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**\* On the Internet \***

## Practical Writing – An Online Interactive Writing Experience

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## Process Writing

Practical Writing is the name of a six-week, completely online course taught at the binational center Casa Thomas Jefferson, Brasilia, Brazil.

Some of the elements from the classic face-to-face teaching of writing taught at Casa Thomas Jefferson also appear in the online Practical Writing course. After all, the basics of writing, such as organizing ideas as well as delivering the message clearly, are the same for paper or screen writing. The most important of those elements is the approach to teaching writing. There are two distinct approaches to teaching writing (though both might be balanced within a given writing course). In the Product Approach, there is a main focus on the form, for example, on the language and grammar of the final product. Students are given a topic and the only thing assessed by their writing teacher is the final product. In the Process Approach, on the other hand, the focus is shifted to the students, who, as with all professional authors, need to go through a process before launching their final product, and awareness is developed of the steps followed in reaching the final product. There is general agreement within the Communicative Teaching community that the Process Approach to second language writing is the most beneficial for students (e.g., Canagarajah, 2002; Seow, 2002; Ur, 1996; Brown, 2007), for it transfers the focus from the teacher, from the form and product, to a focus on the student, to the content and process. Therefore, the Casa Thomas Jefferson makes use of the Process Approach to teaching writing for all levels and ages, as we did in the online Practical Writing course.

To summarize the advantages of such an approach, we will use some of the features from Brown's (2007) list of the most important characteristics of process writing:

- It helps students understand their own writing process
- It helps students build repertoires of strategies for pre-writing, drafting and rewriting
- It gives students time to write and rewrite

- It places central importance on the process
- It gives students feedback throughout the composition process as they attempt to bring their expression closer and closer to what they intend to say

Authors disagree over the number of steps involved in process writing; for instance, Seow suggests seven (2002) and Nunan suggests thirteen (1999), but all of these steps include one of the following:

1. Pre-writing
2. Writing
3. Revising/Editing
4. Post-writing

The goal of the pre-writing phase is to prepare students for the writing, both in terms of content and form. In this phase, students are exposed to the topic of the writing in various ways, in order to activate their schemata so that they can resort to their background knowledge on the topic to help them develop it. By exposing students to the genre they will write about and by exploring models of texts similar to the ones they will produce, teachers are also scaffolding the writing that will take place. Strategies such as brainstorming are very useful in this phase.

Having explored the topic as well as the structure of the writing, students are then ready to write their pieces. In process writing, the writing is mingled with revising and editing. Students get feedback from teachers and peers concerning the content, the organization of ideas, the elements that should be present in the text (e.g., topic sentences, linking devices, etc.) and the language. Feedback could come in general written comments, proofreading symbols, from peers, or even individual tutoring, if time allows. As students get feedback, they rewrite their drafts until they have a satisfactory final product.

The post-writing phase is of paramount importance, yet it is sometimes neglected by language teachers. This is the moment in which the writing will achieve its authenticity. This is the moment the student perceives that there was a real purpose in going through all that process. In the post-writing, students' texts should find a real audience who will read their texts for genuine interest in the topic, and not only because it was an assignment that needs to be graded. If students know the only readers of their texts will be their teachers and for a grading purpose, they will write it only thinking about the grade and, once they get the grade, they will forget about their creations. However, if students believe that their writings will have a real audience, then they will put more effort into writing something useful for many people.

Online teaching offers the best environment to display students' writings to a real audience on the Internet. Through discovering and using the most appropriate tools (Egbert, 2005), you can have students publish their writings to the world, augmenting, thus, their sense of authorship and audience, or readership. With Web 2.0 tools, students can connect with the world through their written language.

The five writing assignments from the online Practical Writing course are described below. It will be shown how these assignments guide students through the flow of process writing: from pre-writing to post-writing.

## The First Writing – An Online Introduction

The first writing assignment is a personal introduction to be posted online. The pre-writing consists of a blog post (at http://practicalwriting.blogspot.com), in which students read an extremely short and disorganized introduction posted by their instructor and have to give him feedback, using the comment area, on how to improve his intro. This way, students need to draw on their own knowledge of writing in order to give feedback. The instructor interacts with the students every time someone writes a comment. A few days later, the instructor publishes a new version of his introduction based on students' feedback and they are once again invited to comment on it. With this interactive and highly student-based exercise, students work with the content of their first assignment as well as with the language and organization used in such writing.

