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Beck Wise, Simone Lyons and Siall Waterbright

“I wrote to become part of that discourse community”: Developing writerly identity and agency in an online writing course

Abstract:

The acute phases of the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated, for many, an abrupt shift to digitally-mediated, fully-remote work and education; for others, remote work and education were already realities. As the pandemic dragged into its third year, there emerged increasing political and public appetite for a “return to normal” – which, for the many Australian institutions who offered few or no fully-digital classes before 2020, is figured as a return to pre-2020 on-campus operations. This goal is justified by a deficit framing of online education relative to in-person learning, eliding the strengths and affordances of learning in digital spaces. If we are to prepare students to write effectively, we need to take seriously the notion that writing is always in digital environments and harness the strengths of online writing instruction such as scalability and improved accessibility. In this article, we draw on a case study of a hybrid researched writing class to demonstrate how an online-first Writing About Writing pedagogy helped students build the confidence, flexibility and self-efficacy needed to establish distinctive writerly identities. This prepares students to write more effectively in novel and rapidly-changing contexts, and offers one approach for building a sustainable, effective, *realistic* culture of writing.

Biographical notes:

Beck Wise researches professional writing, technical communication and medical rhetoric at the University of Queensland, where they are Lecturer in Professional Writing. Beck holds a PhD in Rhetoric & Writing from the University of Texas at Austin, and their work can be found in *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine*, *TEXT*, and *Research in Online Literacy Education*.

Simone Lyons is an interdisciplinary scholar with research interests in the fields of writing studies and animal studies. Simone holds a PhD in Writing from the University of New England, and she teaches writing studies at the University of New England and the University of Queensland.

Siall Waterbright is a writer and academic in cultural studies, creative and professional writing, and editing. Siall has a PhD from Queensland University of Technology and Honours degrees from QUT and New College of Florida, and currently researches charity communication and coloniser histories of child removal, with creative practice in graphic narrative, at the Australian National University.

Keywords:

Digital writing pedagogy, writerly identity, writing development, online writing instruction, Writing About Writing

Introduction

Online writing instruction (OWI) has a long and storied history, both in Australia and overseas. Within Australia, regional universities like the University of New England and Charles Sturt University, among others, have offered fully-online undergraduate degrees in writing for decades; internationally, hybrid and fully-online writing courses are offered by universities across North America and Europe, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) promise broad access to writing instruction where traditional courses may be inaccessible. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic began, in Australia the number of externally-enrolled students was rising faster than the number of internally-enrolled students (Department of Education and Training, 2017, p. 14), with external students citing online study’s flexibility to accommodate paid work, caring commitments, and living arrangements as a key drawcard. The introduction of emergency stay-at-home orders early in the pandemic saw online writing instruction become, at least temporarily, the dominant mode, with writing scholars around Australia – and the world – pivoting their existing classes into a rich range of digital modalities, including Zoom tutorials, podcasted lectures, Slack or Discord spaces, and, of course, existing learning management systems.

This emergency response threw digital writing and online writing instruction into the limelight, and as we write this in July 2022, online classes remain a feature of many Australian universities’ writing programs – and indeed, may remain so. Online offerings have been ramped down in some institutions in response to changing conditions, but it’s likely that demand for online writing courses will remain in light of continuing policy emphasis on upskilling courses with the flexibility to sit alongside work (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022), and increased demand for remote work options, with nearly 40% of employees still working remotely in 2021 after stay-at-home orders eased (Productivity Commission, 2021, p. 9), up from 8% in 2019 (p. 2). All of this is to say that, while the *mass* online writing instruction seen in 2020 is an historic outlier, it is not a rupture: rather, it represents an escalation of existing online and digital writing practices, and looks set to be a precursor to ongoing change in the way we study and teach both creative and professional writing. As we build the writing classes and writing programs of the future, then, we must learn from both that emergency response and the practices that preceded it. And to do so, we need to

engage with both the real conditions of online and digital writing, and the narratives that surround them.

Remote work and study, frankly, have a bad reputation. There is a significant deficit narrative around online university study in Australia, which until 2020 was largely limited to less-prestigious regional institutions. Australia’s Higher Education Standards Panel reported in 2017 that external students took longer to complete their degrees and were “around 2½ times more likely to withdraw from higher education” than internal students or those studying in multi-modal/hybrid modes (Department of Education and Training, 2017, p. 15); they noted, however, that “institution attended has the largest influence on attrition”, with mode of study in third place behind full- or part-time status (p. 46). In addition, the question of campus life has come into stark relief during the Covid-19 pandemic, with primarily-internal institutions emphasising in-person, on-campus facilities and events as central to student experience and success. At the National Press Club in July 2022, higher education reporter Tim Dodd pressed Universities Australia chair John Dewar on campus life, citing “an increasing amount of concern that young students are not on campus” and questioning whether this affects the quality of education (National Press Club, 2022). In the ensuing discussion, while there was some talk about pedagogy, it became clear that Dodd was primarily pointing to extracurricular aspects of student experience, “a vibrancy and life where [students] meet the friends and contacts that they keep with them their whole life”, an experience that he carved out as crucial and formative for school-leavers and distinguished from “older students studying online by preference”.

