

Information Technology Based Writing in Higher Education: Project Work on LANs

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Abstract

This project was implemented on a “private web” by two classes of first year university students, most of whom had never written an academic style paper before, even in their native language, Japanese. Various questionnaires revealed the lack of skills and knowledge and directed the development of the group work. The finished product was a short standardized thesis

The personnel and circumstances were the following. We worked with two classes of twenty-eight students each, who were first year university level, with little computer, email, or web experience; a technologically low level instructor, and the webmaster. The students used their own computers 90% of the time, and about 10% of the time, they used the computer lab to access the BBS. They employed a standard composition and grammar textbook in class.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this work was to design and implement an updated university writing course that would promote IT (Information Technology) with the use of LAN (Local Area Network) Web Boards and other IT media in English.

2. Background to the project

3. Procedural steps

The implementation steps were initiated by a needs analysis, experience questionnaire, and an initial brainstorming session, and progressed through scaffolding of the process writing, to a final group position papers on the Board. Each week, a different skill or portion of the paper was taught, and all the while, there was on-going peer

review (of content, not mechanics) within the groups via the LANs.

Their low computer and net skills were first discovered in qualitative questionnaires, followed by quantitative ones.

The following delineates the fine points, sequentially. The project goals were negotiated and determined to be creativity, discovery, and accuracy, in that order. In class, the first lesson entailed brainstorming on the topic to generate motivation and ideas, plus a lecture on plagiarism and citations. The assignment was a ten-sentence summary, sent by email. The subsequent lesson was to set up groups of four, go to the lab to learn how to use the BBS, and “talk” to each other via the web only.

Subtopics were chosen, and groups signed up for them. Each student had to contribute minimum numbers of appropriate statements. Along the way, such things as statistics were required for interest. The introduction and conclusion were introduced at this point, following “a natural progression” [1], and they were taught in halves. Graphics were added to the finished product.

4. Conclusions and discussion

The project was evaluated via another qualitative questionnaire, an essay type. It examined such aspects as the students’ volume of work (particularly their perception of the amount

of writing); the quality of work; the reactions to group work; the degree of focus; the impressions of teacher domination; relationships with all personnel involved; task orientation; and autonomy. As for the amount of work, this written comment was typical, “Our group talked [“talked” on the web board] about our project 2 or 3 days per week. I wrote many sentences, over 100. We rewrote our report 4 or 5 times, and we spent 5 or 6 hours a week on this project.” Many submissions about the quality of their work involved the following, “I could really learn how to write a report from our project. At first, I wondered why we had to rewrite our report so many times, but it became better and better, little by little. We could write a lot better in the last report than in the first report. So in the end everybody was very happy.” Focus statements that were frequently seen were similar to these, “I was able to pay attention to the work. I had to rewrite sentences about 5 times. In the first few weeks, I spent about three hours a week on our report; I spent about two hours per week later. I was busy.” Regarding autonomy, all the students who expressed opinions about it seemed to reiterate that it was good to work on their own sometimes. “The teacher was not there [in my home] when I wrote on the Board. I could think on my own ideas.” There were equally positive responses about collaborating, “Group work is very good. I didn’t know my group members very well at first,

but we have a good relationship these days, and so we discussed the topic not only on this class' web board, but also by email. I can understand how to use the Web board from group work." Task orientation was described in these ways, "I think I worked [applied] myself. No person in my group was lazy at last [in the end], even one lazy boy. We all did our work; we all did our homework. We didn't chat; we worked hard, everybody." On the teacher's side, we looked into such aspects as ease of checking and overall amount of work, and again were more than pleased with our conclusions. Since a great deal of the checking was done by the students themselves, less time was expended by us. The group set up encouraged the members to monitor each other. We anticipate less of a burden in the next semester, and less in the coming terms thereafter, as this format provides a template for succeeding semesters.

5. Recommendations

With such gratifying results, future expansion plans have been laid out. We plan to collaborate with groups of students at a Tokyo university. The topic would not be limited to only one chosen by the instructor or the students, but could diversify to multiple themes conducted concurrently, with possible switches as the term or academic year progresses, contingent upon resources, personnel, zeal, and time frame. Instead of having one group

of our students from our university communicate with a group of four from another, we envision two from ours with two from another institution comprising a group, and collaborating on a single topic. This could be expanded to include our sister city college, and exchange universities in New Zealand, and possibly in Canada in the future.

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