

Using knowledge networks to teach online writing skills in the professional writing classroom

Rachel Robertson

Department of Communication and Cultural Studies, Curtin University, Australia

KEYWORDS

Knowledge networks,
online writing,
collaborative learning,
authentic assessment

Abstract Recent research shows that online knowledge networks can be effective learning tools. The aim of this project was to determine the value of knowledge networking in classes where students have minimal experience (and low confidence) in online environments; and where the web is both the learning environment and the object of their learning. In *Writing and Research for Professional Contexts 311*, students learn to research, write, and edit web-based material in preparation for the workplace. This project introduced and evaluated three new assessment tasks that exploited knowledge networking in developing student skills in online writing genres.

Background

The Professional Writing and Publishing (PWP) major in the Bachelor of Arts degree is designed to develop the next generation of professional communicators working in government, non-government or corporate environments. A fusion of creative writing and professional communication, this major produces job-ready graduates for careers such as feature writing, editing, corporate communications, speech writing, website writing, and public relations.

The growth of web 2.0 technologies has brought an increasing demand for graduates with online writing and editing skills (see Robertson and Scolaro 2011). We have responded to this demand by adapting our curriculum, learning, and assessment tools and methodologies to include a greater focus on online research, writing, and editing, and on the skills required to be an effective communicator in an environment where social media are becoming some of the most dominant communication strategies.

Participation in the 2011 eScholar initiative allowed us to trial a number of new learning and assessment tools in several of our units: for example, creating short video-podcast learning materials for *Writing, Editing and Publishing 211*; moving to assessed blogs in *Writing Creative Non-Fiction 310*; and creating an online community of fieldwork students in *Professional Writing Placement 321*. This chapter analyses the introduction of

new learning and assessments tasks in Writing and Research for Professional Contexts 311, a key third-year unit that prepares students for professional writing in the workplace.

The challenge

The Learning Outcomes for Writing and Research for Professional Contexts 311 are:

- Interpret and apply concepts and techniques necessary to a range of workplace writing and research tasks;
- Develop and evaluate a body of work in readiness for the diverse needs of professional practice in the workplace;
- Apply independent and collaborative workplace-specific writing skills to the management and resolution of a range of policy and professional practice issues.

In the past, students in this unit have written and edited briefing notes, reports, newsletter articles, and other print-based documents. In response to a rapidly changing workplace, however, we wanted students to develop the additional skills needed to write and edit websites and online text. Since many of them were unfamiliar with online writing, and had never created a website or done any formal internet studies, our challenge was to create learning and assessment tasks which provided effective, relevant training in online writing and editing, and which were manageable for students without any relevant experience. It was important that we did not try to teach website design, for example, as this is not our area of expertise and would not help our students achieve the learning outcomes for this unit.

A key component of Writing and Research for Professional Contexts 311 is team-based learning and assessment. Students work in small groups throughout the semester, pooling their research to complete a series of individual and collaborative assessments. In the past, the only collaborative assessment tasks were group presentations. However, new technologies have made collaborative writing and editing tasks much more readily available and easy to assess. In most workplaces, the research, writing and editing tasks are shared within small teams and we wanted to simulate this type of activity in this unit.

Approach

Our approach was informed by Matthew Allen's research findings on the use of knowledge networking techniques in the Internet Communications program and elsewhere (see Allen 2010 and 2012 and Allen and Long 2009). In this approach, online knowledge networking is not designed to take the place of face-to-face learning, but to be incorporated into the course structure to provide students with new and exciting opportunities for collaborative learning. Our aim was to develop effective learning/teaching and assessment tools for Writing and Research for Professional Contexts 311 using web 2.0 technologies that allow teachers to step back from the scene of learning, giving students room to work and learn with each other from their collective

skills set. We would intervene only when we can be really effective: when the students themselves realise what they need to learn, and what they can't learn from each other.

Based on the relevant teaching and learning literature (Allen 2012, Bloxham and Boyd 2007, Herrington and Herrington 2006, Woo et al 2007), our approach focused on:

- encouraging problem-based learning;
- creating a reflective and skills-sharing learning environment;
- creating a simulated real world environment; and
- building new learning tasks around assessment components.

