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ION RESEARCH CASE STUDIES

SIMPLY WEB-ENHANCING A WRITING COURSE

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BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Susan Manning teaches English as a Second Language for Waubonsee Community College. Serving a mostly immigrant population, she teaches academic writing skills to intermediate and advanced students in an intensive program designed to prepare students for college courses. She also developed and teaches an online English as a Second Language course which utilizes all communication skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing). Online, Susan has learned to effectively use course tools, to seek and/or create interactive and engaging means of presenting content and assessing learning, and to integrate media such as audio and video.

Susan's educational background includes degrees from Truman State University (communications), Bowling Green State University (college student personnel) and Ball State University (adult and community education and higher education administration). Of course, none of that prepared her for the world of online learning. Susan's real expertise comes from her involvement with ION's Making the Virtual Classroom a Reality (MVCR) series. In addition to earning the Master Online Teacher certificate, Susan teaches for that program.

ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2003, advanced students in Waubonsee Community College's intensive English as a second language program were taught

writing skills using a web-enhanced environment. The class was taught half the time in a computer lab and half the time in a traditional classroom. However, students had access to their WebCT site anytime, any place. Students sent their writing assignments as email attachments and received comments digitally. In addition to digitally marked text, students received auditory comments on their writing through voice technology offered by Wimba. Finally, students were challenged to access web-based resources and links within the course to supplement text materials and to customize the learning support each student needed. This paper describes the intended pedagogy of web-enhancing the writing class, the methods and challenges, and the outcomes of the experience.

KEYWORDS

Web-enhanced, WebCT, writing, voice technology

INTRODUCTION

Waubonsee Community College offers an intensive English as a second language curriculum for non-native students to acquire skills they need to succeed in college level courses. Most of these students are adults who work full-time and have families. Students enroll in 16 hours of credit classes in writing, grammar, listening/speaking and reading. Four hours a week is devoted to writing. At the advanced level, students learn to write essays and longer works suitable for college courses.

Having taught the course previously, I observed several challenges in teaching these students in a traditional classroom setting. First, students were overwhelmed by the amount of revising and rewriting necessary to polish their ideas into coherent, well-organized essays free of major grammatical and structural errors. Faced with having to rewrite a piece, students haphazardly made revisions and corrections and often failed to clean up simple mechanical problems in their writing. Furthermore, without auditory explanations of my comments and corrections, students failed to understand why a particular passage or phrase was incorrect or not understandable to a native reader. (It is common for second language learners to have unbalanced language skills; they may listen and comprehend well but cannot express themselves in writing.) However, class time rarely allowed for me to spend adequate time explaining all my comments and corrections to individual students. Finally, deciphering problematic handwriting proved frustrating for me. I didn't know if spelling was correct because I often couldn't read the handwriting.

My proposed solution was to enhance the class through a WebCT component. I asked that the class be reassigned to a computer lab for half of our seat time, and I built a course shell with the following tools:

- Email for sending and receiving works
- Resource links for more help with common mechanical problems and information on writing
- Voice feedback to allow for an auditory discussion of comments and corrections

By offering a web-enhanced class, I hoped students would

- Revise and rewrite their essays with less resistance and effort as they acquired word processing skills
- Investigate resources already available online and eventually learn independently to search for help and access sites that could improve their writing
- Use their listening skills to process feedback and comments that would be useful in revising their writing

Additionally, I believed the electronic environment would aid me in reading their writing (not having to deal with handwriting issues) and would extend the time limitations between Wednesday and Monday classes for students who wanted to work on writing and revising during the weekend.

METHOD

In order to meet the objectives, I designed a simple WebCT shell for the course with links for internal email, voice technology, and resources.

Internal Email

The email system within WebCT was used for sending and receiving essays as attachments. The advantage of this was that papers were digitally stored and time stamped. If a student forgot his diskette but had sent me a copy previously, I could forward the essay back to him without wasting time in class. Furthermore, if it had been several class periods without evidence of revisions, I could graphically show a student when she last sent me a copy.

As I received essays, I added comments and corrections through changes in font color, special codes I used for repeated errors (e.g. CS for comma splice), and highlighted text in which I added my thoughts and comments about the organization of the essay or additional questions I had. Once my comments were added, I sent the essay back to the student.

The only difficulty with the email system was that students sometimes forgot to save and send their work as rtf (rich text format) files. For students who did not use MS Word at home, they were unable to open their documents and work on them outside class.

Voice Technology

It is difficult to mark a paper electronically and give the detailed feedback in text only. Therefore, I used Wimba, an asynchronous voice technology tool, to give students additional auditory support. As I returned their essays digitally, I also left comments for each student in the Voice Feedback area of the course. The students could listen to my comments as they viewed their documents onscreen. I was able to say things like, "Look at the topic sentence in your third paragraph. Do you see something missing?" By adding the voice support, students got a deeper understanding of my notations and were challenged to think about revisions without automatically getting corrections.

Wimba works much like any text-based asynchronous discussion tool. Messages are threaded graphically so users can see to whom a reply is directed. Each message is time stamped and can be sent in voice or text. The voice technology works much like a simple tape recorder with play/pause/stop/record buttons. A user hits play and listens to the message. If she wants to reply, she hits "reply" and begins a recording sequence. Wimba immediately streams messages in a highly compressed format. These messages are stored so that anyone can access them (and listen to them) at a later time.

