

Academic literacies and e-learning: A critical approach to writing in the online university

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Abstract

This paper adopts an academic literacies perspective to argue for a critical approach to the writing practices of the online university classroom. It describes an on-going action research project in an online Masters in Online and Distance Education (MAODE) programme at the UK Open University, which aims to create an online writing resource to support distance learners in developing a critical awareness of the writing practices on the programme. The paper presents the results of an evaluation study of this resource during the 2005 presentation of the MAODE, and discusses the evidence from this study that such a resource can provide a space for students to critique the dominant literacies of the online university.

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1. Writing in the online university

Despite the recent emergence of new visual, hypertextual, and other technology-enabled communication practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Snyder, 2002) the production of written texts remains key to the construction of knowledge in the university, both in the way it is transmitted, and the way its social relations are maintained. Writing is integral to students' induction into academic cultures and discourse communities, and is the principal way they demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired during their studies, and their fitness for accreditation. In many subject areas the development of a student's writing ability has come to be seen as practically synonymous with their acquisition of knowledge.

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The centrality of writing has been recognised through the development of broad pedagogic approaches such as Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines (Monroe, 2003; Trimbur, 1994), and Academic Literacies (Jones, Turner, & Street, 1999; Lea & Street, 1998). These perspectives engage, in different ways, with the debate between discipline-specific approaches to writing which prioritise the ‘socialisation’ of students into the literacy practices of specific, usually disciplinary, academic communities, and more humanistic concerns with self-discovery, voice, and class, ethnic and personal identities (Bazerman, 2005). This debate has an ideological as well as a pedagogic dimension, as it is concerned with the way that writing is used to construct relations of power and authority in the university classroom. Thus Bazerman and others argue for the primacy of disciplinary practice on the grounds that ‘only by learning disciplinary practices can students remake those disciplines in more equitable and less narrow ways’ (Bazerman, 2005, p. 89). The academic literacies perspective, on the other hand, argues that university learning is increasingly modular and inter-disciplinary, and the students diverse (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 161). In such conditions learners encounter different writing conventions as they move from subject to subject or course to course. Research suggests that disciplinary requirements for writing are by no means transparent, and the ways in which subject-specialist teachers attempt to articulate them may be mystifying to novice writers (Jones et al., 1999; Lillis, 2001), or subtly inflected in contingent ways, such as by the gender of the teacher (Read, Francis, & Robson, 2004). A pedagogy for academic literacies draws attention to the plurality of communication practices implicated in what is generally termed ‘academic writing’, foregrounding the need to engage students in a critique of the writing practices they encounter.

The debate is further inflected by the penetration into university academic communities of rhetoric and practices associated with e-learning and lifelong learning. For example, in the UK, a new agenda has emerged in which academic writing is seen as one of a number of ‘communication skills’ which include oral, written, and other technologised competences assumed to be transferable across the many contexts of lifelong learning (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Positioning communication as a generic skill obscures the context-dependent dimension of language (Fairclough, 1999), and works against engaging learners in a critique of literacy practices in university classrooms. In particular, it works against the conceptualisation of texts generated in online university classrooms as a specifically *written* form of social practice, inheriting the same ideological dimension as other, more obviously power-related, practices such as essay-writing and marking, and academic publication.

In this paper, I argue that we need to support students in developing critical awareness of writing practices involved in online textual communication, as in other arenas of academic meaning-making. I describe an evaluation study carried out as part of an action research project in the UK Open University’s (OU) online Masters in Online and Distance Education (MAODE) programme, which aimed to develop an online writing support resource based on academic literacies principles. I discuss the evidence from the study that such a resource can provide a space for students to critique the dominant literacies of the university online classroom.

