GPPG
GOOD PRACTICE
PUBLICATION GRANTS
AKO AOTEAROA

Loops of literacy: Promoting writing skills in large undergraduate classes through online group work

Author

Nancy November, *The University of Auckland*

Introduction

Twenty-first century undergraduates are often highly digitally literate. Recent research has revealed their high levels of technology usage and competence, and their propensity to integrate the latest communication, information, and management technologies seamlessly into their daily lives (Andone, Dron, Pemberton, & Boyne, 2007). This competence can be turned to effective educational ends. Researchers have shown how interactivity, including group work, is essential to the most effective learning scenarios (Anderson & Simpson, 1998; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Hodgson, 1999). It has been found, moreover, that the online environment is an ideal place in which to foster collaborative work (Gabriel, 2004). Yet can students' digital literacy and energy for online interactions be used to enhance their literacy in general, and to develop their writing skills in particular?

This article addresses this question, describing a productive learning cycle, which I term a 'loop of literacy'. In my 150-student first-year course, MUSIC 144/144G, 'Turning Points in Western Music', I have measured the digital literacy of my students at the beginning of each semester. I have then sought, in carefully designed online interventions carried out in 2008 and 2010, to use this often very high-level digital literacy to improve student writing. This teaching practice, which involved the use of online group work and online writing tools, came full circle: the students' engagement in the discipline was enhanced

by their newly developed literacy and their energy for online learning increased correspondingly. In 2009 the course reverted to the previous teaching style, without use of the online assignment sequences. This provided a useful point of comparison.

Implementation

In designing online writing assignment sequences, I drew on recent e-learning scholarship, especially the literature concerning online group work. Salmon's (2000, 2002) work demonstrates how to structure and channel online discussion in order not only to encourage students into the discussion in the first place, but also to lead them towards higher order tasks. Haynes (2002) has provided hints on how to cater to diversity in online group work by asking students to assess their online interaction styles and then generating guidelines to assist each type of learner. More specifically, Warnock (2009) has discussed how one can usefully separate the process of teaching writing online into steps, which include collaboration in virtual groups and peer review. The recent e-learning scholarship also provides valuable guidelines for dealing with the clashes of desires, expectations, and learning styles that lurk in the online environment (see Lapointe & Riesetter, 2008; and Dirkx & Smith, 2004).

My online discussion and writing assignment sequences are multifaceted in terms of the types of tools deployed, some tailored more to visual learners, others to conceptual/text-based learners. Catering to diversity is important in the undergraduate classroom, especially in a 'General Education' course like 'Turning Points in Western Music', where the students are from various disciplines. Students in the 2008 course were involved in three collaborative steps, designed as a sequence that would lead to individual essays on the following topic: 'discuss the significance of X in the history of Western music, where X is the landmark recording chosen by your group'. Students first compiled annotated bibliographies, in groups, online using Google Docs (**http://docs.google.com**), then took part in small-group online discussion, and finally posted reflections online in larger groups (see November, 2010).

When the course was run in 2010, the group discussion assignment was specifically directed towards improving the level of writing in the final assignment for the course, a concert review. This time the online discussion in small groups was based on E. T. A. Hoffmann's 1810 review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Now there were four steps in which the students were asked to think about persuasive language in the context of writing about music. They first analysed the rhetoric of Hoffmann's text using one of two online text analysis tools: Wordle (**http://www.wordle.net**) and Helen Sword's Wasteline Test (**http://www.writersdiet.ac.nz/wasteline.html**). Then they responded to each others' analyses, tried using their own persuasive language in writing about a composer of their choice, and finally commented on their peers' work. A new step introduced in the 2010 course was the peer reviewing of the students' final concert reviews. This step was carried out using the online peer review system Aropā (**http://aropa.ec.auckland.ac.nz/src/aropa.php**).