New learning and assessment tasks

Three new assessment tasks were introduced. In the first assessment, students research and write a news article for a specific website (where previously their task had been to write a print newsletter item). Second, small teams share research documents using Google docs in order to jointly use this research as the basis for all written tasks in the unit. The unit coordinator is also a part of each small Google group. Finally, the teams write and edit a collaborative website for a specific purpose and audience as nominated by the unit coordinator and using a template provided on Google sites by the unit coordinator.

Although our aim is to develop independent thinkers and learners who will have the confidence to build their own mutually supportive learning networks inside their workplaces, these are all structured, scaffolded, and resourced assignments. Students are given an information sheet and an in-class demonstration on using Google docs and Google sites, including the vital information on controlling their own privacy settings and on allowing access to their websites only to group members and the assessor. They are provided with a Google sites template specifically designed for this assignment. We bring in a guest lecturer from industry to talk to them about real-world online writing. Students are shown examples of websites to analyse and evaluate, using skills they have learned in a lecture and seminar on internet-based research and techniques for assessing the credibility of online material. Lastly, individuals or groups have the opportunity to meet with the unit coordinator for assistance at any time if required.

The success of the new learning and assessment tasks was evaluated by two measures: the benchmarking of student-produced websites against industry-standard websites (by the unit coordinator); and feedback from students themselves—their opinions and beliefs about their baseline skills and what they learned in this exercise, collected through an Ethics-approved anonymous survey administered in week one and again in week fourteen.

Findings

Student products

While the work produced for the new assessment tasks varied in quality, the majority of it was judged by the unit coordinator to reach a base-level industry standard: that is, they were equivalent to what would be expected from new graduates. For example, one group was given the task of creating a website on behalf of a peak body for Western Australian writers. Its brief was to outline the challenges and opportunities that digital publishing offers to emerging writers. The website that this group produced was well structured, well researched, included relevant information and links in appropriate language, and was easy to navigate. It was, in fact, superior to the actual website produced by the peak body in WA.

It was significant that the students produced better work in their collaborative website than they did, overall, in their individual web news articles. A number of factors may have led to this of course including the greater time most students gave to the website task and the fact that the website task more closely simulated a real workplace task. Yet the findings appear to support the hypothesis that it is worthwhile to give students room to work and learn with each other from their collective skills set. Working in a collaborative team, their collective skills are greater than the sum of their individual skills. Knowledge networks are highly effective in teaching web-writing skills in the professional writing classroom.

Student opinions and beliefs

Students were surveyed at the start and the end of this unit in class time. The survey was optional and anonymous. While all 42 students completed the initial survey, only 36 completed the final survey, as a number of students missed the final class and did not take the opportunity to complete the survey afterwards when invited to do so in their own time. This may limit the extent to which the survey data can be generalised. The usual Curtin eVALUate report provided supplementary information and was completed by 16 students.

Previous experience

Only 11 of the 42 students (26%) in the unit had previously written text for both a website and a blog. Nineteen (or 45%) had written website text before and the same number had written a blog before (see Figure 1).

