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Web-based writing support: making it useable for distance teachers

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Web-based Writing Support: Making it Useable for Distance Teachers

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Abstract

This paper considers the issues that distance teachers in higher education who are not writing specialists face in supporting their students' academic writing development. We discuss the usefulness of open web-based writing support resources, and propose the need for a system that serves as an interface with these resources. Such a system should help teachers to make quick selections of materials that can be offered to students to address specific problems in the students' assignments. We consider principles for the design of such a system, based on the experience of building and testing a small prototype for tutors on an Open University Masters in Education course.

Keywords: distance education, e-learning, academic writing, online writing support

Topics

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Introduction: the increasing requirement for support for students' writing in higher education

All students need to engage with the writing requirements of their subjects and study areas if they are to make the most of their educational opportunities, whatever their backgrounds and whatever higher education context they find themselves in (Elander et al, 2009; Johns & Swales, 2002; Krause, 2006). Student cohorts in higher education are now linguistically and ethnically more diverse than ever before, with more mature and non-traditional students in their ranks, many of whom juggle work and study commitments (Hyland, 2009; Robotham, 2008; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009). Greater numbers of students study part-time or at a distance (OECD, 2007) and a range of new media and technologies are being employed by institutions to deliver teaching in more flexible and, they hope, more cost-effective ways. This diversity in both student background and modes of study blurs traditional distinctions between the support needs of native and non-native writers of English, and many researchers now acknowledge that an increasing number of students require support for writing in academic contexts, regardless of their linguistic background (Baynham, 2000; North, 2005; Strauss & Walton, 2005; Casanave, 2008; Wingate & Tribble, 2011). This paper focuses on the challenges facing distance teachers who are not writing specialists, in providing that support. In particular, we explore the possibilities and obstacles presented by the use of writing support resources that can be found, freely accessible, on the internet.

Problems for non-specialist teachers supporting students' writing

For part-time subject teachers who are not writing specialists, to support the writing development of students who may have little experience of academic writing places a major additional burden on an already over-stretched workload. In some cases, this may be a demand that takes them beyond their professional competence (De Fazio and Crock, 2008; Puxley, 2008). In a UK study, Pilcher (2011), for example, interviewing post-graduate supervisors about the qualities of a good writing, noted that while they emphasised 'core areas of linguistic coherence and competence' (p.33) they illustrated these concerns by using examples such as spelling mistakes. Dunn & Lindblom (2003) argue that many teachers mark grammar because of a 'secret fear' that they don't know how to mark other aspects of students' writing (p.47), such as those involving more complex decisions around audience, purpose, voice, vocabulary, sentence structure (p.49). Puxley (2008) provides evidence of ways in which some teachers perceive their students to be challenged by the conventions of academic writing. Her survey of distance teachers on a UK-based international Masters in Education programme revealed that they thought more than a third of the students on the programme needed support with 'basic written English' and/or 'Masters level expression', but they also confused issues between these two dimensions of academic writing, with certain problems - such as badly-constructed sentences – as likely to be attributed to one as the other. Puxley also reports that students' writing problems mean that distance teachers have to spend additional time on giving written feedback. Whilst some spent a great deal of time and effort trying to support students with writing problems, others did very little as they felt uncomfortable in this role (Puxley, 2008: 15).

In distance learning contexts – those in which students receive their education at a location 'of their choosing', which may include over the internet (HESA, 2009) – the challenge to teachers supporting student writing development is complicated by a number of factors. As most communication nowadays is textual, via email, discussion forums etc., the time required to manage the expectations of students, both as individuals and as a group, is likely to be greater than it would be in a face-to-face context (Rovai & Downey, 2010; McVey, 2008). To interact effectively, both teacher and student need to be competent with the whole range of technical media and genres of written media-based communication that the context demands (electronic feedback forms, email, institutional virtual learning environment message boards, and other institutional and generic online communication systems). Student expectations for personal support may also be greater in distance contexts than they are in traditional teaching, as peer-groups are often less evident and less effective in scaffolding engagement with learning tasks (Stodel, Thompson & McDonald, 2006; McVey, 2008). Students may lack the 'higher degree of self-directedness' (Rovai & Downey, 2010: p.145) or other elements of preparedness for distance learning, such as skill in reading comprehension, that are necessary to make the best of the limited personalised support available (Dekka & McMurray, 2000). As a consequence, the task of the distance teacher, in attempting to provide appropriately individualised support, can be extremely intensive and time-consuming. Addressing writing problems presents a considerable additional challenge to distance teachers who may also be struggling to come to terms with cultural and linguistic diversity in their student groups.