2. Online distance learning environments as written environments

Although communication in online environments in higher education is still predominantly textual, pedagogic perspectives with a broad definition of participation as interaction,

collaboration, or community, rather than as social literacy, dominate the e-learning literature (see Wallace, 2003). However, in conditions of student diversity and unfamiliarity with online literacy practices, marginalisation, isolation, and ‘dissensus and conflict’ (Blair & Monske, 2003, p. 449) can undermine the goals of collaborative learning. Recognising that identities of participation in online learning environments have to be negotiated against a background of implicit appraisal of one’s words by both peers and ‘authorities’, my colleagues and I have explored various factors in our online MAODE programme that contribute to the complexity of these virtual environments as writing spaces.

Among these factors are: practices which blur the boundaries between pedagogy and assessment, such as when students are marked on their contributions to online tutorial discussion (Goodfellow, 2001; Goodfellow & Lea, 2005; Lea, 2001); rhetorical demands resulting from the mixing of monological and dialogical textual forms (Goodfellow, Morgan, Lea, & Pettit, 2004); perceptions of cultural distance from ‘anglo/US’ academic and personal conventions of communication (Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez, & Mason, 2001); and cultural and critical dissonance related to differences in professional and occupational background (Goodfellow, 2004). Other work in the area, such as that which characterises online textual interaction as argument (Coffin & Hewings 2005; Coffin et al., this volume), or as addressivity (McKenna, 2005) lends support to our view that the texts constructed in these spaces, despite their ostensible role as a medium for interpersonal interaction, are also perceived through the lens of the dominant literacy practices of the academic/professional learning communities they help to construct.

To make the complexity of these online textual practices, and their imbrication in the literacies of the university classroom, evident to learners, is an important goal of our approach to students’ writing. But as Street has argued, a pedagogy for academic literacies and student diversity needs to go beyond simply making hidden or mystified conventions, norms and values, explicit. It needs to be clear how contesting these conventions serves learning—producing a genuinely empowered subject, i.e. neither the ‘cynic nor the “good” student who “does like we do”’ (Street, 1999). This means encouraging students to reflect critically on their own and others’ learning and its relation to the norms and goals that are embedded in the discourses of the online classroom. We note the claim of earlier practitioners and researchers in Computers and Composition in the USA, that computer-mediated communication has an inherent potential to expose ideological aspects of ‘normal’ classroom interactions around writing, because of the way that the medium conceals conventional markers of status and power (Duin & Hansen, 1994; LeCourt, 1998). This work suggests that the technology might be exploited to help learners develop alternative, and more personally meaningful, ways of writing in response to pedagogical tasks, so as to ‘consider more explicitly how to present themselves in this space’ (LeCourt, 1998, p. 281).

Whereas these American researchers were concerned with the explicit teaching of writing online, in our own distance learning context, where there is no tradition of direct teaching of writing, the conventional approach to supporting students is via supplementary online guidance. The default model of a supplementary resource is well illustrated by the OU’s generic ‘Study Strategies’ website. This is located inside a site entitled ‘Study with the OU’, available to all OU students at whatever level. The study strategies pages are a component of the topic ‘Becoming a Student’, which positions it as a resource for novices. Academic writing figures a few levels further down, under a section on expressing oneself in English. Up to that point, the emphasis is very much on general skills development, offering ‘advice’, ‘techniques’, ‘tips’, etc. As this approach is clearly not intended to promote critical

engagement with writing practices in a specific context, but rather to scaffold and reassure in a general way, the research question for us was how to develop an online study support website that would make explicit the complexity of the online writing practices on our MAODE programme, and provide a space for critiquing them.

3. Action research on the MAODE—the eWrite site

The MAODE is delivered online and in print, to a global student audience. Students come from a range of professional backgrounds; including education, the voluntary sector, health services, commercial training. They are of a range of nationalities and resident in a number of different countries. All classwork is done in asynchronous online tutor groups; students never meet each other or their tutor face-to-face. Tutors facilitate online discussions, act as experts on course subject matter, and mark students' written assignments.

