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The Development of Writing Skills in Larger Classes through T-Cosy

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A number of researchers (see Hays et al.) have argued that writing is a mode of thinking. One logical implication of this tenet is that the mastery of any academic subject must involve learning how to write within the context of a particular discipline. Richard Fulkerson points out that such a contextual approach has become part of an axiological core among specialists in composition and rhetoric (417). How is this new wisdom to be applied by people like myself, who are not writing specialists, and how can this be done in the kind of very large classes many university instructors now face in most universities?

In this paper I want to report on the methods I used to improve the writing (and thinking) skills of students in larger classes, within the context of anthropology. In particular, I will analyze my use of a computer conference system (called T-Cosy) which required students to write short assignments onto a computer terminal and which enabled me to provide instant feedback. I have selected excerpts from this computer conference to indicate how I used this technology to apply my knowledge of contemporary composition theory and of pedagogy to teach students how to write better anthropology.

Background

I first used T-Cosy (Teaching Conference System) in an introductory class at the University of Guelph in the spring semester of 1990—a class of approximately 50 students; the following fall I used the

same technology in running workshops for a third year course which has an enrolment of 80 students. Although in principle opposed to the current trend towards increasingly larger classes, especially at the introductory level, I feel a responsibility to help my students learn how to think through writing. Given a lack of viable alternatives, I might have to use T-Cosy in a course with an even higher enrolment.

My interest in promoting student development, especially the development of critical thinking and analytical writing skills, predates my use of the T-Cosy technology. About 5 years ago, I started experimenting with interactive workshops in an introductory anthropology course which at that time had an average enrolment of about a hundred students per section. These workshops were conducted with the help of a teaching assistant, in weekly tutorials of no more than 25 students each. Each tutorial was further subdivided into smaller groups of 4 or 5 students who discussed short ethnographic passages included in a course manual. They also sometimes wrote short essay-type answers on acetate sheets which could be put on an overhead projector for further discussion. The idea was to help prepare these students to answer the essay-type question to be included in two mid-terms and a final examination. I wanted them to master the basic concepts, technical terms and a minimum of factual information needed to understand what anthropology was all about. At the same time I wanted the students to develop their academic writing skills. We also used overhead projections showing short segments from written answers from the actual exam itself, to discuss how weak answers could be edited or re-written to improve their logic and precision or to make them more comprehensible.¹

In January of 1990 I was assigned a spring session in the same course with an expected enrolment of about 50 students, but without the help of a teaching assistant. How could I possibly run several tutorials per week by myself, much less mark the large number of very short written assignments I wanted to give as homework? The solution was to use a computer conference system, open to students, called T-Cosy.

T-Cosy

I am not going to go into the technical details of how T-Cosy works or how it is used. Suffice it to say that it was designed to allow

faculty, administrators and students at Guelph to send written messages to one another, that is to «carry on a conversation» via computer terminals. Several instructors had already required their students to use T-Cosy as a term assignment, usually in order to report on what they had read or to stimulate debates over policy issues. I decided to use the same system in a slightly different way—as a substitute for my tutorials. I wanted my students to write sample examination questions before they wrote much longer exams in the classroom. All students had access to terminals which enabled them to read and write short passages, and they could do so outside of class hours. In order to ensure that all students would benefit from such an exercise, participation in a computer conference especially set up for my course was made compulsory (i.e., grades were assigned). This computer conference was called the T-Cosy workshop. What they wrote on a computer screen, and then sent through the system, reached a terminal in my office, but workshop messages could also be accessed by all of the other students in the course. Before I go on to present some of these sample written passages, however, let me first describe the actual nature of the examination questions.

Ethnographic passages

A course manual (which I designed), included a series of short one or two-page passages, either written by the instructor or selected from popular writers. A typical passage might describe a hypothetical journey back into time, a diary written by an explorer, a section from a science-fiction novel or a description of a non-Western culture by an outside observer. The students were supposed to identify specific ideas or statements which are either consistent or inconsistent with anthropological thinking or the standard usage of anthropological terms. They also had to back up their answers. The aim of this exercise (and the exam) was for students to apply what they learned in a critical manner. There are many possible ways of analyzing most passages, and in some (but not all cases), it is possible to arrive at quite different (but appropriate) responses depending on how the students support their analysis. Sometimes I also asked students to identify ambiguities or logical contradictions. By the time they have to analyze such an ethnographic passage in a mid-term, and later in the final exam, students will have had lots of practice and a good idea of what I expect. I have included one of the shorter passages in the course manual as an example (see diagram 1). For the computer workshop, students had to select and write about one consistency or one inconsistency only.

