Providing online social support to student writers: Virtual teaching strategies for positive engagement

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Abstract

One of the challenges for writing tutors during the pandemic has been trying to find ways to replicate on-campus contact and support for students. In response, this teaching practice-focused paper looks at ways to provide social support to students online with the aim of increasing engagement and enjoyment in the writing process. The paper is based on a workshop session given at the EATAW Conference, in which eight different strategies for engaging remote student writers were presented, discussed, and evaluated. These strategies are: establishing networks of peer support, providing a weekly social meeting, organising writing events, encouraging blog writing, helping students with planning and providing check-in points, helping with time management, sharing recommendations for other kinds of writing, and sharing recommendations for ways to enjoy writing. All of these strategies were developed by the author at a post-1992 teaching-focused university in the south of England during the pandemic. The paper examines the needs for these strategies and how academic writing tutors may use them in practice to engage remote writers, drawing on the conference workshop discussion. The paper concludes with some recommendations for EATAW to further support writing in remote contexts.

Introduction

This teaching practice-focused piece has been developed from the workshop I gave at the EATAW Conference 2021 on providing social support to student writers in remote contexts. At the workshop, I presented a set of teaching activities that I developed as an EAP tutor with a main focus on teaching academic writing. These activities were discussed, expanded on, and evaluated in the workshop. In this paper, I will present these recommended strategies and then draw on some of the session discussion themes to evaluate them.

At the time of the EATAW Conference 2021, most writing tutors, both in Writing Centres and EAP contexts, had been teaching away from campus for over a year. A central challenge for writing tutors has been trying to provide social proximity to their students, despite the physical distances imposed by the pandemic. There has been a strong need to come up with new ways of creating communities in a virtual context, as new issues emerged from the pandemic situation that staff and students were unlikely to have predicted or prepared for. The absence of physical learning spaces on campus has meant that students were unable to feel solidarity with other student writers, for example when working near others in the library. The lack of company from classmates is likely to have made some students feel very isolated, writing alone and unconnected from others, without anyone caring about their academic efforts. In addition, these student writers had no face-to-face support from tutors for a long time. Research has indicated that lockdowns have resulted in a lack of interaction and co-studying networks among university students, which has led to increased stress, anxiety, and loneliness, as reported in a Swiss study (Elmer et al., 2020).

The lack of social interaction has undoubtedly made academic writing more challenging. Seminal work in academic literacy and writing practices has established that 'literacy is a social practice' (Street, 1984, p. 7), and that 'learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31). More recently, Murray (2015) has highlighted the need for students to socialise writing in progress to support further development among peers. In addition, it has been found that students benefit from 'socially supported writing interventions' (Malone et al, 2020, p. 108). Thus, a large body of influential research has made it clear that social support is needed during the writing process. Since the pandemic forced students and tutors to leave campus and only interact online, developing ways to continue supporting them remotely in both academic and social contexts has been of paramount importance. The adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, including learning loss and restrictions on sociability, are still being experienced by contemporary students. In addition, online teaching has been developed on a huge scale and some of this seems set to stay online. Therefore, from this situation of intense disruption to pre-pandemic pedagogy, this teaching practice paper presents and discusses innovations created during lockdowns to continue to provide social support and engage student writers positively online.

Teaching strategies to support student writers online

I share below the eight virtual strategies I have developed during the pandemic in my teaching practice at a post-1992 teaching-focused university in the south of England. It is envisaged that these strategies are applicable broadly to academic writing teaching and can serve to support student writers learning remotely.

1. Networks of peer support

The first strategy is to develop networks of peer support. There are a number of different peer relationships that I have presented as options between students: writing buddy (someone to share writing experiences with); critical friend (someone to give constructive feedback on writing); and peer coach (someone to mutually encourage writing development). These ways of working together with a classmate support the widely used concept of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by offering opportunities for collective learning, sharing and peer support benefits. It is important that the peer support relationship can facilitate open discussions with other students about writing, including any fears or anxiety they may have (French, 2018). These networks may naturally develop among students within the same class and discipline, though online students may need more encouragement or more opportunities to start developing such networks. Other studies have looked more ambitiously at pairing writing partners on different courses or even at different institutions, and found that after some training in peer review, students were able to improve their critical evaluation and writing skills through this peer support relationship (Zevgoli & Dilaveri, 2017). I suggest that this is an initiative that EATAW could facilitate, for example through a forum or link-ups between student writers at different institutions, supported by writing tutors in multiple locations.