The online writing activities that are held in common across the four courses that make up the programme include, for example: presenting one's own views on course topics; reporting on and critiquing the views presented in course texts; responding to and arguing with the views presented by others; responding to in-text 'reflection' questions; putting forward positions in semi-formal debates; organising small group responses to tasks, etc. In addition there are conventional text-based activities such as writing reports and essays for assessment. Tutors, who are part-time OU associate lecturers also working at a distance, write in-text comments on work submitted for assessment, and explanations and breakdowns of marks awarded, using an electronic template. Tutors do comment on writing issues as part of their marking of formal assignments, but they have neither the time, nor necessarily the expertise, to take on the kind of dialogue around writing practices that is necessary if students are to both participate in and critique the dominant literacies (Lillis, 2001, chapter 6). Such dialogue is particularly called-for by some of the e-learning-specific practices that these courses adopt, for example: different ways of linking writing that is done in online tutorials to that which is submitted for marking so that it can be assessed (see Goodfellow & Lea, 2005).

Following a research project in 2000, exploring the prevalence of ideas of cultural difference amongst students on this global programme (Goodfellow et al., 2001), a web-based writing resource was developed, focused on the language and academic socialisation problems of 'culturally marked' students (i.e., those whose native language is not English, and/or who are unfamiliar with anglo/US academic and university study conventions). The subsequent redevelopment of this resource on academic literacies principles has constituted an ongoing action research project for the past five years, during which the plan-act-evaluate-reflect cycle (Greenbank, 2004) has been through two iterations. The key design developments arising from the first iteration included reorienting the resource towards a more critical view of the literacy practices on the MAODE, targeting all students who wished for support (not only the culturally-marked group), incorporating more reference to online writing types (samples from emails, online discussion, tutors' in-text comments, etc.), and integrating the resource into several core activities within MAODE courses.

The resource, now called the 'eWrite Site' consists of approximately 50 screen-pages, with an estimated reading time of 3–4 h. The introductory text orients users to its role as an induction to writing on the MAODE courses, focusing on 'academic literacy practices' and 'pedagogical and social activities' rather than simply on essay writing. The content of the site falls into two broad areas discussed below.

3.1. *Writing in online tutorials*

Writing in online tutorials deals with topics related to online discussion as writing. Accounts of past students' experiences are central to this, as are demonstrations of the different forms that online discussion can take, and discussions of the way that online contributions are assessed in the different courses. The 'Students experiences of writing' section constructs the MAODE as an international learning community, with interview transcripts of students from different national and occupational backgrounds talking about the requirement to contribute online. These accounts often focus on subjectivities that are not apparent through surface readings of messages, such as the way an individual's personal background can influence their communication style. The section carries the site's main message about the complexity and hybridity of online writing practices, the absence of established genres or qualitative norms, and the desirability of taking a critical approach towards one's own, and others', modes of participation.

3.2. *Writing for TMAs*

Writing for TMAs deals with topics related to assignment writing. It includes a detailed account written by an MAODE graduate of how she went about preparing and planning to write an assignment, and audio clips of members of the course authoring teams talking about various aspects of TMA writing. Other advice emphasises personal judgment and again draws attention to the variety of the text-types that are encountered in these courses. Feedback to students in an 'academic writing quiz' on a question about using the first person, for example, suggests that 'you need to be able to judge if an assignment is asking you for a "personal you" perspective, or an "academic you" one.' The section focuses on the role of the assessment process in constructing the norms of academic writing on the different courses in the programme, but it also tries to encourage students to critically reflect on ways that they can work around these norms to develop their own academic 'voice'.

In 2005 this website was made available to all students on the MAODE, accessed from the homepages of the individual courses. The use of the site was monitored throughout the year and student responses to it evaluated. The evaluation study is reported on below.

