Virtually WAC: Coaching Students on Their Writing During SARS

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Writing is beyond a process of just translating one's thoughts into words. On the writers' part it requires thoughtful understanding of the subject matter as well as the linguistic prowess to communicate ideas and reasoning in standard written language. Given its unique importance in scholastic development, writing must be a key university priority for the development of students' capabilities. Sound English writing skills are essential for the enrichment of students' learning experiences and the development of literacy. That is what Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) aspires to cultivate.

Although we had devised our English support teaching as being delivered face-to-face, the web-based mode was piloted during the university-wide class suspension, owing to the sudden onset of the SARS epidemic. Overall, I found that the online coaching of writing offers an edge that I had not anticipated, as it enables an interactive and intimate exchange of ideas

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between individual students and the writing tutor; and this can encompass much more than the correction of grammar and organization.

In this narrative, I am writing to share my tutoring experience of web-based teaching, scrutinizing its strengths and limitations in the context of WAC. In doing this story, I found myself clarifying for myself ideas and insights regarding the teaching of English writing at tertiary level. This story has been a learning experience for me, just as we hope writing is a learning journey for our students. Let us begin by reviewing the basics of Writing Across the Curriculum here at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

Introduction of WAC

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) is a writing initiative that was launched at CUHK in September 2002. Its objectives are four-fold:

1. to hone university students' English composition skills through the practice of process writing;
2. to work within the context of the disciplines students are studying and specific to the written assignments in their courses;
3. to provide exemplars for writing-intensive courses implemented across the curriculum in the three local universities: CUHK, the City University of Hong Kong (CityU), and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU); and
4. to build a robust model for supporting Writing Across the Curriculum in Hong Kong and other similar contexts where English is a foreign language.

The philosophy of WAC is to incorporate process writing into teaching academic writing. WAC encourages process writing because both the product and the process of writing are equally important. Students are introduced to brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing within a supportive environment. Academic writing can be a cognitively challenging activity

that involves a combination of skills such as effective communication skills, and analytical and critical thinking. In addition to these cognitive skills students need to become masters of the conventions and rules unique to writing in English. This is a daunting challenge and so it is vital for WAC tutors to organize collaborative writing support and provide language-rich composition advice to students who are still learning to write in English.

Being a WAC tutor, students can consult me at various stages of their writing. In the second semester, I had the privilege to be the writing tutor in six courses across various disciplines at CUHK, including the departments of Systems Engineering and Engineering Management, Anthropology, Sports Science and Physical Education, Marketing, and Geography and Resource Management. Learning the rudiments of what the courses I support are trying to achieve is both fascinating and taxing. I attend the course instructors' lectures and have gained an increasing awareness of the breadth of human knowledge. Sitting in on all those classes allows me, not only to familiarize myself with the course content, but also to learn about the course instructors' writing requirements and expectations. These experiences provided me with appropriate schemata for reading and giving feedback effectively on students' writing.

During normal schooldays, I meet students and give them feedback whenever they have writing difficulties. I also conduct workshops and deliver tailor-made PowerPoint presentations for affiliated courses. Examples are *Writing a Venture Idea Proposal* (management) and *Writing a Fieldtrip Report* (geography). These activities, however, were conducted in face-to-face encounters.

Influence of SARS on Academic Writing

The SARS crisis created severe disruption to many teaching activities. Like other local universities, CUHK suspended all its classes between 28 March and 13 April. Although classes were resumed on 14 April, contact hours of classes were cut so as to minimize human contact. With the contagious epi-

demic around, two out of the six of my affiliated courses replaced the final examination with a take-home exam. As a result, each student had to submit an additional essay in these courses. That meant more writing exercises were imposed as a result of the cancellation of exams.

When the class suspension was announced at the end of March, my immediate concern was that I could not conduct face-to-face writing conferences with my students. As CUHK was approaching the end of the second semester and many written assignments would have to be submitted shortly, the suspension of classes occurred exactly when students were busy preparing their final papers. My experience of the previous semester told me that some students would come to me with handwritten drafts only a few days before the due date. How can they do this now? I thought I would lose many last-minute students who had not bothered to seek advice from me before this crisis. How could I assist them to process their ideas in a well organized and coherent way?

To remedy this, I immediately adjusted my approach by writing messages to encourage students to start composing their papers early, and disseminated the information through WebCT,[1] CUForum,[2] a course website [3] that one of the engineering professors had developed, as well as by ordinary e-mails. It was interesting that it was a natural response for me to reach out to my students through technology. The message I gave to students was that I was eager and available to help them, no matter how much (or how little) they had progressed in their writing. Without delay, the idea of distant tutoring emerged as I planned to use e-mail extensively to communicate with students in groups and as individuals.