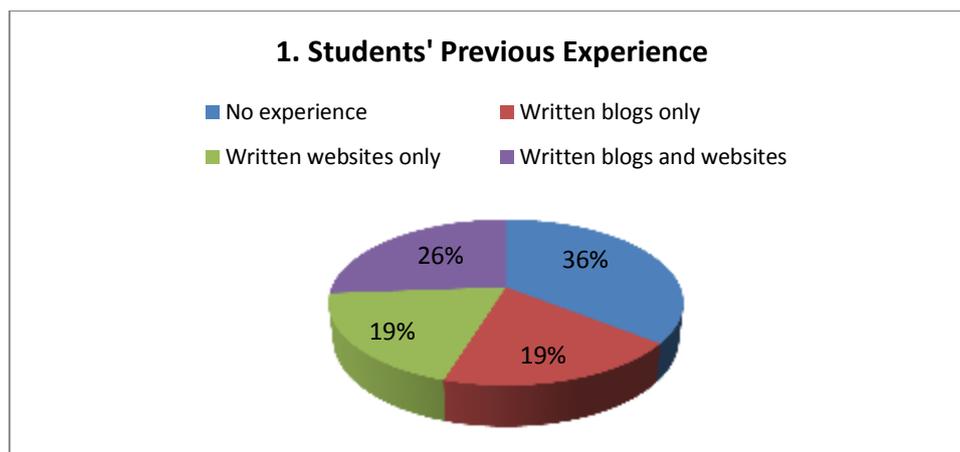


Figure 1: Students' previous experience

Confidence

Students were asked how confident they felt on a scale of 1 to 6 about their skills in research, writing, editing and working in a team on material for websites, online material generally, and print material. The same questions were then asked again at the end of the unit and a comparison made.

At the start of the unit, students were most confident in their skills in writing and editing print material (average rating 4.24) and working in a team to develop website material (3.76). By the end of the unit, students rated their skills in these two areas as 4.83 and 4.81 respectively, demonstrating a 14% increase in their average confidence levels at writing and editing print material and a 28% increase in their average confidence levels at working in a team to develop website material.

Those skills that students rated lower initially showed a greater increase in confidence by the end of the unit. For example, students initially rated their skills in designing the layout of a website at an average of 2.24 which rose by 64% to 3.67, even though the unit did not specifically teach website layout or design. Students initially rated their skills in writing new material for a corporate website at 3.31 and in writing material for a corporate blog at 3.29. These increased by 37% to 4.53 for writing website material and by 38% to 4.53 for writing blog text. The other skills addressed (research skills, editing skills, overall online writing and editing skills) rose by between 30 and 32% (see Figure 2).