This mythos of the physical campus elides the fact that even nominally in-person classes have for years been effectively hybrid through student choice, as any lecturer who has compared the number of views of their lecture recordings to the number of lecture theatre seats filled can attest. University policies require the use of online learning management systems and, pedagogically, class activities like discussion board posts require both online writing and online student interaction. In addition, students’ social interactions and career contacts also often occur online: in informal discussion, a graduate of an Australian writing program told one author of this paper that they had enrolled in the degree not for formal instruction or on-campus networking, but to gain access to a lively alumni social media community. Similar patterns are seen in workplaces, where communication even for physically co-located staff frequently occurs online through the use of collaboration platforms such as Slack and Teams, and of course email. Synchronous and asynchronous, digital and analogue, remote and in-person, writing is woven so closely into both education and work that online experience is ultimately not dissociable from in-person.

This observation is not new. Tracing the interactions over time of emerging technology with writing – itself “the first and most basic communication technology” (Baron, 2009, p. xi) – Dennis Baron notes that these technologies both shape and are shaped by our writing practices, and our abilities to do things with words. The home computer, he argues, did more than any other technology to establish America as a nation of writers, and ultimately allowed writing, digital writing, to “establish itself as *the* way to do business in the modern world – not just the

business of trade and commerce, but that of governance, education, culture and the arts” (p. 135). But digital writing’s affordances exceed the simple transposition of old one-to-one communication practices into a new form – rather, as scholars like Collin Brooke and Ryan Skinnell, among others, have argued, digital technologies and new media position writing as a communal and unfinalisable *process*, “privileg[ing] invention-as-action over invention-as-interpretation” (Eyman, 2015, p. 67). This is a hallmark of Gregory Ulmer’s notion of electracy, which emphasises the ways that multimodal texts – alphabetic, visual, auditory and interactive – change our ways of interacting with the world and creating meaning. Electracy highlights the ways that writing technologies, writers and texts are interarticulated with culture, and the possibilities of ubiquitous digital composition for agential change. But even if that longstanding interweaving of writing and bodies, and of digital and analogue writing *has* been accelerated by the acute impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the claims of the pandemic’s end have brought with them a nostalgia for the old normal, a pre-Zoom, unmediated writing and learning experience that never really existed.

In thinking about the future of writing instruction in Australia, then, we call for closer attention to the real conditions of writing, which has been for decades both digital and online, even when it is in-person. If we are to prepare students to write effectively, we need to take seriously the notion that writing is always in digital environments, and harness the strengths of online writing instruction such as scalability and improved accessibility – as well as the capacity of online and electracy pedagogies to support students’ critical interventions in writing practices, rather than perpetuating the deficit narrative that OWI is necessarily inferior to in-person learning. In this article, we draw on a case study of a hybrid researched writing class to demonstrate how digital learning spaces facilitate a capacious yet individually-tailored pedagogy that positions students as agential learners within a community, allowing them to build the confidence, flexibility and self-efficacy needed to establish distinctive writerly identities.

Teaching researched writing online

This case study examines the implementation of a Writing About Writing pedagogy in an online advanced researched writing class at the University of New England (UNE) in 2018. The class design was shaped by the institution’s enrolments and culture, as well as the need to prepare students from across the university to write effectively in their disciplinary discourse communities and beyond.

Class design and context

UNE is a mid-size regional university specialising in online education. The university has prioritised distance education since its founding in 1938, when it offered correspondence courses for rural and remote Australians. As technology has changed, the institution has shifted to mainly online delivery, with a small number of on-campus students: in 2017, the university enrolled around 4,800 on-campus students, and just under 20,000 online, with the majority of students in both cohorts hailing from regional and remote Australia (University of New

England, 2018a). The university also caters to a majority non-traditional demographic, with more than 75% of students aged over 25 (University of New England, 2018b). These demographics suggest that many of the students enrolled in writing classes at the institution are multiply marginalised (rural and mature-aged), and typically underserved populations. These students might also be underprepared for online writing instruction: research in the United States shows that most students do not understand what is involved in an online writing class (Melonçon & Harris, 2015), while a study involving education students at the research site suggested that most felt especially underprepared for the interpersonal and metacognitive aspects of online classes (Parkes & Fletcher, 2017). As such, a key consideration in developing the class was accommodating and honouring the rich diversity of identities and expertise students brought to the class.