4. **Evaluating critical engagement**

The aim of the eWrite site is the promotion of critical awareness of the academic communication practices of the MAODE courses. This is intended to help students to reflect on their learning, and develop the confidence to write in the online learning environment in the most appropriate way for them. In order to demonstrate critical awareness and link it to use of the site, the evaluation study needed to show that students: (a) paid attention to those parts of the site in which a critical analysis is rehearsed; and (b) reproduced a similar kind of analysis when reflecting on their own participation.

There are a number of problems attendant on any attempt to integrate supplementary resources into study activity on the MAODE. The most important ones affecting this study were firstly that the time available to engage in activities not perceived as core to the course is very limited, and secondly that tutors and course teams on different courses give different priorities to different types of activity. These conditions make it difficult to devise reliable ways to evaluate students' engagement with the eWrite site. We needed a means to identify

those who did use it, and the extent of their integration of it into ongoing study practices, and we needed a means to analyse the terms in which they reflected on their practice. For the first objective we set out to monitor individual accesses to the site throughout the course year, using an automatic logging facility incorporated into the software platform on which the eWrite site was hosted. For the second, we opted for a discourse-analytic evaluation of interviews with students carried out by email at the halfway point of the course year. The data we collected is therefore of two kinds: access statistics and email interviews.

4.1. Accesses to the site

The site records the date and time of every user's access to each one of its pages, together with the ID of the user. For this study, data was collected for every student accessing eWrite pages between the beginning of February and the end of October 2005, the duration of the 2005 presentation of the courses. This data reveals: (i) which students accessed the site; (ii) which pages they accessed; and (iii) the dates and times of access to each of these pages. It does not record how long they spent looking at particular pages or whether they clicked on any of the pop-up windows that are embedded in some of the pages, or whether they used the other facilities of the site. It gives no direct information about what they actually did with the pages they accessed, but it is possible to make inferences from the patterns of accesses. For example, if a student accessed the welcome page at 20:17pm on February 14th, the introduction page two minutes later, and the assessment of online contributions page five minutes after that, we can infer that these three accesses were part of a single session lasting at least seven minutes, during which the user attended to at least one of these pages. The likelihood is that further time was spent on the last page logged, but the system does not record when the student stopped working.

This data gives us an indication of students' overall activity with the eWrite site during the 9 months of the evaluation, the particular areas of it favoured by particular people, and the time spent attending to these areas. This helps us to evaluate how individuals integrated it into their study activity. A student who spent a reasonable amount of time accessing the site (say 2–3 h), did so in sessions which are relatively sustained (say 30 min or more), and returned to the site more than once during the course, could be said to have engaged with it.

4.2. Email interviews

Halfway through the courses (May 2005) an email was sent to all students on the programme asking them to indicate if they had accessed either the eWrite site or the OU's generic study support site described above, and requesting their permission to contact them by email with a short questionnaire about these sites. Those that agreed were sent a further email with the following questions:

What do you understand to be the purpose of:

- (a) the eWrite site
- (b) the study skills site

...are they doing fundamentally the same job?

Which parts of either resource have you found to be of use to you personally? Can you give an example of an occasion when you have used it?

Have you had any discussion with your tutor or fellow students about these resources?

What kind of problems do you have yourself, or observe other students having, to do with writing practices on this course, either online or for TMAs? Do you think the eWrite site or study skills site currently offer any help with these issues?

These questions were designed to elicit general opinions about writing practices and reflections on personal use of the eWrite site. Students who responded were sent further email queries asking for elaboration on aspects of their response.

The analysis of this email data draws on Gee's notion of the 'discourse model'—an implicit explanatory framework used to make sense of experience (Gee, 1999, p. 61). A particular discourse model, for example, underlies the OU study strategies website, with its 'advice on techniques' and 'tried and tested practical tips', etc. This model implicitly positions the users of the site as deficient in practical techniques for studying successfully. Another is embedded in this advice to students from the director of one of the MAODE courses, which helps to construct the power relation between tutor and student:

There is also plenty of other useful information in eWrite. Occasionally you may notice that the advice differs from what your tutor is telling you. In that case, follow your tutor: s/he will be marking your work.