Benefits - Student Perspective

Student surveys before and after the online work showed an improvement in the students' attitudes to the use of online interactions in helping them to learn during the course. Before the online work, 51.4% of the 2010 cohort either agreed or strongly agreed that interacting online helped them to learn; after the intervention this figure rose to 64.1%. The students were starting from a position of greater enthusiasm than those in 2008, of whom 44% agreed or strongly agreed to this statement before the intervention, 61% afterwards. In both years the students were also asked to identify which of the online interactions were most beneficial to their learning, and to give reasons for their selections. In 2008 almost half the survey respondents found the online discussion (probing question and critical response) in small groups to be the most beneficial. Twenty-four percent of respondents nominated the annotated bibliography using Google Docs, and 21% chose the online reflection in larger groups. The 2010 cohort also identified online discussion in small groups as a highly beneficial step. The reasons students gave for this choice show several key learner advantages of online asynchronous discussion in small groups:

- Autonomy: enjoyment of the process of constructing their own knowledge and using their own critical skills to give peer feedback;
- Comfort and congeniality. As one student put it: 'Small groups make it more intimate. Easier to put a point across' (Student A, 2008);
- Diversity and range of resources and viewpoints shared;
- Ease and efficiency of idea exchange and knowledge building;
- Time to give a considered response (as compared with face-to-face interactions).

Both cohorts clearly identified vital educational benefits from online group work and the online peer review tasks: they experienced meta-learning, that is, learning about learning itself, as a product of the interactive process. One student observed, '[online discussion] helped to understand how others think about the topic and through this it helps open new ideas for yourself' (Student B, 2008). In focus groups held in 2010, the students noted that the role of 'semi-marker' (i.e., taking on a teacher/instructor role) afforded them a new critical perspective on their own work:

Feedback from others in small groups [was] very helpful as they picked up on what I missed, giving insight to me for future reference and also being a semi-marker (writing posts on others' reviews) also stimulates my own brain, gets me thinking and becoming very particular in review writing. (Student C, 2010)

Benefits - Teacher Perspective

How did those marking the online and offline written assignments rate the quality of the student writing? In 2008, the e-moderators noted that it was the critical reflections phase, in large groups, that engendered some of the highest quality work. Perhaps the students felt that the stakes were higher, and

thus the quality of response had to be higher, in that more public forum. Indeed, the assignments had been purposely designed so that students could use the 'low stakes' writing and research tasks, carried out in small groups online, to build up to the 'higher stakes' and more formal/'public' writing tasks. The 'higher stakes' task – a final essay or concert review – entailed a more formal writing style and a bringing together of the literacy skills developed in the previous steps: synthesis of viewpoints, critical commentary, argumentation from evidence, correct use of music terminology, and appropriate referencing and citing.

Students showed understanding of how the less formal online discussion and reflection could feed into their more formal reflective discursive essays. In the best essays, students wove together the voices of their peers and scholars in service of their own arguments. In the following excerpt, for example, the student adeptly supports a point raised in group discussion by quoting from another group member and then from an established scholar:

In examining the Furtwängler recording, my research team found that an 'unparalleled emotional and expressive depth' characterises the performance, due to the fact that he was 'not afraid of deviating slightly from the score to enhance the emotion' and musicality of the work [Student D, 2008]. As Cairns (2001) observes, this subjective approach resulted in 'an imprecise beat', a free approach to tempo, and a greater natural sonority rising from the cello and bass section. (Student E, 2008)

In the 2010 iteration of the course I made a greater effort to emphasise connections between the online discussion-based writing and the 'offline' writing. This involved adding the extra steps mentioned above ('Implementation'), and verbally reiterating that the final essay was just part of a larger writing development process. The students took this to heart: this was one factor in the improvement of the average grade for the final written assignment, from B+ (77%) in 2008 to A– (81%) in 2010. In the intervening year, when the online writing assignment sequence was not included in the course, the students were simply to hand in hard copies of the final essay, which they had written and researched according to their own personal processes. It was notable that the marks for the final essay were lower in this year – the average mark was 74% (B).

The e-moderators in 2010, several of whom had also been involved in moderating the 2008 course, noted that the quality of comments and reflections was higher due to the more tightly focused sequence of online tasks. They observed more critical insight and the development of students' personal voices. The following comment contains an example of the latter:

E-Moderator A: the quality of written responses was high (see Student F's response to part 3 – group 4) [a task involving taking on the persuasive voice of an early nineteenth-century reviewer of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony]: 'Could we say, if we were to glance back at the music of the past as one swirl of colour and glory and fire, that Beethoven is to his time as Handel was to yesterday? That the poignant echoes of his majestic oratorios set free the same romantic voice that pervades Beethoven's greatest symphonies and concertos? Certainly, Handel was not the rebel that Beethoven is; his music does not

ignite the same frenzy of discussion. But in spirit, in energy, in tragic sweetness, and in might, there is something comparable, something too explosive to be contained [etc.]'. (Student F, 2010)

Despite improvements in the students' abilities to write persuasively about music, they were still encountering some quite significant problems. In interviews with the staff who marked the final essays, and in student focus groups, the following areas of concern were identified:

- Difficulties using the appropriate musical term or concept in context;
- Difficulties crafting higher level arguments that go beyond simple comparisons towards more critical responses;
- The need for students to develop their personal voices further in writing.