The class is an advanced writing and research skills course offered to upper-level undergraduate students and masters students – an option in the BA Writing major, a required class in the MA, and a listed elective in a large range of degree plans across the university. As a result, it attracts a large and diverse range of students with varying literacies, goals and expectations of a writing class. The unit has been offered in some form since at least 2007, with differing focuses depending on the staff member coordinating it, but with a consistent focus on researched writing in the humanities.

Wise taught this class for the first time in Trimester 2, 2017, largely maintaining the previous coordinator’s curriculum. The class had long ago been team-taught, showcasing case studies of research in four humanities disciplines, and inviting students to develop research projects aligned with one of the four cases. The course had little coverage of research design, writing process, or rhetorical effectiveness, and Wise’s 2017 updates focused on increasing writing instruction. Student feedback throughout and following the class indicated that students were overall dissatisfied, struggling to see the relevance of the generic writing practices taught in the class to their own writing practices, with several suggesting that they would benefit from a discipline-specific writing class. This is an established and effective practice in the US context, but decreasing funding, increasing casualisation, and increasing rationalisation of class offerings in the Australian context have resulted in fewer, larger classes across the university, including for writing courses. While such classes present as more efficient, serving a larger number of students with relatively fewer resources, they pose critical challenges for courses intended to serve multi-major cohorts and develop broad skills, rather than build content knowledge.

Students also suggested that the course was pitched at an inappropriate level, with masters students in particular indicating that the skills developed in the course were ones that could – or should – be expected prior to entry to a masters program, rather than developed as part of the degree. As the undergraduate version of the class has minimal prerequisites, students could take the class as early as their second trimester of study. On the other hand, students in the postgraduate version of the class were often taking it in their last trimester of a masters degree. This meant that students enrolled in the course had immensely variable expertise and

motivations, from building a foundation for undergraduate study to refining their skills for possible HDR applications.

Finally, and critically, online students in particular pointed to the inequitable experience delivered to external students relative to their on-campus peers. Although external students dominated the class (and indeed, were the large majority of students in both the writing major and the broader humanities), the course’s original structure clearly signalled that the imagined audience was a traditional, on-campus student: content was delivered through a weekly lecture, recorded with a small in-person audience for online students to consume later, and in-person students attended weekly tutorials to engage in structured activities and discussion. All students shared a course site, with weekly study guides and open, largely-unmonitored, discussion boards. No course content was designed primarily for external students, or available exclusively to them as the interactive tutorials and lecture were for on-campus students. The setup felt not only inequitable but also weird: while many lecturers have flagged the impacts on course attendance of in-person lecture capture, the rows of chairs in this largely-empty lecture theatre did not stand in for students who used to be there or were meant to be there, but rather held space for an imagined student that never really existed at this distance-first institution – in retrospect, a neat counterpoint to the imagined non-mediated writing that has likewise never really existed.

Taken together, then, it was clear that change was needed. As a teacher-scholar of writing, Wise understood this problem as both theoretical and practical, asking: “How can we help students develop context-specific literacies in large (100+), multi-modal, multi-major, multi-level classes?” In other words, how can we teach students the specific reading and writing skills they will use in their fields, including majors outside the humanities and regardless of their level of study, without fragmenting the course site and unduly increasing the teaching staff’s workload? This question drove both the course redesign and this study, which were developed simultaneously.

Designing for flexibility and agency

In 2018, Wise redesigned the course to employ a Writing About Writing (WAW) approach, a mode of writing instruction developed in the United States to address a recurring problem of first-year composition (FYC): many instructors of academic writing, trained in the humanities rather than writing studies, teach their own disciplinary style but present it as a universal or general style appropriate for all disciplines (Downs & Wardle, 2007). By inviting students to investigate literacy practices from their discourse communities, a WAW approach helps students understand the rich diversity of writing contexts, practices and genres. Given local conditions, in particular the need to accommodate large numbers of students from across the university alongside students enrolled in a writing major that combines creative and professional writing, Wise considered that adapting this approach to emphasise disciplinary literacies might give students the opportunity to integrate their own interests and priorities into a class that they, as well as previous students, viewed as overly generic.

In addition, it seemed that this approach was uniquely well-suited for online delivery, as digital infrastructures allowed implementation of flexible, independent learning pathways that allowed students to “choose their own adventure”, mixing and matching short modules that supported their writing goals. This unique and valuable affordance of asynchronous online writing instruction worked to offset a major challenge of teaching writing in the very large classes characteristic of Australian programs, where it is near certain that any multi-major writing course will include students from every area of the university.