In this paper we explore two aspects of this general problem, and propose an approach to ameliorating it. Firstly, we consider the usefulness of currently available writing support websites as resources for distance teachers seeking to support their students' writing. Secondly, we propose some principles for the design of a system to act as an interface between teachers and the world of open web-based writing support resources, to help them to minimise the time involved in matching specific support materials to specific students and their problems. These design principles we illustrate with examples from a small project recently undertaken at the Open University.

We do not go into the question, here, of how web-based writing support resources should themselves be designed in order to address particular writing problems of distance learners. This issue certainly needs addressing, as rather little work on it has been done to date (see Yang & Chan, 2008; Pennarola, 2007; McVey, 2008 for some insights). However, we have not attempted to assess whether materials are actually effective from the student's point of view. Rather, in addressing the practical question of how to support teachers in using the resources that are available, we focus our attention on how to help teachers, as non-writing-specialists, to think about the problems that occur in their students' writing, as well as to locate materials aimed at addressing them.

The usefulness of web-based writing support resources

It is important to distinguish what we are calling 'writing support' from the explicit teaching of writing. In the USA in particular a tradition of explicit instruction in composition and rhetoric has developed, in which writing is treated as a subject in its own right (see Davidson & Tomic, 1999 for an historical overview). Many of the web-based resources from American universities that we review below have been developed against the background assumption that all students will receive some form of writing instruction at some point in their university studies. Similarly, within the field of second language learning the need for an explicit focus on the teaching of writing is assumed (see, for example, the Journal of Second Language Writing). However, as we noted above, the concern here is the contingent support for addressing writing problems that non-specialist teachers may be called upon to provide, without their students necessarily having access to sources of explicit writing instruction. Conventionally, the approach to providing such writing support at a distance is in the form of guides and handbooks, which may be aimed at both students and teachers, and applied to a variety of different subject areas (Oshima and Hogue, 2006; Swales and

Feak, 2004). Such guides will typically address a wide range of topics, from 'sentence structure', to 'writing a literature review'. Writing support of this kind is usually generic, in the sense that it is assumed to apply to all academic writing contexts, and not tailored to any particular subject area (although broad distinctions are sometimes made between writing for the Sciences, Humanities, or Social Sciences etc.). Students and their teachers are expected to adapt this generic advice for their own discipline areas and specific writing tasks. However, the idea of academic writing as a set of generic skills that may be transferred across subject areas is a highly contested notion (North, 2005, Wingate and Dreiss, 2009). Hyland (2002) has shown that contextual aspects of writing tasks, such as subject discipline, text genre, rhetorical purpose, assignment features, writer characteristics etc. are what shape the quality of writing. Starfield (2007) describes students as having to negotiate 'complex disciplinary microworlds' (p.884) through their writing. Other researchers argue that students have difficulty applying generic concepts to their own practice (James, 2009). Consequently, Lea & Stierer (2000), Hussein (2007) and many others (see Russell, 2002) urge the integration of writing development into subject study, rather than treating it as a generic skill.

A certain amount of work has gone into developing online materials and resources for specific study contexts: Clerehan, Kett, Gedge & Tuovinen (2003), for example, developed a Web based academic literacy tutorial for first year computer science students. De Fazio and Crock (2008) report on an online writing lab supporting students in Management, Academic Preparation, History and English. Wingate and Dreiss (2009) designed an online course for Pharmacy students. Goodfellow & Lea developed an academic writing resource to support Masters students in online Distance Education courses (Goodfellow and Lea, 2005; Goodfellow, 2005). Other researchers have designed and built generic writing support systems that are intended to be adaptable to more specific subjects and contexts, either as teaching aids or as self-help resources. Foster et al's Writing Menagerie (Foster et al, 2005) is one such: a self-diagnostic system that is intended to help students diagnose their own problems in the areas of grammar, referencing and the avoidance of plagiarism. Reinecker et al's SCRIBO tool (Reinecker et al, 2006) addresses the task of writing research papers as a generic competence, using sample student essays in the social sciences to induct students into the forms and procedures of writing introductions and literature reviews. The University of Toronto's IWRITE websites (Proctor, 2001) also use sample student papers from specific courses, along with instructor annotations, to address structure, coherence and style in a variety of subjects across the disciplines. The University of Antwerp's Calliope project (Opendenacker & Van Waes, 2007) provides a portfolio tool and support for students to develop their own learning paths as they move between face-to-face teaching and self-directed writing contexts.

