Introductory Chapter.
Learning and Teaching Writing Online

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1 Writing in Online Environments

This book is about technology-enhanced writing development in higher education. It has been produced by international scholars working in a range of countries and collaborating digitally, despite the distances between them and the differences between their institutions. Students are preparing to enter an increasingly blended world of work, yet the pedagogic models at play in higher education are rarely up to speed (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). By bringing together leading researchers of online writing development, this book provides a ready reference for educators who wish to skill up in promoting digital dialogue, or find new techniques to try in their virtual learning environments.

‘Writing’ in this volume is defined as a learning tool that promotes language development and knowledge construction (Castelló and Donahue, 2012; Klein, Boscolo, Kirkpatrick, and Gelati, 2014). Writing is also seen as a tool that facilitates thinking and enables thoughts to be communicated. Collaborative writing online connects individual and shared thinking, and is viewed as having the potential to facilitate and stimulate learning for all those involved.

The book demonstrates strategies for success in teaching and learning writing processes in higher education, both in technology-enhanced environments, and for courses online. This volume turns the spotlight on our need to continue researching students’ experiences, whilst exploring the dialogic nature of teaching and learning writing. Furthermore, there is a special need for researchers to focus on the dialogic potential when writers come together online, as we are reminded in the book’s Afterword.

2 Rationale

The starting point for this volume is a desire to embrace the complexity of technology-enhanced writing development. The authors share a conceptualisation of online learning and teaching as a valuable pedagogic approach, but one that requires specialist preparation, training, and evaluation (Deane, 2010). Three assumptions are made by the volume’s contributors about these issues.

First, the authors treat online learning and teaching as both structurally and essentially different to face-to-face interaction, which means that there can be no simple ‘translation’ of syllabi and exercises from the real, to the virtual classroom (Harasim, 1993; Guasch, Álvarez, and Espasa, 2010). Chapters reflecting this view include chapter 1 and chapter 5, which are about collaborative writing in online environments, and chapter 7, which reports on the design of a disciplinary course on written communication skills. Hence, the authors outline how to prepare to teach online in both general and specific cases; they discuss programme planning, assessment, and ways of supporting the dynamics between learners online (Nelson and Schunn, 2008).

Secondly, there is a consensus throughout the book that teacher training is a core part of successful technology-enhanced curricula. Ongoing professional development for educators in higher education can take place through a variety of vehicles, such as co-working with technology specialists, learning by doing, engaging with research, and attending events. Chapters especially useful for teacher development include chapter 2, which discusses automated feedback, chapter 3, which evaluates asynchronous online writing tutorials, and chapter 4, which explores methods to support synthesis writing online. As a whole, the volume contributes to debates about training to teach online, and each chapter surveys key literature and provide recommendations for practice.

Thirdly, the authors consider evaluation as fundamental to the enterprise of enhancing the learning and teaching of writing online. Both the theoretical frameworks and the results the authors share elucidate the strengths and weaknesses of particular pedagogies. Chapters echoing the value of evaluation include chapter 6, which is about using freewriting in online courses, and chapter 8, which argues in favour of embedding online writing development in the disciplines. Overall, the book asserts online writing development as both a pragmatic necessary, and a evidence-based approach to improving learning and teaching in higher education.

This volume sets out to identify, analyse and highlight the support needed and the advantages of bringing technology to work harder for writing development. To meet this objective, the book is divided into four sections, moving