LECTURES and WORKSHOPS

Diagram 1

Sample Essay-Type Exam Question

INSTRUCTIONS

(For both Classroom and T-CoSy)

Same as previous essay-type questions
(look for consistencies and inconsistencies)**Ethnographic Passage****THE CLAN OF THE CAVE BAT***(A novel dealing with what life must have been like in 6000 B.C.)*

An excerpt from chapter 22

By G.J. Droptaut

After a fitful sleep, Nina peered out from the peephole in the dark hut where she had been locked up by the Binjas. They had already forced her to walk for fourteen days since her capture and had arrived at this new village in the middle of the night. At first her eyes were not used to the bright sunlight outside but soon she could make out the scenario in the clearing in front of her prison.

The first thing that caught her attention was the physical appearance of the people in this new setting. The Binjas as well as her own people, the people of the cave bat clan, were for the most part dark-skinned with light reddish hair and dark brown eyes. However, the people she now gazed upon were extremely pale and hairy. They were also much taller and their facial features almost did not seem human - their lips were thin, their eyes not slanted and some had noses that seemed too big for their faces.

At noon, someone removed the wooden bar that kept the door closed from the outside and brought her a meal of porridge and dried meat. Three hours later, one of the strangers came to take her away and she had to

go to yet another village, on the other side of a river. Unlike the Binjas, they treated her kindly and soon one of them became her new mate. Within two years she had learned their strange language well enough to converse and soon she accompanied them on various trading expeditions where she acted as an interpreter whenever they encountered the Binjas or their allies. The new people among whom she now lived called themselves the Koras.

Over time Nina became a famous Kora healer. Although she never had any children of her own, she often assisted other women at childbirth, a trade she had learned from her mother before the outbreak of the great epidemic that had almost wiped out the clan of the cave bat. She was often called upon to visit people far away and thus got used to the slightly different ways of speaking of the various Kora tribes that lived on the coastal plain. However, despite her good fortune, occasionally she was still nostalgic for her homeland in the mountains to the west and sometimes she would sing her favourite childhood songs in her mother tongue, which she had almost forgotten from lack of use.

One day, Nina arrived at a small hamlet of fishing folk along the coast. At first she could not understand most of these people although some of them also spoke Kora. The elders, including the headman, thus had to use younger people as interpreters. The headman, who had summoned her to this place, first spoke to her in his own language. You can imagine her surprise when she realized that his speech resembled her own mother tongue (although in physical appearance the people from this hamlet resembled the other people on the plains). After addressing the headman directly in her own mother tongue, the headman spoke slowly and carefully and made her understand that they wanted her to help them get rid of an evil sorcerer who lived in their midst.

(the story continues in the next chapter)

The logistics

The students were divided into groups of 4 or 5, who sat together in class. Each such group was responsible for collectively writing a short paragraph, and they were frequently given time to start a draft during class time. The course manual also had room for students to jot down the names and phone number of other members of their group so they would be able to get in touch after class. The groups could decide how to divide up the work but only one group mark was assigned. Each T-Cosy group message was worth 4 marks, employing the following schema: 3.5 for an A answer, 3 for a B, 2.5 for a C, 2 for a D and 1 for an F. Groups which failed to do this assignment by the due date received a zero. In evaluating such an assignment, I gave feedback on both form (writing style and organization) and content (related to anthropology) which would help students to improve both their grasp of the subject matter and their critical thinking and writing skills. In giving such feedback, I was equally concerned about the subject matter and the proper use of academic written discourse in the context of anthropology. Apart from teaching through my written feedback (available to the whole class), I also encouraged students to improve their achievement level through a rather unconventional method of marking.