All these examples, whilst delivering benefits for the students and teachers for whom they are designed, have necessitated a development-intensive process that requires collaboration amongst multiple stakeholders, and considerable degrees of resourcing, as Wingate and Dreiss predict for customised writing support in general (Wingate & Dreiss, 2009: A16).Within the distance education contexts we are addressing here, to produce course-specific, or even discipline-specific writing support for all learners, even using web-based delivery, is neither practical nor economical. Our attention is therefore turned to the many institutions and individuals who provide students with generic forms of writing support, and put materials on the web as a way of providing such support flexibly and economically. Many such online courses and materials have been opened to general access via the internet (Palmquist, 2003). Some of the best known are the 'Online Writing Lab' (OWL) at Purdue University, the Writing Support Programs at Capella University and the University of Toronto, and the academic writing sites at the University of Melbourne and the Finnish Virtual University (see appendix A for URLs). These sites are all large-scale resources developed over periods of time. Although the resources themselves are generic, as Salvo et al (2009) observe with regard to the 10 years of development of the Purdue OWL, they are 'part of the infrastructure of a large, complex, and successful writing program, ... in a particular institutional context.' (p.108). The institutional context for Purdue and the other writing centres includes teaching in writing and rhetoric at first year, graduate, and professional levels. However, despite this background assumption of a systematic approach to writing instruction, many of these resources have been found useful by external individuals and institutions, as is evidenced by the large number of visits the sites receive. Salvo et al., for example, claim that the Purdue OWL now receives over 100 million hits per year from users in 150 countries (p:107). The open-ness of the OWLs and other sites based on writing programs gives them great potential for use in more peripheral writing support contexts, such as the ones we are concerned with here. This is in contrast to resources which have been designed for more contextualised use, or those designed for general use but which have been developed as commercial ventures for their creators, such as the University of Southampton's EAP (English for Academic Purposes) Toolkit, which forms the basis of the online study skills support provided for the course which is the subject of the pilot study we discuss below.

Furthermore, a number of other sites have been created which collect together open resources for general use building informal communities of users, both learners and teachers, in the process. An example is BALEAP's EAP study website. Recently, a number of institutions' study skills resources have begun to appear in repositories of Open Educational Resources (OERs) such as Jorum, Merlot, MIT Open Courseware, Open Learn, and the OER Commons. OER Commons currently has 25 entries under 'academic writing' (November 2011), linking to a variety of sources including: MIT OpenCourseware; the Connexions repository; and the Open University's OpenLearn initiative. This is indicative of what Yang and Chan (2008 p.404) call a dramatic growth in writing support websites which is likely to 'expand exponentially' in the future. The overall number of academic writing online resources currently available to practitioners and their students is difficult to estimate, but it is indeed large. Two of the biggest OER repositories alone (MIT and JORUM accessed July 2011) between them contain over 3000 entries related to teaching academic writing in some form (whole courses, tutorials, activities etc. but also relevant articles

and discussions). A Google search, via the keywords "online support" + "academic writing", produced around 200,000 results (May 2011), many of which were openly accessible resources from public providers such as the BBC, various universities in the UK, USA and Australasia, and publishers and educational consultancy companies. For "basic English" open resources were available from organisations such as the British Council, and a number of websites targeting ESL learners around the world. There are 54 sites in the initial list we assembled for the project described below and this does not include those aimed specifically at L2 speakers.

Despite the rapid growth in the numbers of these sites, there has been very little research done on the usefulness of such resources to either teachers or learners. Pennarola (2007) reviews research on learners' responses to a number of English Language Learning websites and finds that that although they 'appear to be designed for individual, autonomous use, the lack of student-tailored pathways and personal tutoring would apparently discourage most intermediate-level learners' (Pennarola, 2007, no page number). An example of this is the Purdue University Online Writing Lab. This site has over 700 pages of information, advice, exercises etc. on 'the writing process', 'academic writing', grammar, spelling, punctuation, style, sentence structure, 'subject specific writing', 'letters of application', ESL, 'visual rhetoric' and many other topics. Whilst it also contains a number of teacher resources and links to classes and one-to-one sessions held both online and at Purdue's writing lab, there is little to help the self-studying learner, or hard-pressed non-specialist teacher, to identify and locate remedies for particular writing problems. To date, we have only found one systematic attempt to build a structured repository of academic writing materials which sets out to help teachers and learners match activities to specific learning goals. This is a demonstration system produced by the UK JISC Sharing Language Learning Objects project run by the University of Southampton (Millard et al, 2007). This project's main focus was on the principles behind the creation of repositories of 'learning objects' for sharing across educational communities, but one of its key conclusions was that repositories as such are too 'heavyweight' an approach for everyday practitioners (Millard et. al, 2007:4). Their recommendation, for systems that provide easy access to materials across a number of repositories and other sources, is one that we have responded to in the work described here.