Another concern that is unique to writing is the differing demands of individual papers and group reports. Group projects are generally harder to coordinate among the group members and so writing up the reports is a challenge. Often the report only takes shape once the work is done and this adds to the pressure of the final deadline. Indeed, some marketing students raised their concern in the CUForum that their groups could not explore and meet to discuss their work effectively because of the quarantine measure,

and therefore asked for an extension of the deadline.

Presumably, both types of writing (individual and group reports) involve the extensive library research that is necessary for any academic paper. It was likely that many students would not have collected enough references before the unexpected suspension of classes. It is generally understood that students procrastinate and I usually end up overwhelmed by students' work in later weeks. With this crisis the end of term rush could be so much more severe. However, this is undesirable and I knew I had to try my very best to prevent this from happening. That is why I turned to mass e-mailing the students as soon as the class suspension began.

Distant Tutoring of Writing

Fortunately, giving feedback to students on their written assignments was not hampered during the self-quarantine period, thanks to the convenience of distant tutoring. Altogether, there were 202 students in the six affiliated courses. Of course, not all students contact their WAC tutors. This semester was less than normal and I received nine written assignments of various lengths via e-mail attachments. Some were initial drafts of a few pages long and some were fully-developed reports up to forty pages. The genres include business proposals, sociology papers, anthropology essays and marketing reports.

Concerning the written feedback, I employed the "track changes" function of Microsoft Word frequently in marking in-text changes directly onto problematic expressions. Many of those changes marked were either grammatical mistakes in English or stylistic problems. Also, the "comment" facility in Word is very useful as I can post additional remarks for students to sharpen their ideas. For instance, I inserted a remark "Do you require any English-speaking ability?" when a student wrote down the qualifications of a cashier she planned to employ in the Tsim Sha Tsui outlet in her venture proposal. Sometimes, I use the comment facility to ask for clarification in students' writing. For example, in the final paper of the sociology of sports

science course, one student described the relationship between spectator sports and mass media by simply concluding with "This can increase audiences' interest" without further elaboration. My comment then was "Interest on what? Be more specific." Another occasion I frequently use this function is whenever I have doubt over the source of students' writing. I just put down "Any references?" to remind them of quoting properly. Essentially, I regard these two functions as enabling effective written dialogues with students.

Other than those highlighting functions, I like to give overall comments based on my holistic impression of students' papers. Instances were on the organization of prose and cogency of arguments. In this way, the types of feedback I gave were more thorough and diversified so as to prevent over-emphasizing mechanics. I believe this is helpful for students in polishing their drafts, embracing the principles of process writing.

Easy Bits and Technical Hitches

Compared with giving feedback in the paper-and-pen mode, I found the convenience and flexibility of online tutoring supremely promising. It is straightforward to mark changes as I simply type out my comments and ideas right onto the keyboard. It is also convenient to change the comments, if necessary, when I reread the assignment and, frankly, I did that very often. When I note down comments in pen, I tend to hesitate because the comment will be permanent. Another advantage is that I can save a record of every student's work as if I am compiling a writing portfolio for them. Saving the softcopies in my computer allows me to compare students' initial and final drafts. Meanwhile, it serves as a quality control measure as I can make comparison between the "before" and "after" versions to see how effective my input is. The course instructors may also get a glimpse of what I have done to students' essays. Above all, the comment is legible and neatly presented in typing than my somewhat scrawled handwriting. Another energy-saving advantage is that I do not have to collect and return the es-

says physically to students and the risk of losing the essays can be minimized. And the biggest plus: it is more flexible for me to arrange time to review students' work.

However, reviewing students' essays on computer can be demanding at times. A good memory is needed as the monitor does not display the entire page of students' work. That means I need to use the scroll bar frequently on a single page. But on the printed version, I can see the entire page readily without too much flipping around. It can be an exhausting act, reviewing page after page.

Editing too much is another potential risk when I focus on the grammatical aspects of students' work instead of the overall effectiveness of writing. I have deliberately avoided copy-editing too much as it is more of a learning experience for students to revise their own work instead of me revising for them. On one hand, it is easier to spot discrete grammatical mistakes and awkward expressions. On the other, it does take more time to identify organizational flaws and logical fallacies. It seems that, virtually speaking, my eyes were focused on close features rather than global structures on computer. Perhaps, comprehension takes longer on a monitor and it is more exhausting to comment on students' work on an illuminated screen. I did not compute how much more time I spent but, probably, it takes 20 minutes longer to review a 10-page piece of work on a computer than on paper.