These ideas are borne out by studies of first-year and professional writing classes in the United States, which suggest that WAW mitigates the risk of students taking a humanities writing style as a norm appropriate across the university by demonstrating how much writing varies according to context. For example, Hendrickson and Garcia de Mueller employed a writing-across-difference approach in an intermediate academic writing class tasked with preparing students “to meet the demands of academic writing across the disciplines” (2016, p. 74). At their Hispanic-serving institution, the majority of their students were from socioeconomically and raciolinguistically underserved populations – and a high average student age suggested that, like UNE, the institution enrolled a large non-traditional cohort (p. 76). Their course design, then, needed to accommodate a diverse range of students; as teachers, their commitment was to recognising the expertise that students bring to the classroom while still preparing them to conform to expected genres in later classes. They found that this approach helped students understand literacies as sociocultural phenomena in order to “access critical agency as academic writers” (p. 89). McCracken and Ortiz found that while students in their classes were initially intimidated by the demands of a WAW course, experiencing it as a challenge to their sense of themselves as self-efficacious students prepared for university-level study, students ultimately reported that “surviving” the class helped them develop more confidence and challenge the deficit narratives that circulated about them. Carey Smitherman and Amanda Girard (2011) found that integrating the creative writing notion of “craft” in place of composition theory afforded an accessible introduction to key ideas about writing in their first-year classroom, likewise helping students build confidence in using these new ideas.

Downs and Wardle have argued that “*any* meaningful genre, form, writing-related content, and medium can make an appearance in a WAW class” (2012, p. 133, emphasis added), opening the possibility for this pedagogy to be adapted into a range of different writing classes, such as our own creative, professional and academic writing class, and to be deployed across in-person, hybrid and fully-online modalities. The approach has also been shown to be effective in contexts other than academic writing classes: for example, Read and Michaud adapted a WAW approach in a multi-major professional writing class with the goal of improving skill transfer from university to the workplace (2015). In their WAW-PW (Writing About Writing – Professional Writing) approach, skills like “reading a scholarly article” or “contributing to academic discourse” were de-emphasised in favour of skills critical to workplace communication, such as conducting qualitative research in field sites in order to understand workplace writing as a researched and researchable activity. Their approach ultimately taught students “generalized rhetorical strategies for meeting new and complex writing situations and

attempt[ed] to instil in students a flexible and adaptable writerly subjectivity that sees each new writing task as an opportunity for new learning” (p. 454). Similarly, Perrault found that a WAW approach helped students develop critical and rhetorical scientific literacies, as well as writing skills, in her “Popular Science and Technology Writing” class (2012). In all, this made us confident that the approach could be effective in the context of an Australian writing major.

The redesign of our local class took into account the need to:

- **Design for online delivery first:** In addition to being a mixed-level class, the course is offered in a blended mode with both online and on-campus students enrolled in a single Moodle site. Rather than porting a face-to-face class to the digital space, it was important that the course design utilise the affordances of online spaces, recognising that the overwhelming majority of students were enrolled online and prioritising their experience
- **Focus on writing in and for the university:** to reflect the class’s strong emphasis on context-specific writing, students read research about writing in academic disciplines and discipline-specific workplaces, and were invited to develop research projects investigating literacy in those sites.
- **Incorporate creative writing and practice-led research:** as the class is situated in a writing major that is dominated by creative writing classes, a significant proportion of enrolments were students engaged in creative practice, with some senior students planning to apply for practice-led higher degrees by research. The class then needed to introduce practice-led research alongside qualitative and textual research methods. No other class at the university taught practice-led research, whereas students could take specialised methods classes to learn qualitative and quantitative methods, and textual research methods are taught in a number of different classes.

Assessment in the class was high-stakes, with students writing three assignments over the course of the trimester: a project proposal, a research report, and a critical self-reflection. Writing-to-learn activities were incorporated into the course design via weekly scaffolded writing tasks, but these were not assessed. And while a significant number of students participated in the first four writing-to-learn activities (leading up to the proposal), participation dropped precipitously following submission of the first assignment. The class was delivered in blended mode, with the large online cohort using Moodle-based study guides and discussion boards, and a substantially smaller on-campus cohort using the same study guides and meeting for a two-hour workshop each week. Wise wrote the study guides and delivered on-campus workshops, as well as monitoring and participating in online discussion. They employed a multidisciplinary grading team, including other co-authors, to ensure that students received feedback on their developing research projects from teachers with appropriate disciplinary and methodological expertise – for example, as an expert in practice-led research, Waterbright was tasked with guiding and assessing all practice-led projects.