These discourse models are examples of 'dominant discourses', meaning that they tend to be drawn on by the more powerful members of the MAODE community—course authors, tutors, students who have already studied on one or more of the courses. It is characteristic of dominant discourses that they appear as common sense, embedding assumptions about what is appropriate or normal (Gee, 1999, p. 84). A more critically-oriented model of a resource user underlies the text used on the eWrite site's introduction page, which talks about 'hold(ing) a mirror up to the academic literacy practices of the MAODE' in order to 'make them less mysterious'. Similarly, the site's problematisation of the idea that there are typical characteristics of good online contributions embeds a 'critical discourse', which runs counter to the idea that online participation is assessable in a straightforward way. A critical discourse model is one which problematises the dominant discourses.

To identify the discourse models underlying the students' reflections, we referred to three of Gee's seven categories of 'reality-building task' that language is called upon to perform (Gee, 1999, pp. 10–19). By this he means that the words we use do not just reflect our thoughts or mental states, but enact the social situations and discourses we are speaking or writing into. The categories we used for our analysis were: 'identities' (the views of self that students' words enact), 'social goods' (the people, things and relations on which their words confer status and power), and 'sign systems and knowledge' (the social languages, ways of using text, intertextual references etc. that their words enact as significant). After assigning extracts from their email responses to one or more of these three categories, we classified the discourse models we thought they were drawing on as either 'dominant' or 'critical'.

5. Analysis of the data

5.1. Access logs

There were 111 students registered on the four MAODE courses between February and October 2005. Of these, 93 accessed the eWrite Site at some point during their course. The majority of accesses were to the ‘Welcome’ or introduction pages only, with no further exploration of the site. This had also happened in previous years, as the supplementary status of the site means that many students ignore it after an initial visit. However, a group of about 30 students did explore further and some of these went on to integrate the site into their study practices in ways that were significant for this evaluation. Table 1 shows the number from this group who visited each of the pages in the two main content areas, and the number of times each of these pages was accessed.

These are shown in rank order of users, revealing that the three pages most accessed were all directly concerned with tutor-marked assignments (TMAs). With the exception of the ‘Students’ experiences of writing for online discussion’ page, all the pages that relate to writing online are in the lower half of the table.

Out of this group of 30, four people accessed content pages more than 40 times during their course, and another 20 accessed content pages more than 20 times. 73% of accesses were in the first two months of the course, 10% were in May, when the email questionnaires were sent out, 11% were in April, June and July, and 6% were in the last 3 months. Sessions varied in length between 10 min and three hours, the average being about 90 min.

The overall picture suggests that the site was mainly used in the early stages of the courses, when students were exploring the learning environment and before the course workload grew too great. A certain amount of activity was apparently prompted by the evaluation survey itself. It seems that up to 24 students did make systematic choices about which of the site’s 50-odd pages to explore, and returned to those pages specifically. The data suggests that the efforts to integrate the eWrite site did have some success, and

Table 1
Student users of, and accesses to, the pages on the eWrite main menu

Page Title (bold = pages directly related to Tutor-Marked Assessment or TMA)	Student users	Total accesses
All pages	93	1963
Writing for TMAs	30	65
Course team members views on TMAs	29	60
One student’s approach to TMAs (linked to Writing for TMAs page)	28	56
Students’ experiences of writing for online discussion	25	48
Process approaches to writing	21	37
How online contributions are assessed	20	42
Writing critically	19	33
Writing in online tutorials	18	25
Keywords in TMA questions	18	40
Summarising online discussions	17	31
Quiz on writing for assessment	16	34
What written discussion online looks like	10	18

confirms that the views of those students who responded to the email survey were informed by actual use of the resource.