The problem we address here, therefore, is how to help distance teachers mediate amongst this plethora of online writing support resources in order to contextualise the advice they contain to the particular problems their students are experiencing. To do this successfully, teachers need to develop both their awareness of available resources, and their understanding of the nature of their students' writing problems.

Principles for a system to help teachers mediate between students and online writing support resources

In the account that follows we discuss a number of principles that we believe should inform the design of a system to help teachers to select appropriate resources. These principles are derived from our experience of designing and testing a prototype at the UK Open University (OU), as part of a project called 'Contextualising Online Writing Support' (COWS) (see Strauss et al, 2009). This project involved us in consultations with course developers and tutors working on the OU's Masters in Education programme (MEd). (Nb: 'tutor' is a term used specifically by the OU to refer to part-time distance teachers. In the introductory discussion we have used the more general term 'teacher', but in the pilot study section below we will use 'tutor' in accordance with OU practice). The consultations led to the building and trialling of a system that could be introduced into the assignment-marking practices of course tutors to give them a greater range of potential responses to student writing problems, without adding significantly to their workload. The principles will be discussed here under the following headings: Identifying writing problems; Specifying suitable resources; Creating a usable system.

Identifying writing problems

The first step towards developing a system for use by teachers who are not writing specialists is to develop a categorisation of students' writing problems which is relevant to both the specific issues that teachers are likely to observe arising in the students' subject-based assignments, and the generic advice that is likely to be found in the support resources. As we have seen from the literature, subject teachers' assessments of learners' writing problems can conflate rhetorical and communicative issues (such as register, voice, orientation to audience and subject etc.) with structural and semantic ones (grammar, syntax, vocabulary etc.), so a clear categorisation that signals this distinction is the first step towards enhancing teacher awareness of the actual nature of student difficulties. Categories of problem should also should cover issues that may arise from students being at a low level of understanding of subject content (for example, problems in the structuring of arguments), or being unfamiliar with the particular conventions of academic writing in those subjects (for example, conventions of referencing and attribution). Categories need to be narrow enough to be clearly distinct and recognisable, but few enough for teachers to quickly become familiar with them all. Categories and the different types of problem they contain can be derived either from an analysis of the specific student assignments that the teachers are required to mark, or else from one of the sets of criteria for assessing academic writing that are in common use in the Higher Education environment, for example: the Masus categories (Bonano & Jones, 2007), the criteria used by the

University of Jyväskylä, or the IELTS descriptors.

For the COWS project we carried out a diagnosis of the specific writing support needs of the target student cohort by analysing eight sample essays, together with tutor feedback, from two of the MEd assignments from the previous year. We identified approximately 70 different 'Problem Types'. We divided these into 11 broad categories, or 'Problem Topics', which we considered to reflect a focus on communicative issues, appropriate to Masters-level writing in this subject, and also to be meaningful to tutors seeking to diagnose specific difficulties arising in the assignments. The Problem Topics and Types were checked against the Masus categories to ensure that they covered the most important generic issues. Table 1 shows four of the Problem Topics (Quoting, Referencing & Attribution, Argument, Academic Vocabulary, Sentence Structure – see appendix B for the full list) related to the 5 basic Masus categories (Use of source material, Structure and Development of Answer, Academic Writing Style, Grammatical Correctness, Qualities of Presentation) and some of their sub-categories.

Table 1:   Masus Categories Related to Problem Topics and Types

Topic	Relevant Masus Category & sub-categories	Sample Problems & Issues identified in the sample essays
Quoting, Referencing & Attribution	A. Use of source material Text is free from plagiarism	· No referencing and citing · Unintentional plagiarism
Argument	B. Structure and development of answer Clear focussed thesis statement Choice of Theme and New reflects structure Use of evidence consistent with thesis statement of conclusion which follows from argument / evaluation and relates to the thesis	· Too general - no specific claims · Claims too strong · Not supported by evidence · Not logically structured · Addressed to inappropriate audience · Points not linked · Points not properly sequenced · Too great a reliance on personal experience
Academic Vocabulary	C. Academic writing style.. Appropriate choice of lexis	· Uncritical, inappropriate or unexplained jargon · Inappropriate lexical choices · Inappropriate use of academic terminology
Sentence Structure	D. Grammatical correctness - do grammatical errors interfere with communicating the message? Clause structure follows recognisable and appropriate patterns of English E. Qualities of presentation Paragraphing reflects essay structure	· Ambiguous sentences/ difficult to understand · Not full sentences · Lack of cohesion in sentences

Two of the Problem Topics identified did not have an equivalent in the Masus categories: Cultural and Linguistic Differences, and Voice and Writer's Identity. They were nevertheless retained because they offered scope for extending the Masus analysis in the future. Each Problem Topic was given a brief gloss to enable teachers to see immediately what it covered. Each of the 70 Problem Types was then allocated to one of the Topics. This was not a strict procedure, as many individual problem types could be classified under more than one topic heading. However, we thought that internal rigour in the categorisation system was less important than general usability by non-writing-specialists, so we avoided duplication of problem types across the Topics. The overall framework: Topics and Glosses, each with its specific set of Problem Types, could be presented as a table which was easy to search or browse at either the Topic or Type level (see appendix B).

