Computer conferencing and academic literacy: lessons from Sam's cafe

Bonny Norton-Peirce

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Canada

As the use of computer technology and electronic mail become more established in South Africa, the author argues that it is timely to consider how computer technology can be used to promote the development of academic literacy skills among underprepared students in tertiary institutions. Drawing on data collected from a participant-observer case study of a writing project, "Sam's Cafe", in which computer conferencing was used by the participating students, the author demonstrates that computer technology can open up possibilities for student writers in ways that are qualitatively different from conventional paper and pencil methods. She argues that computer conferencing not only helps students to engage actively with a given writing task, but it reduces the need for extensive and time-consuming feedback from tutors and lecturers. She indicates, however, that computer conferencing and peer evaluation introduce a troublesome dynamic in the cooperative writing process: feedback anxiety. The crucial role of the tutor or lecturer is to structure and monitor computer conferences so that all students can participate in cooperative writing projects with minimal anxiety.

Computers can dissolve the walls of the classroom, collapse space as well as time, and bring people together in dramatic new ways.

Smith, 1983, p.16

A dynamic educational trend in tertiary institutions in South Africa today is the transition from 'academic support' to 'academic development' (see Angelil-Carter, 1993; Starfield, in press). As tertiary institutions strive to accommodate a changing student population in which increasing numbers of students are underprepared for tertiary education and do not speak English as a mother tongue, many have recognised the need to transform curricula, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices to promote learning and teaching at tertiary level. The transition from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to academic literacy (see Starfield, 1994; Thesen, 1994) is a logical outcome of the shift from academic support to academic development (AD). AD staff are becoming increasingly interested in the relationship between language, content, and curriculum and are arguing that the development of student writing skills is not an abstract skill but a complex social and academic process.

Despite advances in the conceptualisation of academic literacy, AD staff still have the challenging task of developing approaches to the teaching of writing that will enhance their students' academic literacy skills. Bajnath (1992), for example, has found that many student writers do not engage adequately with the writing task. As she argues, "They are not in a position to own the understandings and insight that an adequately developed text world would permit" (p.75-76). On the other hand, Paxton's (1993) research on tutor responses to student writing has found that the feedback which tutors give to students is not always effective. Tutors need to communicate to the writers what it is

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that is valued in writing in their discipline and make the rules of academic writing, and more specifically the writing of the discipline explicit so that students can become competent writers in that discipline. Academic literacy is something far bigger and broader than simply grammar and spelling. (1993, p.65).

Recognizing that the process of tutor feedback is both time-consuming and sometimes unproductive, Boughey (1993) argues that AD tutors need to develop more effective and efficient ways of getting "a better product" from their students - a product "that has already been through the necessary process of systematic refinement" (p.65). To this end, he has developed what he calls an "Academic Writing Questionnaire" to raise awareness in students and lecturers about the factors which facilitate the writing process. The Academic Writing Questionnaire addresses, inter alia, the value of peer group cooperation in the writing process. If students act as both audience and editor for one another, Boughey argues, student writing will be improved and the demands on mainstream lecturers "with hundreds of poorly written scripts" (p.67) will be reduced.

In this paper I argue that computer conferencing is precisely the kind of medium that promotes peer group cooperation in the writing process and creates the opportunity for AD tutors to "get a better product" from their students. As the use of computer technology and electronic mail become more established in South Africa, it is timely to consider the ways in which computer technology can be used in innovative, educationally productive ways.

Drawing on data collected from a participant-observer case study of a writing project, "Sam's Cafe", in which computer conferencing was used by the participating students, I demonstrate that computer technology can open up possibilities for student writers in ways that

are qualitatively different from from conventional paper and pencil methods. I argue, however, that computer conferencing and peer evaluation introduce a troublesome dynamic in the cooperative writing process: feedback anxiety. This anxiety arises from the increased responsibility of students to evaluate and affirm the contributions of peers, given the teacher's modified role in the writing process. The crucial role of the AD tutor is to structure and monitor computer conferences so that all students can participate in what Zamel (1987) calls "meaning-making" writing events with minimal anxiety. Thus, as Smith has noted in his article on the "promise and threat" of microcomputers (1983), computer conferencing is not immune from the vagaries of technology. In selecting the date to be analyzed for the purposes of this paper, I was thus particularly interested in what might be perceived as both the "promise" and "threat" of computer conferencing for academic development.