E-learning strategies for dealing with these issues within and beyond first-year music history courses include the following:

- Student creation of a course glossary (such as that in the learning Management system Moodle, **http://moodle.org**), which is specifically geared to the development of the vocabulary of the discipline;
- Extended online discussion tasks, based around a focal topic or issue (possibly introduced in class), which specifically promotes student learning and contextual use of new music terminology (e.g., from the course glossary);
- An emphasis on peer analysis of writing (for example, using Aropä), exploring positive and negative aspects of the writing (for example, using the Wasteline Test), and trying to identify hallmarks of the writer's personal 'voice'.

Guidelines

Based on feedback from students and staff in 2008 and 2010, I have developed the 'the four Ms', guidelines for using online group work to improve student writing:

Guideline 1: Modularise, and think beyond the online module
In 'blended courses', integrate online learning with a variety of other appropriate learning modalities; choose the best tool (whether on- or offline) for the learning task; and make sure that the connections between on- and offline writing tasks are clear to the students. Note that our Internet savvy students still ask that instructors 'keep it [the assignment sequence] simple' (Student G, 2008).

Guideline 2: Motivate, from a student perspective
Students of the Facebook age are concerned about their online presence. Moving from low-stakes (small-group, non-assessed, less formal) online writing tasks to higher stakes (large-group, assessed,

more formal) tasks creates a safe environment in which they can express themselves and use their digital literacy to educational ends.

Guideline 3: Model the process, and permit the teacher perspective

Consider gathering high-quality student writings as models that show, for example, how online discussion can feed into essays. Students enjoy the role of teacher: allow them room to use this skill, for example, by using peer review assessment rubrics that are simple and open-ended.

Guideline 4: Moderate, and also guide

For first-year students, in particular, the moderator can play a significant role in guiding discussion. As one student observed, his group had generated many good questions, 'but no one could answer them' (Student H, 2008). E-moderators can model the process of the enquiring mind, suggesting routes to answers and showing students ways to validate their own voices.

References

Anderson, B., & Simpson, M. (1998). Learning and teaching at a distance: A social affair. *Computers in NZ Schools, 10*(1), 25–29.

Andone, D. M., Dron, J., Pemberton, L., & Boyne, C. W. (2007). E-learning environments for digitally-minded students. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research, 18*(1), 41–53.

Curtis, D. D., & Lawson, M. J. (2001). Exploring collaborative online learning. Journal of *Asynchronous Learning Networks, 5*(1), 21–55.

Dirkx, J. M, & Smith, R. O. (2004). Thinking out of a bowl of spaghetti: Learning to learn in online collaborative groups. In T. S. Roberts, (Ed.), *Online collaborative learning: Theory and practice* (pp.
132–159). London: Information Science Publishing.

Gabriel, M. A. (2004). Learning together: Exploring group interactions online. *Journal of Distance Education, 19*(1), 54–72.

Hodgson, P. (1999). How to teach in cyberspace. *Techniques, 74*(5), 34.

Haynes, D. (2002). *The social dimensions of on-line learning: Perceptions, theories, and practical responses*. Paper presented at the Distance Education Association of New Zealand Conference, Wellington, New Zealand.

Lapointe, L., & Reisetter, M. (2008). Belonging online: Students' perceptions of the value and efficacy of an online learning community. *International Journal on E-Learning,* 7/4, 641–655.

November, N. (2010). Integrating online group work into first-year music studies in New Zealand: 'This IS a university'. In A. T. Ragusa (Ed.), *Interaction in communication technologies & virtual learning environments: Human factors* (pp. 314–330). IGI Global.

Salmon, G. (2000). *E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online.* London: Kogan Page.

Salmon, G. (2002). *E-Tivities: The key to active online learning.* London: Kogan Page.

Warnock, S. (2009). *Teaching writing online: How and why.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.