2. Weekly social for groups/programmes

Following on from the peer support detailed above, which would normally be carried out in pairs, a weekly social meeting online, open to larger numbers of students within groups, courses or other connections, offers another way to provide much needed regular synchronous contact with students. I have scheduled this informal session at a strategic down-time slot in the week: a Friday afternoon, for one hour. In contrast to teaching-focused sessions with specific content, I have kept a flexible and inclusive social focus by inviting students to choose topics to discuss, suggesting that students decide how to conduct the session (such as a whole group plenary or small group breakouts), and encouraging them to join from any device, including phones (usually not recommended), and from any location, including outside spaces. This has created a different ethos and group dynamic to the session, with students relaxing more, sharing whatever information they wish, and experiencing a boost to wellbeing through the community structure.

Topics discussed have included cultural traditions, ambitions, and travel experiences. While the topics are conversational rather than writing-focused, the relaxed interaction of the session can reduce isolation, which can have a positive effect on student writers' moods. Students have

commented to me that they see it as a way of compensating for the lack of the usual often spontaneous social meetings on campus, such as coffee breaks or corridor chats that do not happen online without arrangement.

3. Writing events

Turning to more writing-related community-building events, a wide range of other online interactions can be developed, from small-scale to cross-institutional. A weekly or even daily writing café could function as a drop-in for informal conversations about writing, possibly based around lunchtime or sharing a coffee to increase conviviality. Longer online events might include one-to-two-hour workshops with a specific or broad writing theme: sessions we have created at my university include 'developing writing muscle' and 'overcoming writer's block' (Writing Hub, 2021). Student writers have reported that they particularly appreciate these themed workshops with opportunities to exchange practice with other writers. Longer and more formal writing opportunities could be created through online retreats lasting a day or more. Given that the central tenet of a retreat involves moving to a different physical space for a concentrated period of writing, the concept of an online retreat may create misgivings. However, online retreats appear to work well when specific writing goals are established, and when regular opportunities for interaction are provided during the day for synchronous discussion to aid participant engagement, as in seminars by Defend and Publish (2021). This strategy could be further promoted by EATAW by sharing writing event news, such as dates of available retreats.

4. Blog writing

Blog writing is an additional, very popular activity for engaging students socially in a piece of writing. Blog writing can be encouraged among a group of peers; thus, students not only write their own blog, but also respond to others' blogs. The activity can snowball to enable students to generate debate and make their own web presence, thus bridging academic work and a personal profile, as well as building social and employability skills. The benefits of blog writing have been reported from a student perspective: 'the most rewarding part of the experience was seeing a debate form on my social media account. I felt like an expert who was actively educating and encouraging people to talk about (my subject)' (Hindley & Clughen, 2018, p. 234). The popularity of blog writing as a form of assignment seems to be growing widely, perhaps as one of the consequences of the pivot to online teaching and assessment, so it would be particularly useful for writing tutors to promote this activity among student writers online as well. I have shared my own blogs on academic writing with students and encouraged them to share blogs with peers and with me, so that a learning community can be generated with every member engaging in writing and contributing to discussions.

5. Planning and checking in

Writing tutors can support their students by discussing some goal-oriented checking-in points to monitor their progress and provide structure to learning and writing. One element to this would be encouraging students to keep a diary with dates for writing and their own checking-in points. I suggest that by encouraging students to take responsibility for their planning, the progress checks could then be presented as a positive point of connection between tutor and student, rather than prompting anxiety, should the student worry that their tutor is not satisfied with their progress (French, 2018). Another opportunity for a co-created plan could be in the form of learning contracts for independent study. Many organisations offer resources to put this into practice, for example LearnHigher (2021). This innovation adds additional structure to the learning process, which could impact positively on isolated students' organisation and motivation, and keep them on track.

6. Organising time

As has been commonly found by both students and staff, working effectively in a remote context requires developing good independent time management skills. In addition to planning and checking in, I have found it useful for remote writers to be reminded that they could work productively in short and long periods, appealingly termed 'writing snack' and 'writing feast' respectively by Murray and Moore (2006). Furthermore, it is useful for students to consider the

two impacts on writing productivity described by Zerubavel (1999, p. 18) as the 'time it usually takes you to get into a creative mode and the time you can effectively sustain such a mode and be productive'. Highlighting these points and encouraging students to manage time has taken on even more importance at a distance. Building a time management workshop into online writing support normalises the increased need for planning and allocating time when physical time frames (such as library opening hours, café open times, campus hours) are not available for students around which they can naturally plan.

7. *Sharing recommendations for other kinds of writing*

In an online writing context, it seems especially useful to try to engage students in multiple forms of writing, especially ones that they may find easier as ways to get into and build up writing. Frank and Rinvolucri (2007, p. 11) advocate starting to create a 'writing climate' by stimulating creative and personal writing. Writing tasks that I have observed engaging for students include: students reflecting on their identity from different perspectives, as a writer, student, current or future professional; writing to their future self about their current experiences and thoughts; and developing a piece of creative writing within a medium they enjoy such as a film plot, poem or short story. All of these outputs could be shared with their cohort online, with their agreement. I have found that students particularly enjoy reading the creative work of their peers; this often leads to greater motivation to work together and build a community.