WHAT IS COMPUTER CONFERENCING?

Computer conferencing is an outgrowth of the use of the computer as a tool for electronic communication (such as e-mail) and as a tool for word-processing - two particularly powerful uses of the computer in education. A computer conference is a more structured use of the electronic communications capability of the computer in that it provides for interaction between a specified group of people who wish to work both independently and interactively. While e-mail provides for one-to-one or one-to-many communication, computer conferencing provides for many-to-many communication within a closed system. For example, the Participate ("parti") system, one of the conferencing systems available on the market, offers facilities for electronic mail, conferencing, real time messaging, electronic polling, editors, as well as search mechanisms. There are branching capabilities within the system to allow for small group "discussion" within the larger conference and the

exploration of new topics. A common transcript of the discussions in the conference can be printed out at any time and used for reference, revision, or research. (For recent research on the use of computer conferencing in education see Beckwith, 1987; Cummins & Sayers, 1990; Harasim, 1986; Owen, 1990; Sayers, 1986.)

WELCOME TO SAM'S CAFE!

During a postgraduate course entitled "Language, Power and Possibility" offered by Roger Simon at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in Toronto, Canada, in 1988, students were given a writing assignment in which we had to demonstrate our understanding of the fundamental concepts of the course by responding to a controversial discussion in a hypothetical "Sam's cafe". We were given a script of the discussion in the "cafe" and asked to write our responses to the issues raised. A group of five students decided to turn the assignment into a collaborative effort in which we used computer conferencing to share our views, comment, debate and critique. We all saw computer conferencing as providing us with the opportunity to engage with the concepts of the course in an informal, non-threatening environment.

Computer conferencing was ideally suited to our purposes: the word processing capabilities of the computer enabled us to work through our tentative ideas and record our comments and queries. The networking capabilities of the computer enabled us to share these ideas with other students in the conference, and gave us the opportunity to comment on the input of other participants. The electronic capabilities of the system enabled us to work at a time and place of our choosing - a very important consideration for students living in different places and working with different schedules. Finally, the branching capabilities of the system enabled us to set up separate conferences to allow for the evolution of different debates.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss

the debates in Sam's Cafe, it is useful to give a flavour of the writing we used to frame our comments. Consider the following excerpts:

I wondered wildly what to say next, clutching desperately at the jumbled straws of counter-discourse which remained from those courses I had taken at OISE. I felt that the reputation of feminist post-structuralism was at stake as the assembled literati leered at me condescendingly and the cook disappeared back into the kitchen to dish up more fries. Sam balanced his beer on his stomach and smiled broadly. "First of all," I said "you have to understand the concept of ideological hegemony..."

Sam opens his mouth to respond, but before he can choke out one word, the cook, who is getting fed up with the whole scene, flips on the big-screen t.v. (one of Sam's Cafe's few acknowledgements to popular culture). "Don't worry – be happy" is on screen and many of the patrons drift away into complacency. After all, what is this big deal about language and literature anyway? But my mind is churning...

As the Sam's Cafe project was nearing its conclusion, I took the opportunity to invite my fellow participants to reflect and comment on our experiences with this computer-mediated writing project. I introduced the conference with the following note:

I am going to open a topic called "Reflections" in which I hope all interested partis (get it?) will participate. The kind of issues I am hoping we might address include the following: Do you think the way we approached the Sam's Cafe assignment was useful/ effective/ exciting/ limiting/ frustrating? Why? To what extent does the success (or otherwise) of this particular methodology depend on the computer medium, the particular structure of "parti", the nature of the assignment? What kind of preparation did you/do you do before you sent a note? In what ways do you think

this methodology could be applied to the classroom?