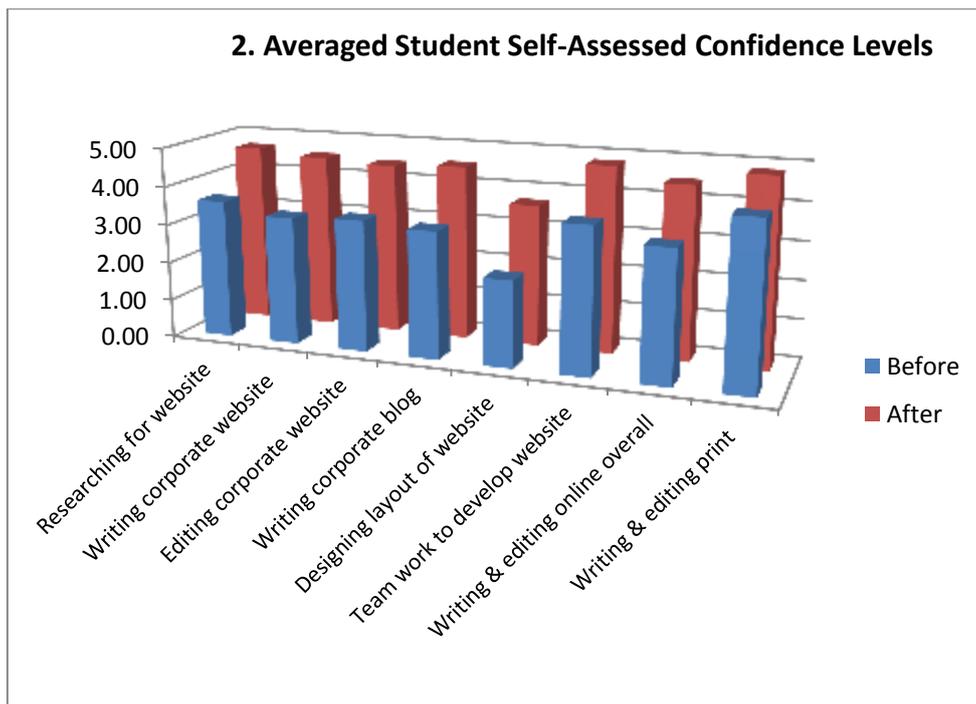


Figure 2: Average student self-assessed confidence levels

Value of learning and assessment tasks

At the end of the unit, students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 6 the usefulness of the range of learning and assessment tasks, guest lectures, tutorial input and feedback on assessments given (see Figure 3). Averaging these responses, all aspects were rated quite useful (3 or 4) or very useful (5 or 6). The most useful aspects were considered to be the unit coordinator’s lectures and tutorial input (5.17), the assessment task of writing a collection of individually authored documents including the new online news article (5.08), and the unit coordinator’s feedback on written work (5.00). The least useful activity was the use of Google docs to share research (3.89).

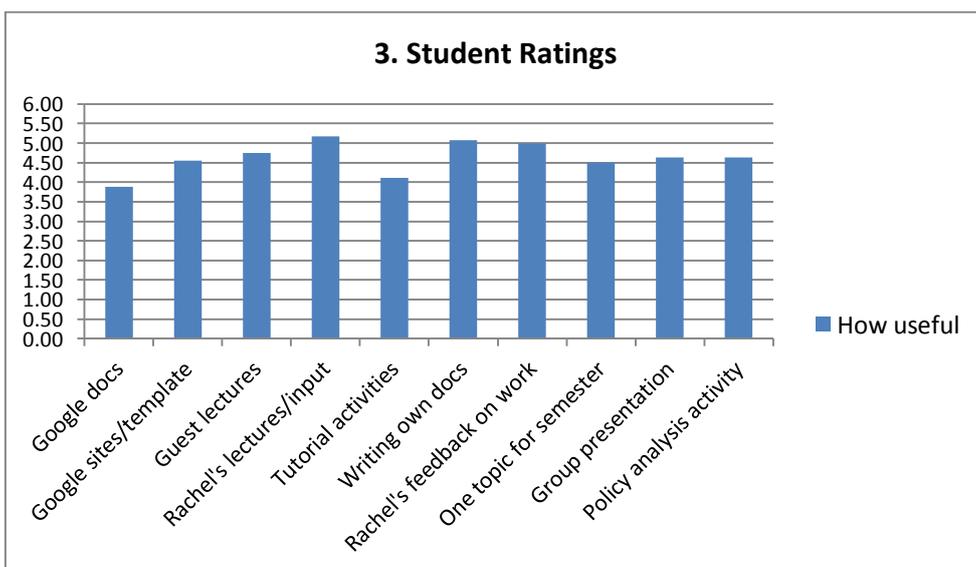


Figure 3: Student ratings of the learning tasks

Students were also invited to add any other comments to the survey form and many respondents did so. In general, the comments reflected a view that using Google docs was not as successful as the other aspects of the unit. The use of Google sites, however, and the specially created template was considered to be a valuable learning tool. Students found it hard but rewarding to work in teams to create a website, but many thought that also having to do a group presentation on the website was unnecessary. Comments made by students through the eVALUate survey were similar in content.

Among the most salient comments were:

- How to improve unit – ‘not so much in-class group activities; no Google docs’.
- How to improve unit – ‘have some classes in computer lab’.
- How to improve unit – ‘give more information about places to obtain research from’.
- Most useful – ‘learning to write in the appropriate manner to target the reader’.
- Most useful – ‘how to use Google sites’.
- Most useful – ‘confidence, I’m more prepared to enter the workplace with additional skills’.
- Most useful – ‘the access to such a wide variety of different texts (self-produced) in such a short time gave huge expansion to personal development as a professional writer’.
- Least useful – ‘Google docs – hard to use and not compatible with everyone’.
- Least useful – ‘sharing research for the individual assignment with Google docs took up more time than it benefited’.
- Other comments – ‘a very interesting unit, I’ve learned skills I know I will use in the future’.
- Other comments – ‘you run a very useful unit, the feedback you give on assignments is fantastic’.
- Other comments – ‘I wish all Professional Writing units were this relevant to careers and actually writing in the workforce.’