I created a voice "board" on a simple web page for the class. For each of my students, I started a discussion thread with a voice message indicating that all voice communication with that student would take place under his or her name. They entered the voice board through a link in WebCT.

Because Wimba is not real-time, students were able to access my voice support and comments at home when it was convenient for them. The only additional peripheral equipment they needed was speakers and a soundcard. If a student wanted to talk back to me, he also needed a microphone. There were no software costs for the students. Once a voice board is accessed (assuming java is enabled) and the student accepts the scripting, the software is automatically installed on that computer.

Resources

In my traditional classes, I routinely supplemented the text with resources from the Internet. For this web-enhanced class, I organized the links by theme and presented them in one location. For example, some links dealt specifically with punctuation problems where others addressed broader themes such as organizational strategies for different types of essays. On a weekly basis, I highlighted one particular link that might be helpful for students to view. Several times, these highlighted links came as a result of repeated problems I saw in their writing; I could target the problems I needed to address.

CHALLENGES AND ROADBLOCKS

Access

When I first decided to pursue the web-enhanced class, I questioned whether the administration could find room in an open computer lab for my class and whether the students would have access to the Internet at home. The administration was very cooperative in designating the space I needed. To my surprise, eleven of the twelve students had Internet access at home. The twelfth student could finish work while on campus (these students were on campus four days a week) or during class time. Access did not present a significant challenge.

Orientation

Teaching the students to use the technology was my first priority. I spent a full class session orienting students to the web-enhanced environment and compiled a detailed users manual for the class. This manual included ample screen shots and simple directions to walk through each procedure. While some students continued to need additional support on procedures, they always asked questions while we were in the lab so it was easy for me to answer them and give support. I continued to send a lot of practice messages during the early weeks, asking students to practice skills in sending and receiving documents or accessing resource links.

Attitudes

Because this class was designed for non-native speakers who might want to continue in traditional college classes, most students quickly saw the value in using the computer for their assignments. They knew word processed assignments would be expected in regular classes. However, for a few students, the attitudinal roadblock was daunting; their pessimism and lack of enthusiasm was measurable. The resistance turned to acceptance after they were instructed to make major changes in the first writing; the ease of cut/copy/paste made major organizational changes much easier than erasing and rewriting.

Spell Check

The issue of spell check and grammar check haunted the class. Frankly, I think spell check can be helpful as long as it does not automatically correct the word. Grammar check is less reliable, although students have to carefully think about why a sentence may have been identified as problematic. In both cases, I gave a presentation on the pro's and con's of both features with many examples of where it helped or hindered. In the end, I let the students decide individually.

Forcing the Issue

A final challenge I will mention is that I had to force the issue on accessing web resources between classes. This follows one of the general principles of online learning; that students become more independent and self-directed. The students might have liked the convenience of working from home, but

that did not translate into having them independently to seek out good resources for the kinds of problems they encountered. When a good link became available and addressed a problem someone was having, I had to specifically direct the students to access it. I forced the issue by adding assignments and activities that required reading whatever web resource was featured.

EVALUATION

One of my initial objectives in designing the web-enhanced environment was to have students revise and rewrite their essays with less resistance and effort as they acquired word processing skills. At the end of the term, I was pleased with how far the students had come in learning to use technology to aid in writing. The students became "fluent" in their ability to write and revise using a computer. Furthermore, the web-enhanced environment gave them additional technology skills and exposed them to a major shift in learning online.

I also wanted students to investigate resources already available online and eventually learn independently to search for help and access sites that could improve their writing. To the extent that students used the web-enhanced environment outside class time, I found the more dedicated students routinely checked the messages, made revisions and came to class better prepared. In fact, they usually completed their assignments before the deadline. Those who struggled with many outside commitments (jobs, families and other classes) did not access the web-enhanced site other than during class.

Finally, I hoped students would use their listening skills to process feedback and comments that would be useful in revising their writing. I saw clear evidence that Wimba enabled the students to practice listening and to receive more substantial feedback from me. It did not make my job easier in making fewer text corrections, but was a more natural way for me to "talk through" the writing instead of only providing marks on a paper.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The web-enhanced environment allowed me to challenge my students through technology and to support their learning in ways I could not or did not have time for in a traditional classroom setting. I could send and receive messages during times when students were not in class with me. I was able to mark their papers and provide auditory comments to support their understanding, again at an asynchronous pace that met my needs as the instructor and theirs as busy adult learners. Final anonymous surveys revealed that the students liked having access to course materials and the voice technology, and greatly appreciated the technology emphasis in the

class.

The success of this first web-enhanced class has generated additional ideas for the future. In the future, I will add a public discussion area for peer review and will ask students to share their writing more frequently. I will continue to assist students in finding resources that document some of their writing and will coordinate this with the reading/vocabulary instructor. Currently, students are required to read so many authentic articles per term, and some of these may be web based and relate to the topics they are writing about. When assignments form the nucleus for speaking (some writing becomes text for speeches in speaking/listening) I can use Wimba to have students practice pronunciation. These changes will also be implemented for intermediate level students as they, too, will have a web-enhanced environment in the future.

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