THE PROMISE OF COMPUTER CONFERENCING

Four of the five participants in the Sam's Cafe project found it to be exciting, informative and challenging. In reflecting on the experience, the comments of participants included the following:

Until very recently I've been resisting computers but I find the possibilities of conferencing very exciting. There are several things I like about it. I see it as informal, experimental and exploratory – as a sort of brainstorming where one explores and deepens on's understanding of the matter at hand before writing the finished product.

Whereas writing alone can be hard slogging and sometimes frustrating, parti was comforting and fun because one knew that one's words were not being written in a vacuum and that one would soon have an answer, often one that, while dealing seriously with serious issues, was also amusing and entertaining.

One of the interesting aspects of parti is that everything that is said is recorded. I take comfort in the idea that I can print out and chew over stuff later – the words are not blown away on the winds of verbal discourse, yet unlike a book I have the opportunity to engage the speaker/author in dialogue.

These comments point to some of the major strengths of computer conferencing as a tool to enhance the learning process in general, and writing skills in particular. First, it provides a larger context for the exploration and sharing of ideas in textual form. In Sam's Cafe, writers were able to share ideas and comments with an audience that in a very authentic way included both peers and teacher. It is the many-to-many nature of the computer conference that provides for this larger audience. In addition, because the purpose of the

assignment was ration of ideas, writing tended to be process rather than product oriented. In other words, we're generally more concerned about raising and exposing than with making definitive statements and watertight conclusions. As Mlynarczyk (11) argues, it is this kind of informal writing helps students "to find their own academic voice the pressure of having to write a formal essay)

Second, conferencing offers the potential for shared and cooperative, self-directed learning par se. In Sam's Cafe, it was the students who initiative in how the class assignment proceed, what issues were to be discussed, who final conferences were to be established. Its took charge of what we said, when we said we said it, and how we responded to the issues ..deed, participants in Sam's Cafe remarked that experience was much more than a writing projec participant noted,

People have ti for specific tasks connected to writing/think much more has happened - affective b grown.

THE THREAT OF CONFERENCING

It is perhaps that the very cooperative nature of conferencing should also have the deleterious e intimidating and overwhelming participants have called "feedback anxiety". Consider th ing comments of Sam's Cafe participants:

I feel th ld make at least some sort of response to has been raised.

I should s' do think there was a certain amount of amongst us, especially at first, as to who ave the best answer, be the wittiest, articulate and so on.

There is so much that I want to talk about and respond to, but I can't deal with it all - there's too much depth and complexity and interweaving and new directions.

The written word has a perceived content of validity that is greater than that of the spoken word. Thus, not only is there a reluctance to comment on what seems like important and knowledgeable stuff, but an additional reluctance to commit what you have to say to paper/screen unless you know it to be important and knowledgeable stuff too.

The use of computer conferencing cannot be uncritically celebrated. In the more traditional classroom, it is the teacher or lecturer who is primarily responsible for giving students feedback on the quality of their writing and the significance of their ideas. In computer conferencing, in contrast, students need to take on the responsibility for affirming and acknowledging such contributions. In Sam's Cafe, the intimidation of volume, print, and peer evaluation led to complete withdrawal by one of the participants. Another felt that the desire amongst participants to be "the most articulate" was a source of stress. In addition, there were many comments on the ambiguous expectations created by the medium; sometime the medium was equated with oral discourse in which a desire for immediate feedback needed to be fulfilled; sometimes the medium was given the authority of published work - "knowledgeable stuff" - which could discourage the writing of tentative, incomplete thoughts. These "threatening" aspects of computer conferencing need to be recognized and addressed if the medium is to achieve its full potential in the development of a student's academic literacy skills.