Having the instructor's introduction, which was improved based on their own comments, as a model, students then write their own introductions and send them to the teacher for feedback. The teacher uses some proofreading symbols (available at http://www.thomas.org.br/activities/ProofreadingSymbols.htm) to correct the language, and also writes comments about the content and organization of ideas. After fixing the mistakes based on their teacher's symbols and comments, students can send the teacher a second draft for more feedback or post their final version in a forum inside the Moodle platform. There is no limit to the number of drafts students can write before publishing their writings, as long as they feel confident in doing so. Learners can send the teacher as many versions of the same text as they wish, until they feel safe enough about publishing their text for others to read. In this particular course, though, most students write two drafts and publish the third one. A few send the teacher only one draft and publish the second, whereas very few work with more than three drafts.

Publishing their intros in the Moodle forum is the beginning of the post-writing phase. Besides posting their intros, students are also asked to read the other participants' introductions and write comments and questions for them. As an optional task, which most of them do, students are shown how to include a photo in their profiles. With this post-writing phase, one single assignment has these multiplied aspects: making comments in the pre-writing phase, preparing drafts of their own introductions and more comments, and leaving questions and replies in the post-writing phase in the Moodle forum. Students usually end up interacting in this Moodle forum throughout the whole course, for the previous weeks are never closed in Moodle once the next one has been opened.

## The Second Writing – A Résumé and a Cover Letter

Moving from informal to a more formal style, students are to write a résumé and a cover letter as the second assignment. Since letters of application, or cover letters, are not very common in Brazil for the job application process, the pre-writing consists of students being exposed to résumé and cover letter models on the internet. From the Moodle platform, students are directed to several websites that give hints for people who want to write their résumés and cover letters and that also show models of resumes and cover letters (For example http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resume, http://jobstar.org/tools/resume/index.php and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cover_letter.). In the Moodle platform, there is a forum where students have to comment on how different résumés are in Brazil and in English-speaking

countries, especially the USA and UK, and what they have learned about cover letters. They are also asked to reflect about the formal writing style.

When students feel ready to write their own résumés and cover letters, they imagine they are applying for a job in their area of expertise and send the résumé and cover letter to the instructor. The instructor gives the same kind of feedback as in the first writing, that is, using the proofreading symbols to give feedback on language and writing comments about the content, general structure and organization of the writing. Students can again write as many drafts as they wish before they feel confident about having a final version of their CVs and cover letters.

For the post-writing, students are exposed to some of the tools available online for professional matters, especially LinkedIn (http://linkedin.com) and the Brazilian Lattes platform (http://lattes.cnpq.br). Also as a post-writing activity, students are asked to paste their resumes in http://wordle.net in order to create a word cloud of their résumés. (Here are two examples: http://www.wordle.net/show/wrdl/1206428/To_learn_aways and http://www.wordle.net/show/wrdl/1203188/Corinthians). In the Moodle platform, there is a forum where they learn how to use Wordle and how to embed their word clouds in a new forum post. They are asked to reflect on their careers based on the visual display of their resumes and write their reflections in the comment area of the forum. Participants are then encouraged to visit other participants' word clouds, read their reflections and write comments for them. Feedback from participants suggests that some have gained valuable insights concerning their careers based on reflections made following this process. Once again, this technique multiplies what could be one single writing assignment into various forms of writing, ranging from pre-writing answers in the forum, to deep post-writing reflections.

### The Third Writing – A Summary

Widdowson (1978) stressed decades ago, reading and writing have to walk hand-in-hand. With the first writing tackling the informal style and the second one the formal style, in their third week, students work with a semi-formal news summary. The instructor selects dozens of pieces of news about various topics from various sources on the Internet which the students can choose from (or then can also choose a different piece of news, as long as they have not read it before). During pre-writing activities focusing on the linguistic aspects of what they read, students work with reported speech exercises and reporting verbs other than "say" in order to avoid repetition. Since quoting and citing are very important skills in writing about news, these exercises serve as scaffolding.

When ready to write their own summaries, participants follow the same procedure as before: send the writing to the instructor, who gives them feedback on language using proofreading symbols and on content via written comments, and students can write as many drafts as they wish.

