Making academic writing real with ICT

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to explore the potential use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) as a tool that supports and improves students’ skills of formal written English in the context of higher education. The article begins first by explaining how ICT is implemented in an optional course on academic writing taught at the Faculty of Informatics and Management in Hradec Kralove for 5 years already. Therefore, a short introduction to the concept of blended learning is mentioned. Furthermore, referring to the corresponding research literature, main pedagogy theories connected with the use of ICT are described, i.e. constructivism and activity theory. In addition to that, it shows how students’ newly acquired knowledge and skills of formal written English result in real electronic publishing. Finally, students’ end products of their half-semester effort are demonstrated and benefits of such work examined.

Keywords: ICT; blended learning; wikipedia; students; English language; writing

1. Background

The purpose of this article is to explore the potential use of ICT as a tool that supports and improves students’ skills of formal written English in the context of higher education. It demonstrates how students of an optional course on academic writing at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic, whose future career profile lies in the fields of information, financial and tourism management, are able to exploit their digital literacy in the acquisition of writing skills. This takes place in two ways: firstly, in the blended use of an on-line reference course and secondly, in the use of 2.0 Web tools - a social software – the wikis (see [1] or [2]) so that students can perform and complement their assignments successfully and consequently succeed in the jobs market.

2. Blended learning approach

The term The term blended learning has become extremely fashionable nowadays, particularly in corporate and higher education settings. But what, in fact, does blended learning mean? The term itself is quite difficult to define since it is used in diverse ways by different people. Overall, the three most common meanings for blended learning are the following (see also [3]): 1) the integration of traditional learning with web-based on-line approaches; 2) the combination of media and tools (e.g. textbooks) employed in e-learning environments; and 3) the combination of a
number of teaching and learning approaches irrespective of the technology used [4]. As Bonk and Graham [5] claim, blended learning is part of the ongoing convergence of two archetypal learning environments. On the one hand, there is the traditional face-to-face learning environment that has been around for centuries. On the other hand, there are distributed learning environments that have begun to grow and expand in exponential ways as new technologies have expanded the possibilities for distributed communication and interaction (Table 1). In this paper, following Littlejohn and Pegler [6], blended learning is perceived as an integration of face-to-face teaching and learning methods with on-line approaches.

Table 1. Development of the Blended Learning Systems [5]

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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Past</td>
<td>(largely separate systems)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>(increasing implementation of blended systems)</td>
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<td>Future</td>
<td>(majority of blended systems)</td>
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A complementary part of the blended learning in the case of Hradec is e-learning, which is being widely developed at the faculty. The Faculty of Informatics and Management has been intensely involved in the application of e-learning in teaching since 1999 as its teachers continuously attempt to improve the quality of their teaching. E-learning especially makes an important contribution to increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational process. E-learning started to be widely used at the faculty in 2001 when a few selected courses created in the virtual learning environment WebCT (web communication tools) were introduced for part-time students. In 2002 these and other on-line courses, often called OLIVA (on-line teaching = On-Line VyuK), began to be used as a new quality support for full-time students as well. At present more than 150 e-courses are being fully exploited in teaching at the faculty. In English teaching more than 45 e-courses are being used. Some of them, such as Teaching Written Business English, can be taught completely on-line. However, most of them are blended as there are usually a few tutorials. One of the representative blended courses at the faculty is, for example, an optional one semester course on Academic Writing. The course is aimed at the whole process of writing and gives advice on how to write professionally. It shows the component parts of the writing process, that is: envisaging what to write, planning an outline, drafting passages, writing the whole thing, revising and rewriting it, and finishing it in an appropriate form, together with publishing all or parts of a text. In addition, it focuses on those features which are different in English and Czech, such as making references, quoting bibliography or using appropriate English. As for the last aspect, there are independent sections on grammar structures in written English, lexical structures, and punctuation. Moreover, the course exposes students to blended learning and thus makes use of students’ IT skills and their life experience as “digital natives.” That means they meet a teacher once in two weeks to discuss and clarify the mistakes they made in their assignments (i.e. essays), which, together with a deeper self-study of the materials implemented in their on-line e-learning course, they write every second week. Moreover, sometimes there are regular classes and e-courses are used as reference courses (i.e. students can once again read the information
obtained in class and do some additional exercises to practise their knowledge) for further self-study or revision of the lecture. This is, for example, true for teaching the *Culture of Great Britain* or the *History of the USA*.

3. The use of wiki

To make learning purposeful, teachers strive for new ways of running their classes. They also realize that the role of ICT has changed and thus their use must be remodeled when introducing a new successful IT society. With the emergence of Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, wikis or social networking sites, there is an urgent need for collaboration and sharing the context through the Internet. And one of the most well-known wikis is Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopaedia which is a great challenge to academic writing classes at the faculty. Students exploit it not only as a reference source for general information but actively collaborate in its expansion. Furthermore, the use of wiki in the educational process is supported by pedagogy theories, for instance, constructivism or activity theory. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that argues that learners construct knowledge from their experiences, both positive and negative. According to this theory, learning is an active social process, which means that learning occurs when individuals are actively engaged in social activities (compare to [7] or [8]). Moreover, constructivism regards a learner as a unique individual, considers his/her cultural background, or supports the responsibility and motivation for learning. Constructivism is often associated with the activity theory which understands human activities as complex, socially situated phenomena (for more information see [9]). As it can be seen from the above definitions, both theories perceive learning as social interaction, cooperation and collaboration in which a learner plays a crucial role.