After I evaluated the assignment, I «posted» my marks by means of a message on T-Cosy. Each of the original messages (still on the system) had a mark attached to it in this way. This was an open and public form of feedback because everyone in the class could see how each group had done. I would have preferred to identify the students only by ID number, but the system as currently designed does not allow for this possibility—at least one member of each group (who actually signed on to the system) would be identified at the top of each computer message. However, I tried to allay any fears or anxieties by carefully explaining my philosophy of giving as much feedback as possible to the students and also told them I was using T-Cosy as a kind of experiment in promoting student development. Most of the students in the class did not know each other, nor did they have much opportunity to interact with other members of the class (except as members of the T-Cosy groups). I was willing to risk creating some embarrassment resulting from a public disclosure of their group marks in order to promote a greater sense of self-confidence in the analytical writing ability of

students who would benefit from this exercise. I should add that access to the computer workshop was open to members of my class only, and therefore any public disclosure of both names and marks was restricted to about 50 people.

Students knew that the computer workshop was designed to enable them to do better in subsequent in-class exams and that they also had an opportunity to improve the marks assigned for the workshop itself. Any student was also entitled to edit (re-write) any other group's assignment (message), but only if the message they decided to edit was already assigned at least a B or a C.² In this way, students could raise their original mark, if they managed to change, let us say, a C into a B answer. Individuals who belonged to groups which had received a D or an F could also revise (re-write) their own group's message to raise their marks. In order to encourage as much peer learning as possible, and to involve students with better writing skills, I also allowed individuals whose groups had already received an A (worth 3.5) to improve another group's message. If they did so, they would be assigned an extra half mark (bringing them up to a 4).

Because T-Cosy has a very primitive system for text-editing and no spell-checker, I told the students not to worry about what were obviously typographical errors. Since their computer messages were not final «public documents,» I was less worried about the final «polishing-up» stage of writing than the actual organizational structure and logic of their answers. If these assignments had been hand-written and handed in to me, I would have tended to circle spelling and punctuation errors. T-Cosy did not allow me to do this (nor did the students have the opportunity to make minor changes once they had hit the carriage return to go from one line to another). Thus, the very inflexibility of the word-processing system used in T-Cosy forced me to follow a pedagogical principle developed in composition and rhetoric—namely, not to focus on details at the first stage of composition (Fulkerson 413). This principle was explained to the students and I assured them that even university administrators often wrote unedited, «messy» messages in communicating to each other. I have also deliberately left all of the original minor errors (or inevitable typos) in the examples included in this paper.

Discussion of Students' Writing

Rather than give readers all possible answers and comments, I have selected five messages for discussion. Diagram 2 illustrates what these T-Cosy messages actually look like on the screen—only the names of the students have been stroked out in order not to breach confidentiality. Specific sections or isolated sentences from all five examples will appear as quotations (but exactly as they were written on T-Cosy, without editing or corrections). These sample sentences or paragraphs (taken from computer print-outs down-loaded from the mainframe at Guelph) will illustrate the students' own writing as well as my feedback on both form and content, including sections which specifically deal with matters of writing per se or which illustrate pedagogical principles. Because this chapter is not specifically addressed to an anthropological audience, I will not go into the substance or content of the assignments. Readers must also keep in mind that most of the following passages are quoted out of context. The sentences selected are meant primarily to demonstrate my attempts to encourage analytical writing and critical thinking skills.

Example 1:

My first example (also shown in diagram 2) illustrates a typical C answer. Despite some technical problems with wrap-around of lines, this group's message was not badly written, except for some minor punctuation errors. They did, however, give me an example of both a consistency and an inconsistency, even though I had only asked for one or the other, which indicates sloppiness in reading my instructions. Further, even looking at only that part of their answer which was counted (and which was technically «correct»), their answer was weak because of their unsophisticated and inappropriate use of social science terminology: «While visiting people along the coastal plain Nina adapted to the variations of the language of the Kora tribe. This correlates with the language continuum concept.»

Apart from my feedback on content, I pointed out this writing weakness in my T-Cosy reply: «Your consistency could have been better expressed. I don't think the term 'correlation' is appropriate here.»