Specifying suitable resources

A number of requirements need to guide the identification and selection of relevant online writing support

resources to address particular Problem Topics and their constituent Problem Types. All resources should be unrestricted, and directly accessible via a single URL. The materials in the selected resources should relate to the Problem Topics explicitly, even if they do not cover all the Problem Types related to any Topic. This is to give teachers confidence that the Topic they have identified is being addressed. There should not be too much variety or choice in the resources that are suggested, so that teachers are not faced with a lengthy reviewing job before they are able to make a selection. The selection of a resource to address a particular problem should be manageable within the context of an on-going marking task. That is to say, it should not require the teacher to suspend the marking for more than about 5-10 minutes whilst they make their selection. A final requirement is that the resources should include material from any online writing support provided by the students' home institution, provided it is relevant and suitable. This is to make both teachers and students aware of any local context of writing support. Any material produced for a particular subject or level within the institutional curriculum should be prioritised (although the assumption of this whole approach is that such contextualised support is likely to be limited). These requirements taken together tend to dictate that resources eventually selected should consist of small subsets of pages within particular websites, rather the sites themselves.

For the COWS project we carried out a search for candidate resources based on a literature review of research on writing support websites, a search of known Open Educational Resource (OER) repositories and academic writing portal sites, and a Google search under a range of keywords (online + support + writing, online + "writing Lab" OR "writing centre"; online + "academic writing" etc.). This gave us a representative list of 66 websites containing potentially useful materials for tutors on the particular course we had in mind. We then applied the following criteria to a subsections within each site:

1. The subsection should contain a page with a title explicitly relevant to one of the Problem Topic headings
2. The relevant material should be limited to 1-2 page/scrolls of information requiring a maximum of 20 minutes attention time for a student to complete
3. The material should have some form of exercise requiring active attention from the student

Using these criteria, subsets of 3-7 resources were selected for each Problem Topic, each resource addressing at least one of the Problem Types within that Topic (see the COWS website URL, appendix A, for the full list of resources). We ensured that each subset contained at least one resource from the OU's own study skills site. The OU's resources are not properly open as much of the material is licensed from another university and only accessible to users with an OU login ID. However, they are open to all OU students, so were suitable for this particular internal project.

Creating a usable online system

The key principle is that the system should be as simple to use as possible, which should be assured both through the initial design and through piloting the system with its intended users. Teachers' attention is assumed to be on the subject-related content of the assignments they are marking, rather than on analysing writing problems. The main decision-points when using the system whilst marking a student essay are therefore: i) deciding which Problem Topic is the most relevant description of the problem at hand; ii) deciding which of the resources associated with that Topic is the most appropriate to recommend to the student; and iii) deciding how to incorporate reference to the selected resource in the feedback to the student. To support this, the structure of the system should be straightforward, with only three levels of information: Problem Topic; resources relevant to that Topic; the resource being viewed. On-screen textual explanations should be kept to minimum, although enough information on the source and nature of a listed resources should be given together with the link, to help with the decision about relevance. Teachers need to be able to use such system without having to log in or create an account. Resource links should open the page of the target resource in a new browser window and teachers should be able to copy and paste the URLs of selected resources directly into their feedback on students' assignments.

For the COWS project a website was created, following the principles above, on the OU Knowledge Network (see appendix A for the URL). It was piloted with tutors on the MEd to test how well it could be integrated into assignment marking. Three tutors took part in the pilot, allocating a day's work over a two-week period to familiarising themselves with the system, using it whilst marking student assignments, feeding their recommendations back to students, and filling in feedback forms for the researchers. Whenever they found a particular problem occurring in a particular student's assignment sufficiently often to merit some additional writing support, they were asked to: i) identify the most relevant Problem Topic in the system, ii) review the resources associated with that Problem Topic, and iii) make a selection from these resources and include them in their feedback to the student. They were also asked to keep a short journal recording their perceptions of the process and to return this to the researchers as well.