Method

Every student in the class was initially invited to participate in the study via a forum post by an independent research officer within the institution; this officer’s role was to manage the recruitment procedure and maintain participant confidentiality until after final grades were reported. A subsequent round of recruitment occurred in Trimester 1, 2019, when Wise posted in the Moodle sites for other upper-level/Masters writing units then being taught. In total, ten students elected to participate, allowing the researchers to gather and analyse their assignment sequences. Participants came from across the university and included both undergraduate and postgraduate students. All participants had taken the class online. The study was approved by UNE’s Human Research Ethics Committee (approval HE18-234).

For this paper, we focused our attention on students’ reflections, employing a grounded analysis to identify what and how external students learnt about writing through the online WAW approach. Following Charmaz (2003), we approached the object of study with a focus on ideas suggested by the literature review and our pedagogical experience, and developed analytic categories from patterns that emerged in our examination. We looked, in particular, for common ideas and experiences conveyed in the students’ reflections. This allowed us to identify themes and sub-themes on which to focus our analysis. The recurring use of certain terms in the reflections – including key terms from the unit materials – helped to signal commonalities across students’ communicated experiences as well as any divergences.

Seven of the participating students were enrolled as undergraduate degree students. Three were enrolled as postgraduate students. Undergraduate students were required to submit a 500-word self-reflection for this assessment item. Postgraduate students were required to submit a 1000-word self-reflection. Both sets of students were allowed 10% leeway in word count.

The assignment description for the task asked students to ‘Write a critical self-reflection that examines your work and development as a learner and writer in this unit’. The assignment prompt follows:

Overview

Provide a short, general discussion of your experience in the unit, using some or all of the following questions to guide you.

How, if at all, did the unit influence your writing?

How, if at all, did the unit influence your understanding of writing and/or literacy in general?

How, if at all, did the unit influence your understanding of academic writing and/or literacy in particular?

Writing reflection

Discuss the writing choices you made when drafting and revising your research proposal and research report, explaining what choices you made and how and why you made the decisions you did. Include in your discussion how, if at all, unit materials influenced those decisions.

Future directions

Discuss how, if at all you think you will use your new knowledge about writing in future units of study.

The first stage of coding, undertaken by the researchers independently, identified and categorised passages from the ten assignments according to the frequency with which particular terms or ideas occurred. The three sets of coding were then compared and discussed to yield what Charmaz refers to as “tentative analytic categories” (2003, p. 3). A second round of coding, based on common ideas identified through the discussion, was then undertaken, with all researchers reviewing this set.

In the first round of coding, each of the three researchers applied a slightly different sensibility, based on disciplinary expertise and personal experience. However, the sets intersected to a great degree, indicating that a relatively small number of ideas and themes were prominent across the ten submissions. Of the ten reflections submitted by participants, nine gave overwhelmingly positive accounts of the students’ learning experiences in the unit. One expressed a very negative experience with the unit. Key ideas and themes that emerged included specific writing and research skills, particularly refining research focus, flexibility and learning about writing process, discourse communities, audience consideration, and confidence.

We then considered the major themes and ideas revealed by this process of codification in relation to existing published academic research about OWI and WAW. Literature searches relating to writing about writing, writing skills, writing communities, audience and confidence yielded a number of sources relating to self-efficacy as it relates to writing skills transfer and writing learning progress. Some specific examples from the reflections are discussed in relation to this body of literature in the next section.

Results

Our analysis of student reflections showed that online delivery of writing instruction allowed for the use of a WAW approach to provide flexible learning opportunities students could tailor to their personal and disciplinary needs. The participants’ research fields included creative free writing, creative crime writing, survey-based audience research, geology, English literature studies and history. In addition, the research sample included students with a rich range of intersectional identities, including age, cultural background, multilingual status, socioeconomic class, location, employment and caring responsibilities. A challenge for the unit coordinator involved meeting students’ different needs and expectations through online communication methods, while accommodating students’ varied skill sets, interests and digital competencies. Online instruction’s capacity to allow students to navigate a wide range of learning materials in their own way and times proved advantageous. Similarly, online communication and feedback provided diverse students with opportunities to find guidance and preserve comments using methods that suited them. In their reflections, students reported

feeling more confident as research writers after completing the unit, a feeling associated with agency and finding ways to belong in their discourse communities. Several students explicitly stated that the skills they built in understanding writing conventions were ones they could transfer to different disciplines and writing contexts in the future. While the scope of this study did not extend to analysing students’ progress or the quality of their work, the students’ wide variety of research topics, range of methodologies, and predominantly positive feedback suggest that digital delivery of a WAW approach can effectively develop research writing confidence and skills for diverse students.