8. *Sharing recommendations for enjoying writing*

Similarly, finding ways to encourage more enjoyment of writing, and creating positive associations with writing, seem especially valuable in remote study. One example would be preparing for a writing session by following mindfulness techniques (Penman & Williams, 2011) such as calm breathing or quietly pausing between finishing one activity and turning to the next. I have found this works equally well with an online group to start a writing session. I also recommend the use of the Alexander technique to help students improve sitting posture (to be more upright) and therefore feel more positive about writing. A simple Alexander technique exercise that I have used with students involves sitting on one's hands in a chair, leaning forward then leaning backward, coming back to a middle position, taking out one's hands, and then experiencing a sense of re-alignment in the spine. The additional comfort for sitting can provide a boost to continue or start writing. For further motivation to stimulate writing, choosing a different location to write such as an outside space, using a different part of a room, or even just changing the workspace a little could re-energise students with a writing task. Finally, finding one's own formula of the right ingredients to stimulate writing, such as a favourite beverage or snack, or particular music could help a student working remotely to develop a positive and personal association with writing.

Discussion

In the EATAW workshop, the above strategies were discussed in breakout rooms and evaluated through an online poll (with the options 'very useful', 'useful' and 'not useful') for the eight suggested activities above as strategies to provide social support. Participants were also invited to suggest other ways to support student writers online, which were added to a shared Google doc. Some observations and discussion points in the workshop are summarised below from my notes as facilitator.

All strategies were reviewed positively as 'useful' or 'very useful', but there was particular interest in the writing buddy systems and blog writing. Regarding buddy systems, one further recommendation was for students to work on collaborative writing projects. Google docs were highly recommended as a way to work together, for both collaboration between students as well as between students and teachers. I have used Google docs as a way of undertaking a collaborative proofreading task on a sample draft, encouraging interactive discussion of what needs to be corrected or checked, and what is acceptable as it stands. As noted above, Google docs were also used for interaction during this workshop session, so participants were experiencing this suggested practice directly. Given the increased interest among educators in blog writing for teaching and assessment (Hindley & Clughen, 2018), it is not surprising that writing tutors were especially interested in this genre of self-expression. In addition, considering

the surge in use of social media during the pandemic, blog writing seems to be an especially engaging task through which student writers can connect to a wide audience and share their ideas.

Participants also offered further suggestions regarding the support of effective remote time management. These included making sure that the online writing support keeps to regular times, making sure students receive prompt responses to emails, and that writing submission points have clear deadlines. A further kind of time support could be weekly announcements to motivate students with organisation and getting work done. I have used weekly emails on a Monday morning to help students organise their work for the week and manage their time successfully, which has received positive feedback from students.

With respect to student-student peer support, the workshop discussion reiterated arguments from recent literature, for instance, Malone et al.'s (2020) view that having students discuss work and advise each other can offer very welcome social support during the writing process. One additional important recommendation from the discussion was to encourage more tutor-tutor conversation as part of socialisation. Another was to note how important it is for tutors to show empathy to students, telling students that they understand it is a difficult time and that they are there to support them (Gatuguta & Marshall, 2020). These personal interactions are arguably even more important remotely.

One problem raised by participants was online fatigue when students become tired in online sessions. Various solutions can be offered such as breaks, encouraging students to go outside where feasible and also opportunities to complete a task off screen and return later within a set time. A further way to improve online environments includes making sure virtual platforms for learning have been sufficiently adapted to the online pivot and are engaging and organised for self-study (Gatuguta & Marshall, 2020). Returning to the recommendations for enjoying writing, recent research by Woloshyn et al. (2022) considered how fatigue could be managed within a doctoral group writing community. Their research suggests that shared mindfulness practices enhanced understanding and joy in the writing process, and that this group activity worked particularly well online.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this short paper I have shared eight teaching activities designed to support student writers remotely. These strategies were establishing networks of peer support, providing a weekly social meeting, organising writing events, encouraging blog writing, helping students with planning and providing check-in points, helping with time management, sharing recommendations for other kinds of writing and sharing recommendations for ways to enjoy writing. Each strategy involves the writing tutor creating or co-creating adapted means of providing support online, so that students working remotely are encouraged to engage more in and feel more positive about the writing process.

The strategies are shared in this paper in order to offer writing tutor colleagues some potentially new ways of supporting students online as the pandemic and the consequences of the pandemic continue to affect modes of learning. Based on the strategies presented in this paper, recommendations for EATAW are to help to facilitate online networks and offer a hub for online writing recommendations and writing events news.

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