5.2. *Email interviews*

At the end of May an email was sent to all the students asking them whether they had accessed the eWrite Site and requesting their permission to send them a further questionnaire on their reactions to the resource. There were 21 positive replies and these were emailed the short questionnaire shown in Section 4 (above). Thirteen students responded to the questionnaire and eight of these were contacted with follow-up questions designed to elicit a conversation around issues they had raised. There were many interesting observations made in these responses, but the underlying question we are asking, in our analysis of them, is whether there is evidence of critical discourse models underlying their words. Many of the texts of the eWrite site adopt a critical framing, and we wished to see if students took any of this up in their own reflections.

The texts provided by the students who responded to the questionnaire and subsequent emails amounted to approximately 3000 words. To analyse these texts we adopted Gee's 'reality-building-task' categories. Extracts (words and phrases) from the students' texts were assigned to one or more of the categories 'identities', 'social goods', and 'sign systems and knowledge', according to whether their topics related to reflections on self, things valued by the MAODE community, or kinds of writing and knowledge. The texts themselves were then labeled as 'dominant' or 'critical' on the basis of whether the majority of extracts reproduced or problematised institutional discourses on the MAODE. This is not a precise procedure in the way that Gee, for example, uses examples of cognitive and affective 'I-statements' to characterise the self-positioning of working class and upper middle class school students (Gee, 1999, pp. 142–147). We did not have the same kind of information about the social identities of our students that Gee had, and we were not working with a clear theoretical framework such as social class, but rather with a collection of assumptions and intuitions based on our action research. In our data the categories sometimes overlap, and the labeling of texts is subjective, being reliant on the opinions of two of us who are familiar with the discourses of the MAODE programme and the practices of discourse analysis. Nevertheless, we considered that even such an imprecise procedure might be sufficient to identify examples of alternative, and perhaps critical, discourses, if any were present. Tables 2 and 3 show samples of this analysis.

S2 uses the OU term 'returning student' and the expression 'under my belt' to identify herself as an old hand. Her qualifications and TMA score are valued social goods in this context. The reference to 'my own writing style' is ambiguous; it could be seen as contesting the institutional view that academic writing is a generic skill. However, in conjunction with the qualifications and TMA marks we interpret this as a claim to have already achieved a recognised standard and thus as a dominant discursive construction of writing style. The whole extract is therefore classified as drawing on a dominant discourse model of student writing. The student's claim not to have used the eWrite is misleading, as the access records show that she logged on three occasions early in February, and spent at least 30 min accessing the 'Students' experiences' and 'Quiz on writing for assessment' pages. We interpret this as further evidence that her views represent a discursive position rather than directly reflecting her practice.

Table 2
Student text classified as dominant discourse model

Text	Identities	Social goods	Sign-systems & knowledge	Discourse model
[Student S2: email response to question 'Have you used the eWrite Site?]	I am a returning student and have my own writing style...			Dominant
...not once. I am a returning student and have my own writing style. I also have a BA through the OU and 3 other MA level courses under my belt. I got 86 on my last TMA...	.. under my belt	...I also have a BA through the OU and 3 other MA level courses under my belt. I got 86 on my last TMA...	...writing style ..TMA	

Table 3
Student text classified as critical discourse model

	Text	Identities	Social goods	Sign-systems & knowledge	Discourse model
1	[Student S4: email response to follow-up questions] Like many others, I was, and still feel to some extent, reluctant to write to conference, considering a message to conference an 'act of publishing' rather than an act of speech ... I'm often behind/out of sync with the coursework, and don't particularly want to let on, ie 'publish' my ignorance. This is particularly the case when the discourse is technical.	..I was, and still feel to some extent, reluctant to write to conference I'm often behind/out of sync with the coursework, and...	Like many others...		Critical
	 don't particularly want to let on...	.. 'publish' my ignorance...	...message to conference an 'act of publishing' rather than an act of speech .. the discourse is technical	
		.. my ignorance...			