Confidence builds over time

Non-traditional students (e.g. older adults, people in rural or regional locations, or those from low socioeconomic backgrounds) make up a significant portion of online learners. These same students are also more likely to experience limitations through the “digital divide” (Gos, 2015, p. 309). Non-traditional students are often challenged by negative experiences from their various pasts, which can translate into low self-image and lack of confidence in their own abilities as writers (Gos, 2015, pp. 320–1). Research shows that WAW approaches can help students develop a sense of agency and confidence, and that this approach has benefits for non-traditional students (McCracken & Ortiz 2013). However, WAW also requires complex metacognitive skills, which, as McCracken and Ortiz report, is not without challenges and can seem daunting to both students and instructors. Online writing learning can also provoke anxieties, in both students and teachers, about barriers to connectedness (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015, p. 140). Hewett states that student connectedness is considered crucial to engagement and learning (2015, p. 79). The reflections in our study demonstrate these concerns, with some students reporting feelings of uncertainty, discomfort or doubt during the research and writing process, and complex measures were required to overcome hurdles. This was especially true for students undertaking creative practice-led research projects:

Despite my enjoyment of creative writing ... I struggled with the “free-range” nature of the research topic ... since the unit materials were primarily written for a research report, I found it a great challenge to adapt this to my exegesis.

Historically, my attempts to write creatively within a defined structure have sometimes resulted in overthinking and creative paralysis; this informed my decision to free-write my creative work and then subsequently impose meaningful structure upon it. While doing so played to my creative strengths, it failed to encapsulate my academic desire to achieve targeted outcomes with the text, as the first draft then required significant revision to convey my intended ideas.

One student expressed particular unease:

I found it very hard to get interested in actually writing [...] and it was a struggle to get it going. I got stuck very frequently and nearly ended up with a paper half the required length.

Online content delivery affords flexibility and continued use

While the WAW approach and online delivery provided challenges, such challenges are ubiquitous in writing learning. In face-to-face as well as online modes, teaching occurs within electronic environments and relies on digital tools, with writing instructors often being the first port of call for students experiencing difficulties with technology (Snart, 2015). The reflections we analysed showed students found digital delivery affordances such as multimedia materials, online marker feedback and forums for communication with teachers and peers beneficial:

Information [...] in the week 3 study guide video, a step by step guide in week 11 on how to write an effective introduction, as well as numerous chat sessions with [the unit coordinator] assisted greatly in my understanding and execution of my project. I felt the availability and guidance of the unit coordinator facilitated my progress through the unit.

On a personal level, the ongoing supervision, feedback and discussion available within this unit (to evolve the proposal and paper) has been the most interactive experience I have had at university so far. As a result I now feel more confident to seek academic support in other units.

I added and changed several sections as I took on board the comments received from the marker of the research proposal.

Marker feedback ... helped me to narrow my question and focus my research.

I [...] was primarily influenced by feedback I received on my first assignment [...]. However, I had been considering narrowing my research question beforehand, as the student who peer-reviewed my draft had suggested I consider a more specific research question.

I prepared [...] several drafts [...] before finally settling on the one that I wanted to submit. I added and changed several sections as I took on board the comments received from the marker.

All respondents mentioned access to asynchronous, multimodal unit materials in their reflections as beneficial. One student specifically mentioned the ability to download and retain resources as a positive part of their transferable skills learning. The capacity to be self-guided as students, navigating materials made available online in their own time and ways, was also reported to be valuable in providing access and promoting engagement and agency.

[T]he teaching style and approach to the subject [...] did not prescribe, but guided me as a student to start approaching my own unique style of writing within the boundaries and expectations of academic writing.

With thoughtful selections of readings, and an attentive but gentle shepherding through feedback, I felt an element of self-guided research, which has imbued a deeper sense of this topic than most courses of study.

Students learn to learn as they write about writing

Clear assignment instructions were found to facilitate successful navigation and research writing, even as students were invited to “choose your own adventure” where the online format allowed instructors to offer multiple, individualised pathways through the course content – an affordance not possible in an on-campus course with a single lecture:

The learning materials encouraged me to write to an audience, as well as explaining different methodologies used in research.

[A]ssignments included explicit directions so I knew what I was doing and this flowed through to my written assignments [...]

One student reported an overall negative experience in the unit, addressing pedagogical methods and indicating a preference for direct instruction:

There is not enough direction in the unit and I felt lost the entire time. I was expecting to have more teaching, rather than just being given readings, on how to go about research and creating a research question and then a normal paper.