On the basis of these responses it is reasonable to conclude that the assessments were considered to be valuable and effective, although there is obviously a case for refining and streamlining some of the assessment technologies. These comments need to be evaluated in the light of the other findings, however. We agree that we need a more user-friendly document sharing platform as an alternative to the somewhat unwieldy Google docs; but once this is sorted out, the benefits of sharing research through an appropriate technology should become clear to students.

Conclusion

Are online knowledge networks effective learning tools for students who have minimal experience (and low confidence) in online environments, and for whom the web is both a learning environment and the object of their learning?

Our findings suggest that third-year PWP students (in 2011) had minimal experience in researching, writing and editing online material and that the changes to this unit provided them with a valuable opportunity to develop and apply the required skills and knowledge.

Students struggled with the use of Google docs as a tool for sharing research, in spite of the information and demonstration provided to them. The use of Google sites, however, proved successful and students produced collaborative work of a high standard. The task of writing individually-authored online news articles was less engaging to students than the task of collaboratively writing a website. The website task, as well as requiring joint problem-solving and reflection, was considered by students to be a more effective simulation of a real workplace task. While some students found team work to be difficult, most recognised the value of extending their team work skills and appreciated the opportunity to do so in an environment where the unit coordinator could support them and also view their individual contributions (as enabled by Google docs and Google sites).

Students undertaking Writing and Research for Professional Contexts in 2012 will have slightly more experience of online writing because they will have written blog posts in their first and second year units and may have participated in editing tasks through small group wikis. This unit, however, is still likely to be a key unit for developing online writing and editing skills, along with the new Advanced Editing and Publishing 322 (beginning in semester 2, 2012). The 2012 learning and assessment tasks have been refined based on the research undertaken. Students are given a number of choices about how they share their research now, including Google docs, Blackboard Groups, emailing each other and photocopying print material. The collaborative website task has been retained and students will have the opportunity to share their websites with other students in their class (though presentation skills will no longer be assessed, thus increasing the focus on the collaboration and the website text). The online news article assessment has been retained but the focus will be more specific, increasing its similarity to a workplace task. Finally, an additional lecture from an industry leader has been added on the uses of social media. We envisage continuing to adapt our learning and assessment tasks to provide students with opportunities to develop the changing skills required by employers of Professional Writing and Publishing graduates.

References

Allen, Matthew. (2012) *Learning in Networks of Knowledge: Applications for a paradigm shift in online learning*. <http://www.knowledgenetworklearning.net/>

- Allen, Matthew. (2010). 'Risks and opportunities in authentic learning via the Internet', *National Curriculum Innovation and Quality Forum*, December, Melbourne Australia.
- Allen, Matthew and Jane Long. (2009) 'Learning as Knowledge Networking: Conceptual Foundations for Revised Uses of the Internet in Higher Education', *Proceedings of the World Congress on Engineering and Computer Science*, Vol I, WCECS 2009, October 20-22, 2009, San Francisco, USA.
- Bloxham, S and P Boyd. (2007) *Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*. London, Open University.
- Herrington, Anthony and Jan Herrington. (2006) *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education*. London, Information Science Publishing.
- Robertson, R and N Sclaro. (2011) 'Employer expectations of professional writing and publishing graduates'. Unpublished, Curtin University.
- Woo, Younghee , Jan Herrington, Shirley Agostinho, and Thomas C. Reeves. (2007) 'Implementing Authentic Tasks in Web-Based Learning Environments: The instructor's inclusion of authentic activities improves the quality of student interaction and learning in online classrooms'. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly Magazine*, Vol 30, No. 3. <http://www.educause.edu/>.

Citation:

Robertson, R. (2012). Using knowledge networks to teach online writing skills in the professional writing classroom. In A. Herrington, J. Schrape, K. Singh (Eds.), *Engaging students with learning technologies* (pp. 167-175). Perth, Australia: Curtin University.



[eScholar 2011 Rachel Robertson - Case Study Video](http://youtu.be/0rXDQH4Cgeg)

<http://youtu.be/0rXDQH4Cgeg>