Each of the three tutors had approximately 20 scripts of about 2000 words to mark within a two-week period for the assignment on which the system was tested. One of them found the additional work involved in using the system to be too much trouble from the start and withdrew from the project after assessing three students. The other two tutors completed the study and submitted project feedback forms for nine and three students respectively. Table 2 shows that five Problem Topics were identified overall in the work of these students, and that Tutor 1 found and recommended three resources to address three Problem

Types, and Tutor 2 found and recommended four resources to address eight Problem Types.

Table 2: Pilot Study results – Problem Topics & Types identified and resources recommended (figures in brackets indicate the number of students identified by the Tutor as having this particular problem)

Problem Topic:	Argument	Style & Register	Critical Evaluation	Summarising and Paraphrasing	Quoting, Referencing & Attribution
Tutor1	Claims too strong(3)	Too personal(1)			Technical problems with reference list and in-text citations(4) No referencing(1)
Recommended resources	Open University Generic Resource Hedging	University of Melbourne Generic Resource Academic Style			Academic Editing Service generic resource Incorporating the words of others
Tutor2	Not logically structured(2) Points not properly sequenced(1)	Too colloquial(1) Too personal(2)	Only one viewpoint presented (1)	Inadequate summary(1) Over reliance on quotes(1) main points of a text not identified(1)	
Recommended resources	University of Sussex generic Resource What is an argument?	University of Melbourne generic resource Academic Style	Coventry University generic resource Integrating sources,	Monash University generic resource Paraphrasing and summarising	
Tutor3	Not logically structured(1) Points not linked(1) Points not properly sequenced(1)				
Recommended resources	(none)				

The Tutors demonstrated that they had addressed Problem Topics central to the 'academic writing' end of the spectrum of diagnosis (Argument, Style & Register, *Critical Evaluation*, Summarising and Paraphrasing, *Quoting, Referencing & Attribution*), and recognised relevant Problem Types (claims, personal style, colloquial register, inaccurate referencing, absence of referencing, structure, sequence, viewpoint, absence of summary, over-quoting, main points, linking). Two of them were able to use the system to provide additional writing support for all the students they identified as needing support. The resources they recommended to students included only one from the OU study skills website, supporting our intuition that this particular licensed resource was not, by itself, adequate to meet the support requirements for this course.

In their comments on feedback forms and journals submitted at the end of the study the two active tutors revealed other considerations they had brought to the process. Both reflected on the amount of time they had taken to familiarise themselves with the resources before they passed them on to the students – up to 10 minutes per link in some cases.

> *Tutor 2 comments on feedback form:*
>
> *It took me time (10 mins) to work out the link I needed.*
>
> *Used two resources, seemed to take forever to check if they were appropriate and then add them into to in-text comments*
>
> *I had to check the link each time to make sure that the focus matched the issue in the*

> *student's work. This took time 5 mins.... Probably 3 mins once I was very familiar with the link.*

> *It took up too much time to suggest more than one link... time spent on checking that the content was right. This added up to 8mins.*

Both also described some of the thought processes prompted by using the system, such as whether or not to give feedback on particular problems. In some cases the problems were multiple, and they did not want to overload students with critical feedback in their first assignment. In other cases, the need to address problems arising out of unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions (e.g. style) took precedence over deeper learning issues (argument, critical evaluation) and more technical issues (referencing).

> *Tutor 1: Comment in journal*

> *As [Assignment No.] is obviously the first assignment of the course, I haven't pulled up students on all of their academic writing issues, as I do not want to discourage them at this early stage. It is probably for some students the first MA level assignment they have written, and others have not written in an academic style for many years. For example, most students needed some corrections related to aspects of referencing, but at this early stage I chose not to highlight this as a 'problem'. I would only do this if they persisted in making mistakes on future TMAs despite my feedback. I also decided that it was too early in the course to start correcting grammar, but this will be taken up if it is a problem in future TMAs.*

The additional time added to the marking process by the use of the system was dealt with by one tutor by adopting a delayed-feedback strategy in which the exploration of resources was done *after* formal feedback had been returned to the students. This was so as not to keep students waiting for their marks. The students who were going to receive additional academic writing support via recommended resources were told in comments on the marking form that the tutor would be getting in touch by email. The resource recommendations were sent out a week later. The other tutor's strategy was to give feedback immediately, but to focus on a smaller subset of the resources, returning to ones previously explored rather than broaching new ones to address new problems. This tutor adopted a quite critical perspective on the resources, rejecting some because, whilst generally appropriate, they did not include specific issues she considered important, or because their presentation was not sufficiently attractive.