This preference for direct instruction is one reported in other research. Wise, Van Luyn and Cantrell (2020) found that students in a digitally-delivered editing class felt more confident responding to set study materials and completing high-stakes assessment than they did in engaging in guided independent practice with scaffolded assessment – in other words, they typically preferred content-focused class delivery over process-focused skills development. They also found digitally-based learning to be time-consuming – not a surprise to writing instructors, who know that workloads increase for both students and teachers in online writing instruction due to the high literacy loads of these classes, but a surprise to students accustomed to other modes of teaching and assessment, and a critical issue for non-traditional students like those enrolled in writing classes (Gos, 2015). For online students in the writing unit we looked at, the desire for instruction was not as acute as the editing unit, however, as students were working independently and could fit their university work in around other commitments, whereas the editing class specified timelines for work with peers. In addition, the writing class incorporated explicit instruction in time and project management as part of the WAW

approach; this pedagogical choice was made to help students respond to the challenge of maintaining motivation and progress that writers face when working remotely as well as to help them develop metacognition about the writing process.

Online instructors must design for access and community

The anxieties expressed in reflections about the open-ended quality of WAW learning, the appreciation of extensive feedback and opportunities for questions, guidance and clear instructions, show the need for considerable front-loading in WAW instruction, particularly when delivered asynchronously. While WAW can be delivered entirely in synchronous classroom settings, both in-person and online, where students can take notes and ask questions to form resources for individual research, students cannot know what they will need to know until they know it, which means they may not ask questions or take note of material they later find they need. Online pedagogical affordances allow students to make use of materials and find information when the need arises, providing access and flexibility that is likely to be particularly helpful to non-traditional students.

In addition, online delivery using a WAW approach helps build community. Student writers are likely to be more engaged and inspired when they feel like they belong with others in a particular space. A sense of community among students and teachers in the digital learning environment is linked to the capacity to find belonging in a community of writers (Gos, 2015, pp. 116–118; Hewett, 2015, p. 73). In their reflections, students described learning to think about readership and the language expectations of different disciplines through the WAW approach. Opportunities to think about digital communication supported thought about audience, identity and writing communities:

I had to be more careful about the language I used. Normally, my audience would be described as “knowledgeable but inexperienced”; however, the blog posts had to be written for an audience that potentially had very little knowledge about the writing process. Considering the intended reader for my research report has expanded my notions of literacy and of the writer’s responsibility to speak the language of the reader.

These benefits were associated with the exchange of ideas made possible by online writing delivery, particularly peer forums. As well as developing specific skills and knowledge, the results suggest the WAW approach facilitated by digital delivery offers students the opportunity to think about themselves as researchers and writers:

The research design was influenced by a desire to create a paper that I [...] would find useful [...] in researching the same area.

The unit also made me more conscious of my role as writer, and who I was writing for. It felt particularly new writing from the perspective of an “expert” on my chosen topic, and to therefore consider what I could teach the reader.

By understanding the basic values of the crime fiction writing community and the assumptions about the readership that crime fiction writers make, I wrote the creative part of my research project to become part of that discourse community.

Some student reflections indicate the online delivery and WAW approach were successful because they helped students overcome doubts or preconceptions about their writing and research abilities. Like Belcher (2009, cited in Huerta et. al, 2017, p. 716), some students suggested they felt isolated when they embarked on this process, as if other students and researchers had skills and knowledge that they lacked, an effect that is amplified by the isolation associated with studying remotely. By undertaking research to identify and practise the writing conventions and habits of their chosen disciplines, students discovered these feelings were common and developed confidence in overcoming them.

Comments in reflections showed that the peer forums made available through online delivery made students feel less alone, allowed them to learn from one another, and developed digital communication skills that could be applied to a range of situations:

It is comforting to know that I am not alone in my insecurity about writing, procrastination, and binge-writing tendencies, and that it was possible to overcome or manage these obstacles to produce good writing.

It was empowering to know that as a writer I am not expected to immediately know the correct writing conventions for a particular discipline, and that they can be learned.

For my project, I chose to do practice-led research I had not heard of this before but found it exciting to learn that it could be applied to many different creative areas. Some people wrote stories and used this type of research to answer their research questions. This type of research can also be applied to other works such as theatre or dance.

Learning to provide and receive feedback is an essential skill that I can foresee as being applicable to, not only future academic endeavours, but also employment, hobbies, or anytime skills can be improved.

Student reflections showed the process of demonstrating to themselves and others that they could find out through self-guided research the expectations of different discourse communities gave students confidence and a sense of agency:

I think the biggest influence that this unit had on my writing was my confidence.

I have gained more confidence in my writing practice.

I have found one of the keys that I have been searching for [...] more confidence in my professional writing.

Embedding metacognitive writing offers transferable skills

In addition to aspects of online pedagogy such as online forums, marker feedback and materials able to be navigated in multiple ways, students identified key aspects of the WAW and broader writing approaches that they found useful, such as pre-writing and journal-keeping:

[T]he practice of keeping a journal made me more aware of my research-related thoughts when they appeared.

