningful to the readers;

2. develops the main idea with adequate, specific, and logical support that makes an impact on the reader;
3. reflects choices based on the audience's knowledge level, experience, opinion, and interests;
4. takes the reader from one idea to another and organizes the ideas both within and between paragraphs;
5. communicates--with reasonable correctness--in standard written English.

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