In practical terms, in the course of the semester students usually have 5 assignments. They are as follows: a summary of a lecture/seminar; an argumentative essay without bibliographies and references; two essays including bibliographies and references and writing an entry for Wikipedia (see also [10]). When students are creating an authentic article for Wikipedia from scratch, they are not only motivated to write but begin to recognize the usefulness and necessity of the formal writing aspects of their course, e.g. the importance of attending to errors and checking facts when writing to be published. Their writing process when composing an article for Wikipedia might be as follows:

- to get thoroughly acquainted with the website itself, e.g. to discover what kind of information is included, what kind of information is excluded, what is included in the footnote ….;
- to choose a genuine and interesting topic for their article, obviously, a topic which has not been covered in the wiki yet; if necessary to negotiate the topic with the person or institution that might be concerned;
- to gather appropriate and relevant information on the topic and select only the most reliable and important facts;
- to make an outline of the article;
- to draft and revise the article a few times, possibly get someone to proofread it or to consult the facts in the article;
- to format the source, make references and footnotes;
- to submit the article and expect further revisions from the wiki reviewers.

An example of one student’s product can be retrieved from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jizerska_50](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jizerska_50).

In addition to that, students in the course on *Academic Writing* are instructed to use their critical thinking skills, which can be promoted through using the wiki. When collecting information for their articles, they must, for instance, use these skills in order to conduct reliable and valid research. The whole course also aims to help students enhance their thinking skills in an active way. For example, an argumentative writing task will demand of students that they consciously implement and integrate both lower- and higher-order thinking skills. Their thinking processes can be demonstrated in a simplified way according to Bloom’s Taxonomy [11] as follows:

1. collecting information about the essay topic and reading the texts about the topic - **knowledge (LOTS)**
2. describing and explaining the background of the topic – **knowledge and comprehension (LOTS)**
3. identifying and comparing arguments for and against – **comprehension and analysis (LOTS)**
4. formulating, debating and verifying conclusions – **synthesis and evaluation (HOTS)**

4. Benefits of blended learning and wiki platforms in the teaching of foreign languages

Undoubtedly, blended learning has also become one of the successful learning strategies in the acquiring of a second language (SLA). In fact, blended learning has been a major growth point in the ELT (English Language
Teaching) industry over the last ten years. As Vygotsky [7] pointed out, in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) setting social interaction was needed to facilitate language outcomes. As Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal [12] state, blended learning in the EFL setting can be defined as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment. Therefore, blended learning inevitably helps to contribute to compensation for the various deficiencies in the EFL setting, such as a lack of high frequency of exposure, a lack of exposure to the target language community or adopting inadequate learning strategies. Moreover, in this process of learning the teacher’s role is changing. S/he becomes a sort of mediator or rather facilitator and thus helps a student to reach an understanding of his/ her content and mistakes through in-class discussion or by a prompt on-line feedback.

Blended learning also contributes to the development and support of more interactive strategies not only in face-to-face teaching but also in distance education. Developing activities linked to learning outcomes specifically places the focus on learner interaction, rather than on content dissemination. In addition, distance learning can then offer more information available for students, better and faster feedback and richer communication between a tutor and a student. Obviously, it offers more opportunities for communication (both face-to-face and on-line).

Furthermore, the wiki reflects new opportunities for learners to take greater control of their own personalized learning, in this case learning how to write in formal written English. Besides developing thinking skills and critical thinking skills, acquiring the relevant linguistic and stylistic patterns, they learn how to conduct research and get it published in the same way as native speakers. That means that they also learn how to avoid plagiarism which is the issue both among the SLA and the native writers. One of the advantages is also the fact that wiki is simple and easy to use and its content is available to people without cost.

As it has been mentioned before, the wiki creates a social platform since it represents a collaborative web-based space that can be modified by any user.

Visitors do not need any specialized qualifications to contribute. Wikipedia’s intent is to have articles that cover existing knowledge, not create new knowledge (original research). This means that people of all ages and cultural and social backgrounds can write Wikipedia articles. Most of the articles can be edited by anyone with access to the Internet......Anyone is welcome to add information, cross reference, or citations, as long as they do so within Wikipedia’s editing policies and to an appropriate standard. [13]

As Tardy [10] indicates, in producing a text for Wikipedia, students gain a real sense of audience and enjoy the satisfaction of seeing their work published on a high-traffic global website. And as Clark and Mayer [14] state, the emergence of social software and the development of Web 2.0 applications seem to play a significant role in the transition from the Information Age to the Interaction Age.

On the other hand, there are some drawbacks [15] which might contradict the above mentioned statements. Blended learning is certainly time-consuming and demanding for creation, preparation and evaluation. As far as Wikipedia is concerned, it is sometimes criticized for its credibility and reliability of information. Finally, both approaches at random have to face problems with technology.

5. Conclusion

This article has attempted to describe the ways in which ICT has been efficiently implemented in the writing classes at the Faculty of Informatics and Management in the Czech Republic and how their use might help students to be successful in the networked environment of the network society, in which they must work creatively and collaboratively, but responsibly. In higher education both approaches contribute to students’ personalized learning. That means that students are able to control their learning as they are able to adjust the information according to their personal needs. They can access materials at any time and anywhere. Furthermore, they can proceed at their own pace. Finally, both approaches in the learning process definitely promote better comprehension, active processing and positive interdependence while at the same time they give a learner a chance to become a more autonomous, motivated and responsible individual.

References