THE ROLE OF THE TUTOR/LECTURER

As Rivers (1990, p.279) argues, whenever new technology

is introduced into the classroom, the teacher has a crucial role to play in its successful implementation: Without the cooperation of well-informed teachers, precipitous introduction of new technology can lead to equally precipitous abandonment of what may be prematurely judged to be an ineffective enterprise.

In computer conferencing projects, the AD tutor or lecturer has a significant role to play in promoting a successful writing experience for all participants in the light of experience and knowledge of the teaching domain in question. While effective writing skills are developed when the writer's audience is expanded and authority shared, the teacher's authority is modified but not usurped. Experiences in Sam's Cafe indicate that the responsibility of peer evaluation can weigh heavily on students' minds – in extreme cases, resulting in non-participation. For this reason, the AD tutor has an important responsibility to help promote the development of academic literacy by structuring and monitoring the computer conference. Drawing on my experience with the Sam's Cafe project, I have found the following suggestions helpful:

1 Computer conferencing skills

Before beginning a particular computer conferencing task, students should be given a thorough introduction to computer conferencing so that they can gain familiarity with the system's capabilities. They should also be trained in elementary typing skills. While their skills will increase with time, they need to have a certain amount of confidence and expertise before launching into computer conferencing. In addition, it would be useful for the AD tutor to confer with the students on a regular basis to determine if the project is proceeding successfully.

2 Task structure

One of the reasons why Sam's Cafe was successful was

because its task structure was clearly defined. The need for a defined task structure was convincingly stated by a participant in the project:

I think it's important that there should be some sort of task structure for parti to work. We talked about this yesterday in the dialogue course where we have also had a conference going on, but which didn't really take off ... it was just vaguely there to discuss whatever and it didn't really go anywhere.

3 Persona

Because participants in a conference are entering into a dialogue with other participants, they are taking risks in exposing, and more importantly, recording their ideas in a public forum. The AD tutor should therefore make provision for the protection of identity if the participants in a conference so desire. In Sam's Cafe, where participants were few in number and mutually recognizable, participants took on the persona of a customer in the Cafe. This served two very important purposes. First, it gave participants the opportunity to protect their self-esteem until such time as trust and effective bonds had been established. Second, it gave participants the opportunity to introduce colour and levity into their writing, which in turn added to the enjoyment experienced by the participants. As one said:

Sam's Cafe somehow captured people's imagination. I think it's the idea of personae in dialogue, or polylogue? combined with the existence of a set task. I think that personae helped us in the beginning and that later they weren't as necessary.

4 Time frame

Because participation in computer conferencing tends to be intensive and time-consuming, it is useful for the AD tutor to suggest a time frame for the completion of the task. This will help students to focus their discussions and reduce anxiety that the task will be a

never-ending source of pressure.

5 Group size

Wherever possible, AD tutors should attempt to limit the group size of any particular conference to approximately six people. The branching capabilities of "parti" for example, would allow for these small-scale conferences. Small-group interaction will improve the likelihood that trust will be established between participants, a spirit of community developed, and active participation enhanced.

CONCLUSION

Computer conferencing offers exciting possibilities for the development of student writing skills by creating the opportunity for students to engage actively with the writing task before producing a final product. In addition, it provides a larger audience with whom the student writer can interact and refine ideas. Furthermore, it reduces the time the AD tutor needs to take to provide effective feedback to a student. But the very cooperative nature of computer conferencing necessitates risk taking and responsibility, both of which can be intimidating to students. It is precisely because this form of computer-mediated writing has great potential to promote and enhance student writing that I have outlined some of the problems that might arise in attempting to utilise computer conferencing in academic development; an uncritical enthusiasm for the use of this technology might be counter-productive. However, I have indicated why students may be intimidated by this medium and I have suggested how AD tutors could make best use of the technology. By addressing both the promise and the threat of computer conferencing in academic development, AD tutors might well use computer conferencing to develop academic literacy skills that are far bigger and broader than simply grammar and spelling.

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