Web-Assisted Writing Instruction and Adult Learners

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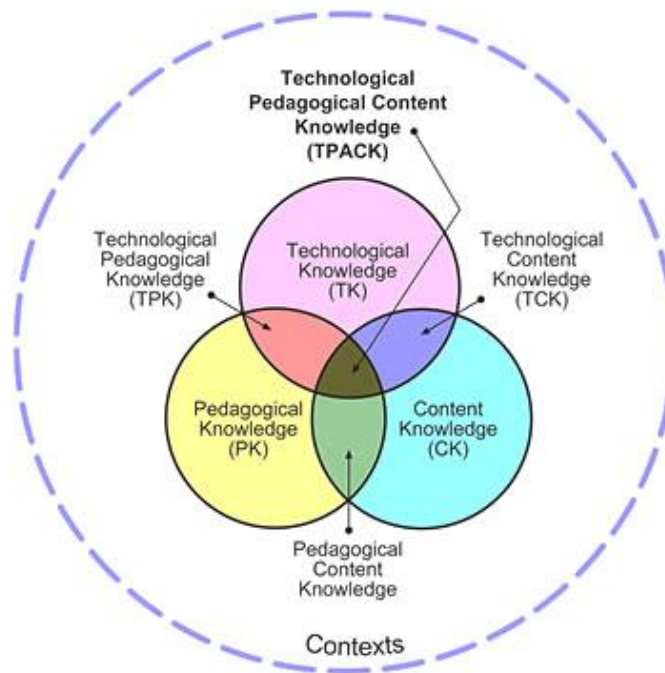Web-Assisted Writing Instruction and Its Potential for Adult Learners

Today's students are expected to be multi-taskers, multimedia users, and multi-literate communicators. It is this last consideration that this paper seeks to elaborate. In America, literacy has traditionally been understood to be the ability to fluently read and write Standard English. In the last decade, however, literature shows that another dimension has been added: technology literacy. With this new aspect annexed to the longstanding notion of literacy, postsecondary writing instructors are now faced with not only teaching learners how to increase their fluency and accuracy in Standard English, but instructors also face a secondary challenge of ensuring that adult learners are able to effectively use technology to achieve learning outcomes. Studies have raised the concern that reliance on technology in the writing curriculum creates a "haves" and "have nots" culture (Mueller, Wood, Hunt, & Specht, 2009; Stine, 2004; Stine, 2010; Grabill, 1998). This issue poses a problem in the writing course for adult learners for whom web-assisted instruction may present obstacles to learning. Current literature shows the drawbacks for technology-driven learning environments, including accessibility for the "technopoor," whereas Stine (2010) and Shephard and Aagard (2011) have found that incorporating technology into course design actually closes the gap and creates greater democracy and egalitarianism among learners. Proponents cite the potential benefits to web-assisted instruction. Finally, Stine (2010) suggested that "blended" classrooms provide the best of both face-to-face classrooms and online classes. And, certainly, the literature offers a multiplicity of online options to foster the writing process and augment in-person instruction. To better standardize the andragogical approach for web-assisted adult writing instruction, a comprehensive assessment of web-assisted learning platforms should be conducted. This review studies arguments for and against using web-enhanced writing instruction for adult learners and proposes that further research is needed to

provide a definitive rationale for integrating technology into the writing curriculum of adult

education.

Literature Review

A Paradigm for Web-assisted Writing Instruction

The Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN) provided an interdependent

paradigm for adult basic education ("Teaching with Technology," n.d., Figure 1), and the

literature shows that this paradigm applies as well to web-assisted writing instruction for adult

learners:

(Figure 1)

What OTAN's paradigm showed was that the three knowledges—pedagogical (or in our

case andragogical), content, and technological—overlap and are inextricable. For writing

instruction for adult learners, this means that best practices for teaching will address both

technology and content.