> *Tutor 1: Comment in journal*

> *I put time aside to become familiar with the links after the main marking period, rather than before or during it. There are a number of choices which I needed to get to know myself before I passed any on to the students. It was important to select the right one to send to a student, so that these could be followed up. I also didn't want to delay the return of the [Assignment] to the student, so for the students who I though might benefit from academic writing support, I told them on the [Feedback Form] that I would be getting in touch by email.*

Most of the students whom the tutors judged to need additional support required just one or two interventions recommending resources contextualised to their particular problems. If either tutors or students had had to locate suitable resources themselves it would have been considerably more time-intensive. The system addresses this problem, but the time required to make an appropriate selection is still too long. Tutors need to trust the content of the resources in order to utilise them. They may approach this by attempting to become familiar with all the resources (very time-consuming) or by concentrating on a subset and focusing the support they give on just a few issues (possibly limiting). There is clearly a tension between providing too many resources (which will take the tutor time to check for suitability to context) and too few (which might mean that the tutor doesn't find a resource appropriate to the particular problem). Familiarity with the resources in the system built up over a period of time would obviously help. Trusted recommendations from others dealing with the same student group might also help shortcut the familiarisation process.

Although the students' own use of the resources recommended to them was not a focus of this small study, it is worth mentioning that one of the tutors reported that three students had responded to a follow-up request asking for their opinion of the usefulness of the links they were sent. All had found the link useful; all said they would use the information in their next assignment; two found the site they had been recommended easy to access; one found it difficult to access; one said she was now using the resource in her own teaching.

Perhaps most encouragingly, both the tutors who took full part in the pilot study expressed enthusiasm for the approach at a subsequent focus group discussion on the project that involved other tutors and the director of the course. Whilst being quite critical of some of the materials themselves, and concerned about the time it might take to become thoroughly familiar with the whole range of available resources, they nevertheless felt that there were considerable advantages to be gained in terms of developing their own analysis of student writing problems and being able to offer students something more than a few lines of advice in the feedback on an assignment.

Summary – uses and improvements

In this paper we have explored the gap between the needs of distance teachers, who may have neither the time nor the expertise to provide writing support to their students directly, and the affordances of the writing support resources that many universities and other agencies are putting online. We have proposed some principles for a system that can act as an interface between teachers and the world of web-based writing support, and illustrated the functionality that might be involved by piloting a small prototype. Whilst the smallness of the pilot means we cannot make any claims about the likely take-up of such a system by distance teachers in general, we are nevertheless satisfied that the principles are sound. A system such as the one we have described here could be a solution to the problem of utilising the many excellent generic resources that exist on the internet, in the specific context of a teacher marking a student assignment. It is also possible that it would be found useful by face-to-face teachers as well as their distance colleagues, in contexts where there is no writing centre or dedicated writing support personnel available to help the students. However, more work needs to be done to ensure that any effort put into further developing and using such a system is worthwhile, both to teachers in terms of their enhanced understanding of student writing problems, and to the students actual writing development.

There is, of course, no guarantee that providing a student with generic advice on a particular writing problem will remedy that problem, even if the advice has been carefully selected for its relevance. Student writing development is a complex issue and the role of a teacher in fostering it goes way beyond the simple correction of 'errors' that appear in assignments (Lea & Steirer, 2000). Part of this role is to scaffold the development of self-study habits and learning autonomy (Moore, 1997) and the approach we have described here is intended to give teachers an additional means of doing this.

We can envisage a number of improvements to the basic design that we have described. For example, the delayed-feedback strategy described by one of the pilot tutors above could be supported by enabling a list of recommended links to be compiled on a single page with a unique URL that could be sent to a student. The system could also be better geared for contextualisation in supporting teachers to create subsets of resources considered particularly relevant for particular subjects and courses. Other useful functionality might be to enable specific resources to be ranked, annotated and recommended, so as to benefit other teachers and learners in other academic writing contexts who may use the resource at a later time. Sheffield University's Academic Skills Hub (see appendix A for URL) has implemented a very simple version of this kind of recommending, though 'voting' buttons attached to resources. It is not difficult to imagine how this might be enhanced through the addition of user reviews that indicate what the different resources are useful for in the context of particular courses. This could also lead to developments whereby the system could recognise the repeated association of a particular topic/problem with a particular resource in the context of a particular course/subject area, and suggest matches which would further reduce the time that users needed to spend exploring for themselves. As Wheeler (2010) reminds us, technology has the ability to 'connect like-minded people, enable them to gain quick access to up to the minute information, and self organise themselves' (Wheeler, 2010, p.104). This work could point the way to a new type of online resource supporting both teachers and learners involved in developing academic writing, and in the process add value to the many materials already openly available.

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Appendix A: Open web-based writing support sites, Open Educational Resource (OER) repositories, and other sites referenced in the text.