For the post-writing, students are invited to publish their summaries on the Practical Writing wiki (http://practicalwriting.pbworks.com), where they learn a little bit about wikis. As a means of helping them develop their digital literacy, students are also instructed on how to add the link to the original news story in their summaries. Lastly, students are invited to read the other participants' summaries and write comments for them.

### The Fourth Writing – A Letter to the Editor

The fourth writing assignment is very much linked to the previous one, but this time students work with a Letter to the Editor. They are to write a letter to the editor of the newspaper, magazine or website from which they read the news story that they had summarized. For pre-writing, students are asked to read a few letters to editors and answer some questions in a Moodle forum about the motives and reasons for someone to write a letter to an editor. In addition, since the letter they will write is actually an email, there is also a forum discussion on the differences between a regular pencil-and-paper letter and an electronic one. Finally, students work with opening and closing phrases for formal emails, such as "Dear sir/madame", "best regards", "I look forward to hearing from you", etc.

After editing and revising their letters the same way they have been doing with the other assignments, the students are ready for the post-writing. In this case, they are shown how to find the contact area on the news website from which they read the story they summarized. Then they are asked to actually send the letters they have written to the editors and see if they get any replies. This post-writing activity is as authentic as it can get, for participants are invited to use their texts for the exact purpose for which they have been created.

### The Fifth Writing – A Narrative about a Memorable Trip

For their last writing, students work one more time with the informal style. They are to write a narrative of a memorable trip they have had. As a pre-writing task, participants are directed to the Practical Writing blog (http://practicalwriting.blogspot.com), in which they read about a blog guest's memorable trip. We usually ask some English native speaker from one of the communities of practice in which we participate (Like the Webheads in Action, http://webheads.info) to write this guest post, as we feel that participants get rather motivated by interacting with native speakers about real events in their lives. We also feel that a pinch of extra motivation is needed at this moment of the course, after students have worked with four writings in four weeks. Learners are asked to interact with the blog guest by asking questions in the comment area, which helps them digest the content of such a genre (a narrative in first person) and analyze the structure and organization of the writing. Meanwhile, there are exercises in Moodle which deal with the verb tenses more commonly used in a narrative about an event in the past, for example, the past tenses.

Using the guest writer's text as a model, participants write their own accounts of a memorable trip and send their texts for the usual feedback session(s) on content and form. As a post-writing activity, students are invited to publish their narratives in the Practical Writing wiki. This time they also learn how to upload and embed photos of their trips in their wiki entries. Lastly, participants are encouraged to read other students' narratives and leave comments on them.

### In All Writings

Besides the tasks described above, throughout the whole course, students are asked to include newly learned words in our Moodle glossary. This way, they end up building a collaborative dictionary of terms they learn throughout the course. Since the Moodle glossary allows for comments on individual entries, some students comment on their friends' new words, which shows that the knowledge of new words is not only fixed by this task but also spread. In order to make the best out of the glossary, learners are also shown how to find and use online dictionaries and thesauruses.

Moreover, the instructor schedules five live chat sessions, one in each of the five first weeks, at different times and different weekdays, in which students are invited to talk about anything concerning the course. Some participants show up just to chat, which is excellent for they are practicing writing, and others use this time to ask questions concerning their writings or the English language.

**Conclusion**

As has been shown, it is possible to have a highly interactive writing course completely online, integrating an LMS or learning management system such as Moodle with appropriately used Web 2.0 tools. Participants hardly notice that besides learning more about writing in English, they are also learning about these Web 2.0 facilities. The course was designed in such a way that the tools are just tools, just a means for the communication to flow. We try to anticipate students' difficulties with the technology; we create screencast tutorials and try to answer all questions as soon as possible so that no student feels that technology is a burden. We don't want the students to feel that they need to learn technology before taking the Practical Writing course; rather, they end up learning about it while in the Practical Writing course.

As happens with many completely online courses, the Practical Writing course has a certain number of drop-outs, who usually allege lack of time and say they would like to come back and try the course again. We realize that a lot of discipline is needed for distance learning, when learners are the ones in charge of sparing time for their tasks. Nevertheless, the ones who do finish the course give us great feedback in the end-of-course survey and many of them decide to take another of our online courses.

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