Web-assisted Writing Instruction's Limitations for Adult Learners

A correlation can be drawn between OTAN's overlap of technology/content and findings in the literature that described the limitations of using web-assisted writing instruction (Grabill, 1998; Mueller et al., 2009; Stine, 2004). More than a decade ago, Grabill (1998) raised concerns that literacy is an access principle requiring that adult learners know how to use computer technologies in order to write effectively with such technologies. The problem in the late 1990's was that some teachers and students had limited physical access to technology, and those who had access might not have received adequate training to use the technology to assist in the writing process. Grabill noted this was an obstacle to the writing process of adult learners because access to and training in web-assistance enables "sophisticated written literacies, both to enhance civic participation and workplace effctiveness" (p. 299). Limited access and lack of training formed a "technological underclass" or "technopoor" group of adult basic writing learners. This meant that some learners went without access while others who had access had to spend too much time learning how to use the technology instead of using it to write. Grabill noted that learners were not motivated to learn the technology and how to write with it because they had trouble connecting computer skills with writing, and they did not see how such skills could translate into success in the workplace. Finally, Grabill called for adult educators to seriously consider the assistive role computers could play in writing courses and to create more appropriate curricula that would use technology more effectively to enhance learning outcomes.

Mueller et al. (2009) conducted further research and drew some of the same conclusions as Grabill. Their study examined web-assisted writing technology to see how adult learners

reacted to software and web platforms as aids to improve writing skills. Participants in the study were given a Survey of Technology Use to ascertain their attitudes toward learning platforms and writing. Mueller et al. found that in the ten years since Grabill's study, learners reported increased comfortableness with using web-assisted technologies even though they still found the writing process challenging. Eleven writing software programs were evaluated on the basis of ease of use and how effectively the program helped improve writing skills. The results showed several positive responses: the technology helped learners improve in the areas of writing conventions, organization, speed of composition, confidence, and independence. The study showed that adult learners had positive and negative feelings toward writing technologies. Adult learners got frustrated with technical issues, especially when trying simultaneously to focus on their writing, but were happy with the improvement in their writing. Once adult learners felt comfortable with the technology, they wrote more productively and independently. The outcome of Mueller et al. was to recognize the limitations of using assistive technology in writing programs and to recommend that in order to reach the potential benefits of technology, writing programs should be structured around the learners' needs.

Stine (2004) addressed the same web-assisted potential access problems described above by Grabill as well as the potential learning benefits for basic writers. Stine acknowledges Grabill's concern about accessibility for lower income, lower educated populations, especially as they struggle to conform to Standard English conventions. Reiterating OTAN's paradigm of integrated pedagogy, content, and technology, Stine admitted that online learning forces adult students to learn how to write at the same time that they are trying to learn advanced technology skills. She explored how a lack of technological skills can negatively affect acquisition of writing proficiency. Another concern she voiced was that basic writers tend to over rely on technology to

correct writing errors or weaknesses. Echoing Grabill's pedagogical concerns, Stine pointed out

that while an online environment reduces negative feedback, it also reduces positive feedback.

Plus, online writing courses require independent learning, and though basic writers may be eager

to learn, they may not have the strong study habits or good time management necessary for

distance learning. Adult learners can feel overwhelmed trying to navigate an online course

management system, and they may feel frustrated that the technology takes too much time away

from writing. Stine found that until learners feel "safe" in using web-assisted technologies, their

writing process will not benefit from the technology. Another limiting factor is that online

learning forces a basic writer to thrive in a mostly text-based environment. Stine noted that the

difficulties did not extend to the learner alone. Teachers likewise found themselves undertrained

in using web-assisted technologies for writing. Stine recommended that the writing instructor

consider the simultaneous demands of pedagogy, technology, and content before adopting a web-

assisted platform.

Web-assisted Writing Instruction's Potential Benefits for Adult Learners

On the other hand, Stine (2004) also discussed the advantages of web-assisted courses

and suggested using a hybrid learning environment that blends in-class and online sessions. She

found that a learning management system like Blackboard, for example, helped basic adult

writers develop skills in organizing and writing compositions, joining class discussion board

posts, collaborating in peer reviews, and gaining confidence in their own writing "voice." Stine

maintained that the hybrid writing course gives adult writers "the best of both pedagogical

worlds." She further extolled the benefits of web-assisted learning for developing writers. In the

online milieu, burgeoning writers can participate in written reflections and idea exchanges on

blogs, discussion boards, e-mails, chats, videoconferences, etc. that they otherwise might not

have had time for. Stine held that taking at least some of a course online forces students to be more engaged and responsible for their own learning experience—asking, opining, contributing, responding, focusing on areas for improvement in their writing skills, and synthesizing what they have learned into new compositions. The persistence of online communication fosters persistence in adult basic writers and leads to greater retention and success.