S4 uses 'like many others' to confer social legitimacy on her view that writing to online conferences is problematic. Similarly, '...was and still feel...' positions the view as consistent. 'Out of sync' with her coursework enacts personal agency—to work

differently rather than inadequately. ‘Publish my ignorance’ is ambiguous as it draws on a dominant ‘deficit’ framing (my ignorance) but also constructs the conference as a forum for publication, which contests the dominant view of it as a site of collaborative learning. ‘An act of publishing’ similarly constructs a model of interaction which implicitly critiques this view. This text thus problematises the notions of: speaking to peers online, keeping up with coursework, ‘knowing’ and communicating knowledge informally, engaging in technical discourse. We interpret this as drawing on a predominantly critical discourse model. S4 was one of the more consistent users of the eWrite site, with two sessions in mid-February and two in May, and a total access time of over two and half hours, during which she favoured pages on ‘summarising online discussion’ and the course team audio pages as well as the student experiences, and online writing and assessment pages. Elsewhere in her interview data she confirms that summarising a discussion was a task she had to do, although she does not critique this task. She also refers to a number of students having ‘assessment worries’ without any further critique. These references draw on institutional framings of study activity. We note, therefore, that the interpretation of a text as dominant or critical does not preclude other texts from the same student being analysed differently. The analysis does not apply to the student, or to some synthesis of their views, but to the discursive ‘work’ being enacted in specific extracts. Furthermore, elements of both dominant and critical framings may be attributed to a single extract, as is the case in both these examples.

Applying this analysis to all the texts revealed that dominant discourse models are indeed dominant in the accounts of these students, accounting for about 80% of the extracts classified. These models were enacted through some characteristic themes, the most pervasive being that of a personal skills ‘deficit’ with regard to some aspect of TMA writing, or to contributing to online discussion. This is often emphasised through a contrast with the authority of tutors and other, more capable, peers, for example:

[S5 email] I believe that my TMA results tell me that I’m better than I think I am.

[S6 email] ... my TMA marks have been improving steadily. I guess the only way to find out if I have succeeded in writing more critically is by asking my tutor

[S2 email] I suspect I do not know all the conventions... What I do is respond in kind

[S3 email] I felt intimidated because I was worried whether my contributions would match up to what I thought at the time was [their] very high standard.

[S7 email] Because I’m not contributing enough (in my opinion) I feel it would be a bit cheeky for me to say anything.

We interpret these extracts as positioning the TMAs and the course conferences as valued ‘social goods’ and as privileged systems of writing and knowledge, and the students’ own identities as aspirant members of the groups who trade on them. Writing and/or reflecting critically, in particular, is singled out as a skill that is valued by tutors and the wider educational community.

[S6 email] I am trying to write more critically now and my TMA marks have been improving steadily... The guidance on how to write critically on the eWrite site is not that easy to understand—perhaps an activity to check the learner’s ability would be good.

[S5 email] I personally am not brilliant at critical reflection, or critically analysing published works—journal articles, book chapters etc...It is a skill that I'm very conscious of and don't feel totally comfortable with. The e-write site does offer a level of guidance at the descriptive level only.

S5's further comments on critical reflection exemplify a dominant discourse model of student writing particularly well, enacting common-sense and institutionally-warranted constructions of student identity (needing to improve), educational power relations (assessment), social goods (interaction with peers and tutor) and privileged knowledge and language systems (carefully designed course activities) quite explicitly:

[S5 email]...the best way to improve such a skill is to practise it (and have it assessed) in a relevant context through carefully designed course activities involving interaction with peers and tutor.

S5 was a systematic user of the eWrite site, accessing it on four occasions between March and August, and spending 20–30 min each time viewing pages related to writing for TMAs and academic literacy in general. Her view above does not reflect the problematising of 'Writing critically' that is presented on the site, but instead reproduces an idealised account of study on the MAODE programme that is found in many forms elsewhere in the written environments of the courses (the course guides, advice from course teams and tutors etc.). Nor is S5's own reproduction of this framing in itself critical, except insofar as it problematises the descriptive nature of 'guidance' on critical reflection provided by the eWrite site.