(See the COWS website for the complete list of sites used in the pilot system) nb: whilst all of the links were current at the time of the pilot, some have become defunct subsequently and have not been fixed as the pilot site has not been maintained.

- http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/workspace.cfm?wpid=9178

Open Web-based Writing Support Sites

- British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes EAP-related websites http://www.baleap.org.uk/baleap/resources/eap-related-websites
- Calliope Project http://www.calliope.be
- Capella University http://sloanconsortium.org/effective_practices/capella-university039s-online-writing-support-center
- Purdue Online Writing Lab, Purdue university http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource /619/01/
- Finnish Virtual university http://sana.tkk.fi/awe/cohesion/index.html
- Southampton University EAP toolkit http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/activities.html
- University of Melbourne Academic Writing Site http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/language /style/index.html
- Sheffield University Academic Skills Hub http://www.tash.group.shef.ac.uk/
- Townson University Online Writing Support http://www.towson.edu/ows/sentencestruct.htm
- Writing at the University of Toronto http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/

OER repositories

- Jorum (UK Joint Information Systems Committee) http://www.jorum.ac.uk/
- Merlot (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching – US university consortium) http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm
- MIT Open Courseware (M.I.T.) http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm
- Open Learn (Open University) http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/
- OER Commons (Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education) http://www.oercommons.org/
- Connexions (International consortium) http://cnx.org/

Other Sites:

- Journal of Second Language Writing http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-second-language-writing/

Appendix B: Problem Topics, Glosses, & Problem Types used in the Pilot System

Problem Topic & Gloss	Problem type
Argument The overall 'story' of the piece. Its authority and convincingness. It's logical structure and use of evidence. The claims it makes and conclusions it reaches.	Too general - no specific claims ·Claims too strong ·Not supported by evidence ·Not logically structured ·Addressed to inappropriate audience ·Points not linked ·Points not properly sequenced ·Too great a reliance on personal experience
Style & Register The overall 'rightness' of the language and voice used, in relation to the type of assignment it is.	·Too colloquial ·Too personal ·Too formal ·Too flowery ·Too anecdotal · Use of pronouns inappropriate · Inappropriate genre
Academic Vocabulary The use of words and terminology that carry an appropriate level of objectivity, precision, and formality.	· Inappropriate or unexplained jargon · Inappropriate lexical choices · Lack of nuance · Repetition · Problems with collocations · Inappropriate use of academic terminology · incorrect reporting verbs · Clichés · Incorrect use of articles · Use of reporting words and importance of tense in their use
Critical Evaluation The achievement of 'distance' from the subject, allowing for discussion and criticism of others' viewpoints in a balanced and objective way.	·Issues not understood ·Topics not appropriately prioritised ·Only one viewpoint presented ·No evaluation –just description ·No justification of criticisms
Quoting, Referencing & Attribution The appropriate and principled use of other people's ideas and words in support of an argument.	·No purposeful referencing and citing ·No referencing ·key/appropriate quotes not identified ·Problems with reference list and citations ·Quotes not appropriately incorporated into text ·Deliberate plagiarism

	·Unintentional plagiarism ·Quoting with no analysis of original text
Summarising and Paraphrasing Giving the gist of another piece of writing in ones own words, preserving the most important points of the argument.	·Main points of a text not identified ·Inadequate summary ·Over-reliance on quotes ·Over-reliance on words in original text
Sentence Structure Writing understandable sentences of an appropriate length, in which the topic and what is being said about it are clear.	·Ambiguous sentences/ difficult to understand ·Not full sentences ·Convoluted, overlong sentences ·Too many short sentences ·Lack of cohesion in sentence itself ·Word order
Thematic structure The development of a central idea and the way the different parts of the essay relate to this.	·Inadequate planning and layout ·Structuring and linking of ideas ·Lack of cohesion ·Lack of coherence ·Purpose and use of paragraphs ·Use of linking words ·Use of referents ·Use of headings ·Signposting ·Introductions ·Conclusions
'Answering the Question' Addressing exactly what is being asked in the assignment question.	·Question/topic incorrectly interpreted ·Question not answered ·Instructions not carried out ·Tangential writing – moving on and off topic
Cultural & Linguistic Differences Issues that arise because of the influence of a first language or expectations from a different academic culture.	·Differing academic conventions ·Specific language difficulties (eg: pronouns, reporting verbs) ·Problems with collocations ·Translating from L1
Voice & Writer's identity Developing confidence and 'ownership' of the ideas that are being expressed in the writing.	·Use of I/we ·Personal views not integrated with literature ·Personal views inadequately expressed