Diagram 2

workshop/passage 2 #1, from fschryer, 388 chars, Tue May 15 18:20:09 1990

TITLE: Introductory remarks
Welcome to the workshop topic 'passage2'. This t-cosy workshop starts on Thursday, May 17th and deals with the ethnographic passage «The Clan of the Cave Bat» (p. 32 in the course manual).
The last time (topic, passage1), some of you beat me to it, so I wanted to make sure you could all see this introduction, before you start writing your group answers.

workshop/passage2 #2, from - - - , 498 chars, Thu May 17 12:03:46 1990
There is/are comment(s) on this message.

TITLE: Ethnographic Passage
Group - - - - -
Inconsistency: According to the clan of the cave bat passage it took Nina two years to learn the language of the Kora's. Considering the village was only across the river this goes against the concept of language continuum.
Consistency: 4While visiting people along the coastal plain Nina adapted to the variations of the language of the Kora tribes. This correlates with the language continuum concept.

workshop/passage 2 #10, from fschryer, 602 chars, Thu May 17 21:43:36 1990
This is a comment to message 2.
There are additional comments to message 2.

Evaluation: C (2.5)..
Comment: you only needed to do either one consistency or one inconsistency. Your inconsistency get NO mark (it would have been an F by itself). It is possible (and there are lots of examples) where one language continuum exists on one side of a river while another one exists on the other side. This might happen if two previously unconnected groups happen to both reach the river from opposite directions and then maintain the river as a convenient political boundary. Your consistency could have been better expressed. I don't think the term "correlation" is appropriate here.

Another student in the class then wrote an improved version of this original group message in reaction to my editorial comments. Her revised message shows a more mature and polished use of anthropological discourse, which raised her original group mark of 3.5 to an individual grade of 4: «The variations of the language of the Kora tribes is [sic] a good example of what linguists call a language continuum.»

Another student also decided to re-write this message in a slightly different (and I thought creative) way, but in so doing ran into a logical problem. The main difficulty was his poor choice of words in one sentence which could be interpreted as a logical contradiction:

«Specifically, the tribes all belonged to the Kora family, and therefore [sic] their respective languages would have stemmed from a common Kora base, and then as the tribes moved geographically farther from one another, they may have evolved into slightly modified versions of the original language which was their base.»

In providing feedback, I was concerned with giving as much encouragement as possible while at the same time providing a precise diagnosis of where he went wrong. This is my reply:

«Your mark would have gone up for this revision, were it [sic] not for some lack of precision in your use of written English. Are you referring to the Kora tribal family (which is OK) or a family of Kora languages (in which case the original tribes would have actually become geographically separated and broken the continuum as they moved farther away from one another)? Also you should have written that the tribes would have evolved (or better, 'developed') slightly modified versions of their original base and not 'into.' You make it sound like the tribes evolved into language (something I am sure you did not mean to say). The rest was good. I knew pretty well what you meant but to get an A answer/passage, you must use clear, proper and precise written English, which leaves no room for ambiguity, misinterpretation or logical contradiction. Your original mark stays the same, although you almost turned message 26 into a solid A answer (if it wasn't for a few logical and/or grammatical flaws).»

Example 2:

Another group received a B for an analysis of another passage. The anthropological content was very good, but one of their sentences was very ambiguous. This sentence started with the word «this» without a clear indication of an antecedent. I will not cite the original passage or the student's message, but only my short response: «This work gets a B. You make a good observation; however, how you use 'this corresponds' is unclear. Do you mean corresponds to the natives' perception of the captain or the captain's real social status?»

I decided to comment in the form of a question because this writing problem was so common; by drawing attention to it, I hoped to make both this group and other students in the class more aware of the need for greater precision in their writing. Given the importance of role models and peer pressure, the students who wrote this message probably ended up learning the most by reading the following improved version of what they were trying to say. This edited version was written on T-Cosy by a classmate a day later: «It is consistent with the anthropological viewpoint that the natives would give the captain of the expedition a garment that would confirm his prestige as a leader.»