One drawback is quite prominent in distant tutoring. Writing is closely related with reasoning and meaning construction. In many students' writing, vagueness and ambiguity arise. Some of this is related to language usage and diction; other aspects are due to structural problems and confusion between ideas. I would then have to ask for clarification and put down my concern in words. I once put down a long critical remark in an anthropology essay discussing the issue of globalization:

> The decline of local cultural identity/homogenization seems to be contrasting to the following point: not totally homogenization, cultural differences sustain. Do you plan to use Barbie to illustrate both? If yes, that would be rather difficult.

> I suspect that the so-called "cultural differences sustain" is artificial and sim-
> ply due to the marketing strategy of local branches of Barbie.

Later, when I evaluated this piece of writing with the course instructor, he totally agreed with my comments but the student overlooked and failed to address this point in the final essay. Somehow, abstract ideas and writing logic are difficult to explain succinctly in a way which students can comprehend in writing, but those concepts can be understood readily in verbal exchanges with vivid examples and analogies. Explaining points of clarity appears to be more direct and effective in face-to-face writing conferences.

Reflection and Evaluation

In retrospect, SARS has provided me, a junior writing tutor, with invaluable insights and hands-on experience in the teaching of academic writing. The cancellation of classes was a challenge for me to take up working virtually as a writing tutor. At first, I was bored by the self-quarantine measure. I found it tedious and uncomfortable sitting in front of my desktop reviewing essays. What's more, the yield rate was admittedly low no matter how hard I urged students to start writing early. My feelings about distant tutoring are an intertwining of disappointment and encouragement. Yet, I realize that clearly written feedback for students can be a favourable learning experience as they can refer and reflect on my input as they wish. Somehow, jotting down comments is more unequivocal than the all-too-brief verbal exchanges on ideas. The frustration due to low participation vanished once I was reassured by learning more of the importance of writing and students' positive responses upon my assistance. An anthropology major candidly revealed to me that:

> I think most students would not choose face-to-face meeting (not me). It can
> only be done when both of us have already read the passage before, or else we
> would both waste a lot of time. It is difficult to carry out, not because that we
> cannot make the schedule, but is to bring you a complete piece of work when
> we meet. Not many students would finish the homework early. Advantages of

online tutoring, other than time, is that I can send you as many e-mails as possible, so you can always keep up with my new ideas or revised outlines. Also, if I haven't quite finished my work, I can send you e-mails with my new paragraphs. We will not need another appointment again.

The effectiveness and impact of distant tutoring is yet to be seen. Nevertheless, the convenience cannot be denied, especially at a critical time such as the SARS crisis. Innovative communication channels such as ICQ and MSN are very popular among university students. Even though I have not considered using these instant short messages for giving feedback, it is possible to employ those inventions in the academic domain. Working remotely with students' writing poses potential shortcomings but I think the web conferencing technology can minimize that inadequacy.

While maintaining face-to-face interaction as the primary teaching mode, I regard distant tutoring as a clearly complementary strategy. Given the complex and changing state of affairs in so many aspects of university and civic life (for example, will SARS return again?), it is an indispensable strategic task for any university to meet this growing challenge by boosting its infrastructure for supporting high quality web-based teaching. The SARS experience has shown us the benefits that online teaching can offer in tertiary education. I stalwartly believe teaching and learning with students distantly is no longer a distant thought!

In all, my repertoire in coaching students' writing has expanded to accommodate the individual needs and learning pace of each student, given writing is a highly individualistic and creative exercise. As always, I am honoured when I make a difference in my students' tertiary education experience, particularly by creating a writing environment that blends both traditional and online experience in WAC-affiliated courses. Although it sounds like a cliché, having sound academic writing skills is the universal passport to learning. Likewise, both being open to novel pedagogy, together with the wise use of technology, are imperative strategies for all teachers. So, I come away from the SARS crisis with new skills and new awarenesses that I can continue to use in the development of my teaching of English writing.

Notes

1. WebCT is a web-based course tool having functions such as contents publishing, course progress tracking, course calendar, forum, private mail, online quizzes and chat room, etc.
2. CUForum is another platform for web-based conferencing.
3. Prof. Janny Leung has designed a website for her course: SEG 3450 Engineering Innovation and Entrepreneurship.