Several students explicitly stated that they developed skills in the unit they were confident they could apply to future endeavours. This suggests, to invoke Driscoll and Well’s research into disposition and writing skills transfer (2012), that the process of investigating writing conventions in a discipline disposes students to believe that they can apply a similar process to other disciplines and writing and research tasks:

Learning to make connections between ideas and creative writing and the research necessary to inform that writing is a valuable skill and one that is portable across most vocational and educational areas.

I will be more likely to adapt my writing for different contexts.

I am confident that the pre-writing, drafting, data management, and paper organisation methods will be invaluable for future writing projects.

It gives me a measure of enthusiasm about how I might apply the analysis of writing-practices [...] in some of my future units.

Of the ten respondents in our study, nine reported overwhelmingly positive experiences. Students expressed feeling a greater sense of mastery, or at least feeling on their way to achieving this, in their studies and writing:

I now know how to construct a concise abstract, model different types of introductions, and how to structure the delivery of research findings.

I am confident that the pre-writing, drafting, data management, and paper organisation methods will be invaluable for future writing projects and I am confident that I will be able to improve my use of them with practice.

I believe that this unit has given me the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct further research projects.

The effects are probably not yet visible in my work, but I feel they will develop with practice.

Without this unit, I feel I would still be lost in the wilderness and not fully understanding what is [expected] of writing for university.

The student who expressed a negative experience nonetheless reported benefiting from the unit:

In the end, the paper I have done is very different to what was in my proposal [...] While I am not entirely happy with the final result I do believe it is better than it would have been had I stuck to the original plan.

These responses support McCracken and Ortiz’s conclusion that, where students succeed, it is “*because they struggled*” (2013).

The analysis of student reflections from the unit indicates that online students across a range of fields and research methods found the WAW approach productive in developing their confidence and flexibility as learners and writers. The process of identifying a discipline and devising a research project about writing in that discipline – the WAW approach – prompted students to think about what they wanted to learn, and about where and how they might find models and adapt and apply information toward their goals in particular areas. These reflections also show that digital delivery provided affordances such as the ability to exchange ideas, ask questions, share experiences, and navigate materials and feedback in their own way, which promoted access and engagement. Applying a WAW approach in a hybrid researched writing class, and using digital learning spaces to individually tailor pedagogy, was found to help external students, particularly non-traditional students, to develop as agential learners and independent writers. While the limited number of participants and responses analysed here cannot support broad claims about the specific methods used, the correspondence between the experiences reported by these participants and research findings relating to self-efficacy and writing skills transferability suggest digital delivery of WAW can be valuable in delivering writing learning in large units with students of diverse needs, abilities and backgrounds.

Conclusion

While the outbreak of Covid-19 compelled a widespread shift to online teaching and learning, the digital environment was already well situated as a place for writing instruction and practice. The suitability, flexibility and adaptability of digital methods for writing teaching and learning are displayed in the results of our study involving a 2018 tertiary researched writing class. For this writing class, comprising undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the university and at varying stages of their degrees, a WAW approach was applied in a blended online and in-person delivery mode. WAW is recognised as an effective means of teaching research and writing skills to students who may have varying interests, needs and abilities. It is applicable to different disciplines and to creative and professional writing styles and genres. Furthermore, it is adaptable to in-person, hybrid and fully online modalities. Analysis of students’ experiences in the 2018 class reaffirms that a WAW approach works well in the digital teaching and learning environment and, even with limited resources, can accommodate a large and diverse student cohort.

The online teaching and learning methods adopted for this class evidently encouraged student engagement and self-efficacy, and they supported students in the development of meaningful and transferable skills. These findings are consistent with previously reported experiences around students’ successes in online writing classes. They also fit with the Higher Education Standards Panel’s recommendations on aligning education with student career goals, monitoring and promoting engagement across a course, and, for external students, ensuring that both course design and pastoral supports target remote delivery rather than simply being an extension of on-campus offerings (Department of Education and Training, 2017). The deliberate prioritisation of online delivery for the hybrid class in 2018 made the most of technology in ways that benefited both external and on-campus students, recognising the digital space as the predominant writing environment.

Of the students who participated in our study, many indicated feeling challenged by the teaching and learning approach taken. Yet these same students also indicated that the challenges ultimately led them to realise increased self-confidence in their research and writing skills and to achieve greater flexibility and agency in their application of these skills. Significantly, students mostly reported achieving greater efficacy as researchers and writers, and they expressed confidence that the skills and knowledge gained in this class will effectively transfer to other professional, creative and academic writing settings. As a result of learning researched writing under a WAW approach within a digital environment, the students feel like better writers and, following from this realisation of self-efficacy and identity as writers, expect to be better writers in the future.

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