Example 3:

This example is a message (another C answer) which caused considerable controversy and discussion. I will therefore use it to show the flexibility of my computer workshops and how what was initially a problem could be turned into a meaningful dialogue between instructor and students. I will not go into the specific details, except to mention that the passage the students had to analyze also related to some aspect of anthropological linguistics. Apart from some technical difficulties, it was poorly written and I also had to give considerable feedback to clarify a point I had made in a previous lecture. The controversy arose when several students decided to comment on the feedback I had given. The reaction of these students is a classic example of the process of intellectual development among university students which William Perry (1970) has diagnosed as the «relativistic» stage. The students wrote:

«We as a group feel that choosing the continuum of language as a premise of our argument is valid in that we chose the most likely explanation with our limited information in anthropology. Your 'however, it IS possible' explanation only serves to prove that anything could be possible.»

In order to clarify this issue, I had to give additional feedback in oral form, during a class discussion and subsequently in the privacy of my office. However, using the public T-Cosy forum enabled me to publicly acknowledge that I could have done a better job explaining a particular technical point in class. I also had to clarify that I expected students to develop their own position, but always within the rules and conventions of the discipline. At the same time, the student in question (and others) had the opportunity to further develop their writing and thinking skills by engaging in what became an ongoing debate carried on through T-Cosy. My feedback (even if only a paragraph long) motivated students to continue writing to convey their ideas, which was the whole point of the exercise.

Example 4:

Next I offer an example of a poorly written message (it got a D) which was re-written by the same group after I told them that they had a series of isolated statements with no argument or logical progression of ideas. Although their new version is far from perfect, it does show how re-writing after feedback can lead to improvement in analysis/writing. The original message is as follows:

«A consistency found in this passage concerns the relation between agriculture and hierarchy. It was indicated that this society practiced agriculture through the use of metal axes and wooden digging sticks. In regard to hierarchy, the captain of the expedition [sic] was treated highly and given a short cape and beads. A hierarchial society, craft specialization and agriculture are all characteristics of a ranking tribe.»

Much of the re-written version was exactly the same, but there was some attempt at revision:

«A consistency found in this passage concerns the relation between agriculture and hierarchy. It was indicated that this society practiced agriculture through the use of metal axes and wooden digging sticks. In regard to hierarchy, the captain of the expedition was treated highly, this indicated their ability to recognize authority. He was given a short cape and beads, this also indicates a characteristic of craft specialization, considered to be a feature of the chiefdom society.»

Their mark went up to a C, but I indicated that there were still sentence structure and punctuation problems and, more importantly, that there was still something wrong with their first sentence:

«Your new version shows improvement, but I think it would be better if you started by saying that the passage was consistent in regards to both agriculture AND hierarchy. If you say 'relation between', then you would have to specify that agriculture allowed or was a precondition for the development of social ranking or hierarchy (or something like that).»

Example 5:

I will not copy the text of the final example, which was a model A answer. However, this student displayed a tendency to «write up,» something which I wanted to discourage as much as possible. Here again, T-Cosy enabled me to get the message across to as many students as possible:

«Evaluation = A (3.5.). My only criticism is your statement 'as we have been informed in the classroom'. You should never make it too obvious that you are 'only a student' by referring to the class lectures as the source of anthropological views or data. That is an example of what is called 'writing up'. You should simply say 'according to standard (or most up-to-date) anthropological kinship theory' or something like that.»

Evaluation of the Experiment

As a result of my use of T-Cosy, the writing skills of my students improved. This was reflected not only in a somewhat higher than usual class average, but by a positively skewed distribution of final marks. Only six students did not participate in some or all four of the computer workshops. These students included both weak and already good writers, but four of them did show an improvement of their writing skills between the mid-term and the final (although they lost some marks for not completing part of the compulsory class assignment). While not participating in the workshops, these four students may very well have at least signed on to the computer conference and learned from reading what other students were doing. However, I was not able to ascertain whether or not they signed on just to read. Another complicating factor (something I discovered two weeks into the course) is that some students had limited time to gain access to computer terminals in the library because they had to commute back and forth from Toronto and could only be on campus two days a week.