Most of the extracts that we classified as critical occurred in the texts of S4 (discussed in Table 3) and S8. The latter, a non-native writer of English, was a prolific user of the eWrite site, accessing it on six occasions throughout the course, for sessions that lasted at least 20–30 min each. Her main focus was on the 'Students' experiences' accounts, 'Quiz on writing for assessment', 'Writing critically', and the references and links pages.

[S8 email] but I am not sure how well we can interact informally between us knowing that some tutors or academics might access our informalities or anxieties.

[S8 email] Everything seems formal & I deeply feel that this might keep online education far behind f2f.

[S8 email] written speech is more time-consuming to the already restricted time adults can give. & just think that online, you write to complete strangers!

[S8 email] think to be able to have an opinion about connectedness one should try many forms of it, not just university tasks.

These critical framings draw on, and enact, student identities as time-restricted adults with interests that may lie outside the university context, and with legitimate views of what is appropriate communication practice inside it. They problematise open online interaction in the context of power relations between 'tutors or academics' and students, and the absence of relations of familiarity. They problematise the idea of 'connectedness' (in the sense of electronic connection) if it is constrained within the context of the university. We interpret these views, like the views of S4 on online contributions as 'act(s) of publishing', as elements of an alternative discourse model which works to construct online writing practices as problematic and as impacting on student identities as writers.

As I have said, explanatory framings of a critical nature were in the minority in the texts of most students, but where they did occur the extracts almost always related to participation in online discussion and not to practices associated with the more conventional production and assessment of TMAs. As I have noted in the discussion of the access log data, there was an overall preference for accessing pages which had a direct relation to TMAs. Assessment processes embed the most socially significant and least negotiable power relations between student and institution that we find in the MAODE and are an arena in which students might see little chance of getting recognition for critical perspectives. Whereas in the less outcome-weighted domain of the online tutorial, dominant views of student identity, social value and significant knowledge are more easily, and safely, contested. In this sense at least, this study supports the hypothesis that computer-mediated communication provides a space for more critical approaches to university writing practices.

6. Summary and conclusion

The eWrite site modeled a critical approach to the writing practices of the MAODE. One in four students made use of it as a resource, but few of these reproduced its critical stance, instead framing their accounts of these practices within a dominant discourse model. Given that their exposure to the resource was a very minor part of the overall study experience, however, the fact that we did find evidence of critical engagement by some of the students gives us cause for optimism regarding both the aim of promoting critical awareness of online writing practices, and the eWrite site as a means for achieving it.

Firstly, we are encouraged by the nature of the critical reflection that we did encounter in this study, scarce though it was. The comments on online discussion as publication, on its essential formality, and its subordination to the specific values of the university speak directly to our conceptualisation of these practices as academic writing not as generic ‘communication’. Secondly, the extent to which some of these students succeeded in integrating the eWrite site into their overcrowded work schedules convinces us that issues around writing in online learning environments are indeed of concern to them. Thirdly, we have developed new ideas about the design of the resource and the way it presents itself to the casual visitor. A lot of the students who accessed the introduction pages never went any further, and one of the reasons for this may be the way users are currently positioned in the introductory text as newcomers. In the next iteration of the design phase of this action research project we will address how to target the resource on a wider section of the MAODE student audience, whilst at the same time highlighting what individual users might find relevant.

Finally, we have noted that whilst critique applied to dominant discourse models of writing in our online MAODE programme is a relatively rare commodity, ‘writing critically’ is a feature of academic literacy that is acknowledged and valued by many. Further progress in developing students’ critical engagement with their learning might be achieved by persuading the academic community in general to train its critical writing faculties on its own e-learning practices.

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