Stine listed many advantages to the blended adult writing course, but in particular, she describeed how such a course encourages students to read more, write more, revise more, and contribute more. She held that giving students opportunities to engage in live discussions and in virtual discussions or to submit assignments in person or through the LMS reinforces multiple modes of communication, especially writing, and teaches the students how to successfully enter the academic conversation in the virtual classroom and in the actual classroom. Additional benefits include multiple options for learning that address the needs of various learning styles and intelligences.

The Hybrid Web-assisted Writing Course

Stine (2010) looked further into the question of a hybrid web-assisted adult writing course, specifically what types of writing assignments are effectively handled in an LMS. She acknowledged that most adult writing learners are not necessarily a good match for online learning because this medium is almost solely text-based and confronts adult learners' weaker skills in reading and writing. Stine (2010) called for more research to identify instructional strategies and practices work for web-assisted writing courses.

Stine (2010) returned to the problem of student technology access and skill and suggested that the ideal hybrid classroom would be an on-site computer lab where the teacher could demonstrate the technology tools the students would need, and the students could practice using

those tools in class. According to Stine, "Adult basic writers with high writing anxiety and high computer anxiety will quickly feel—and become—lost if they cannot complete an assigned task because they are unable to navigate the technology" (p. 35). Web-assisted instruction enhances the writing experience for basic writers and involves them in new ways that meets the needs of a wide range of learning styles and intelligences. Other studies found that short, repetitive writing assignments in the hybrid course reduce anxiety and improve writing. A sample lesson might be to have the students write three short essays: a first draft, a revised draft in response to peer reviews, and a reflection on their writing process over the course of the assignment. Other assignments might ask the students to create new text to interact with each other in discussion boards, chats, wikis, or blogs. These activities allow students to grow past lower-order concerns of knowledge and application and toward synthesis and evaluation. Significant learning experiences could occur in class but would be especially beneficial if taken online. The key in web-assisted learning is to make sure the technology does not get in the way of learning or negatively affect students' ability to finish their homework.

One of the most promising implications of Stine's work is the notion of the "flipped" classroom where the teacher starts an online class discussion by posting a controversial question. Students weigh in in a lively debate, and then in the following in-person session, the class discusses the topic further. Then the students are given an article to read or video to watch related to the debate. Stine (2010) held that once the students have debated and clarified their own views both online and in person, they are eager and ready to delve into the subject and to reflect on it in writing at a deeper level. Students in these sorts of flipped lessons tend to write with more confidence and conviction because they have actively engaged with the material in a meaningful way, with web-assisted technology as their aide. Stine concluded with a discussion

of President Obama's proposal to fund community colleges so as to produce five million additional graduates. The implications for this growth mean that in the coming years, there will be a large population of new basic writing students needing specialized, trained instruction. Stine called for more research to determine "how developmental writers of all ages fare in a variety of online learning situations" (p. 51).

Web-assisted Writing Instruction Using Web 2.0 Tools

The final literature reviewed was Shepherd and Aagard (2011). Supporting Stine's findings, Shepherd and Aagard advocated web-assisted writing opportunities, specifically online journal writing using web 2.0 tools such as wikis, social networking, blogs, and document exchanges like dropbox. Shepherd and Aagard studied seventeen adults and found that "all but one had computer skills sufficient to create and house electronic portfolios using online tools" (p. 611). They further found that "older adults required minimal training and exhibited positive attitudes in using Internet search engines. Although web 2.0 technologies have limitations, Shepherd and Aagard maintained that online journaling and collaboration can provide adult learners with meaningful and positive growth in their writing and thinking processes. Where Grabill (1998) held that adult learners were not conversant in computer technologies, Shepherd and Aagard found that today's adults are much more tech savvy than the previous generation and are more likely to benefit from online writing opportunities that allow them to establish meaningful social connections.

Conclusion

In order to fully understand the powerful tool that web-assisted writing instruction can be, it will be necessary to conduct a study to determine to what degree specific learning outcomes are achieved. Possible areas for study include adult learners' ability to master conventions of

Standard English, generate original ideas, assert a position and support it with sound research and reasoned logic, revise and edit, collaborate in peer review, read and analyze texts at a deep level, and contribute confidently to the academic conversation. Such a study would compare traditional in-person courses, hybrid courses, and strictly online courses. Clearly there would be similarities, but with the rapidly changing technological face of education, it will be crucial to adopt best practices for writing instruction that reflect an interlinked paradigm that blends sound andragogy with web-assisted content expertise.

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