In speaking to the students during and after the course, many told me that they appreciated the feedback they had received. They also liked the manual and the exercise of commenting on ethnographic passages. However, these same students also told me that they had to overcome a mental block about using computers and some still disliked computers after the course. There was also a high level of frustration concerning the awkward and difficult nature of T-Cosy as a word-processing technology. Students already familiar with using Word Perfect, Word Star or other forms of text-editing were particularly disappointed with the primitive editing functions of T-Cosy. These reservations were also expressed in anonymous course evaluations, which I did not get to see until all the final marks had been distributed. No one specifically complained about the lack of anonymity involved in the method of posting grades for the computer assignments, but I decided not to reveal marks so publicly the next time I used T-Cosy. During the fall of 1990, in another course with an enrolment of 88 students and the assistance of a teaching assistant, I arranged to have all marks sent individually only to the students who wrote a particular passage. However, everyone could still recognize who wrote messages on T-Cosy and anyone could revise or edit any other message if they felt it needed improvement.

Conclusions

I will sum up by briefly outlining some of the advantages and disadvantages of using T-Cosy the way I did, to foster development of writing skills in larger classes and to promote a better grasp of the anthropological way of thinking.

Advantages:

1. One does not have to worry about the limitations and constraints involved in having to schedule tutorial times and specific classrooms suitable for small-group discussions.
2. Feedback to one student can be read by all without having to make duplicate copies for distribution in class. This maximizes the efficiency of the time spent by the instructor(s) and enabled all the students of the class to learn what were the criteria used in marking written assignments. Many students could thus learn from the mistakes made by others, even if they chose not to attempt any revisions.
3. The use of T-Cosy promotes peer learning even in larger classes. Students can see examples of weaker and stronger (model) answers and they can also see how a weak answer can be transformed into a stronger or more precise answer. By having them work in groups (both inside and outside the formal classroom setting), students can also help each other.
4. By having students initially work in groups, the amount of time required to give feedback to written assignments is cut down to a reasonable amount (although it is still labour-intensive). For example, instead of spending ten to fifteen minutes on each of 50 individual messages (for a total of over ten hours), the instructor only spends a little over two hours marking ten group assignments for the first draft.

5. One could easily train teaching assistants to help do this type of evaluation and feedback (on both content and form) for really large classes, as well as to help in the evaluation of individual messages (the re-writing part). Only about a quarter of the class (mainly the better students) chose to write revisions on an individual basis, which still made the second evaluation manageable.
6. Students who don't like group work still have the opportunity to get rewarded for individual messages (by doing revisions).
7. The system is flexible; depending on class size, one can have smaller or larger groups, increase the number of assignments, and even institute a system of selected feedback (only commenting on the weakest answers). While the quality of teaching and learning inevitably declines with increasing class size, one can at least minimize the damage (before resorting to multiple-guess exams which do not promote any writing development whatsoever).

Drawbacks and potential problems:

1. Many students (and professors) have a mental block against the use of computer technology. One must set aside extra time to teach students to use T-Cosy, and make sure there are computer assistants around to help students with any minor technical problems, especially when they are first learning how to use the system.
2. Apart from the fact that the students first have to learn to use T-cosy (on top of everything else), the editing function is still very primitive and it is a shame that student numbers instead of their names could not be listed at the top of T-Cosy messages. The T-Cosy system definitely needs to be altered to allow for greater anonymity and to thus provide more confidential feedback. The level of anxiety or discomfort would thereby be reduced. In other words, the system needs to be made more user-friendly and more sensitive to the issue of student confidentiality.

3. With increasing class size (and more students using a limited number of computer terminals), the back-up services required to keep the computer system running smoothly might not be able to keep up with demand. Other technical problems (system crashes) have also arisen when I have used the system.
4. The instructor becomes more dependent on such back-up services and thus loses some measure of control over how well the course goes. Unless there is a good spirit of teamwork in the university at large, I would definitely not recommend using T-Cosy or a similar type of computer conferencing system.

All in all, however, the advantages for me have so far outweighed the disadvantages. The T-Cosy system, though still in its infancy, has a great deal of potential.

NOTES

1. The actual method described was originally designed by Catherine F. Schryer when she was the English Language Services Coordinator at the University of Guelph.
2. Such revisions were separate messages which were linked to the original message in the computer. Thus, original and revised versions could be seen together on the screen.