

Dedication

*To my family and friends,
for their unfailing support and
encouragement*

**THE ROLE OF ONLINE COLLABORATION
IN PROMOTING ESL WRITING**

Thesis submitted for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
(Strand: Applied Linguistics and TESOL)

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examined an ESL writing class, which consisted of 36 students, at a community college of Hong Kong. The students took part in three online collaborative writing tasks in the second semester of 2004-2005 by sending drafts to peers who gave them suggestions and comments for improvement and working together on the completion of the writing tasks via email.

The 36 students worked in small groups of four to six. They wrote, responded and revised using the email system offered by the WebCT interface of their course book. The results were evaluated by means of questionnaire, interview with participating students, report of the peer observer, written work, e-responses and reflective summaries of students.

The overall results suggest that students generally enjoyed the supportive atmosphere created by online collaborative tasks and regarded the use of online collaboration as a means of improving their writing by enhancing their motivation, awareness of the audience and the importance of revising, and by reducing their stress and cultivating their positive attitudes towards writing, although some of them were found to have reservations about the effectiveness of peer feedback. Supported by the data, the writer concludes that online collaboration does have potential in motivating ESL learners and bringing about positive learning effects on writing, but that the key lies in how it is managed and how effectively it is incorporated into the programs.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Three years into my career as an English instructor of ESL courses in the tertiary institutions of Hong Kong, I began to think about my approaches to teaching writing, especially when I had the opportunity of using the online interface offered by an English course book. With the help of my business students of 2004-05, I started to explore approaches to improve my students' writing skills and at the same time, to best prepare them for their learning and career with the use of technology.

For decades, the use of information technology has been increasing in higher education and educational research has demonstrated that different ways of integrating the use of technology into classroom teaching have different effects on learning. In many cases, learning can be enhanced through the experience of a shared environment for discussing and working together. As an educational pedagogy that promotes learners' autonomy and improves their writing skills, online collaboration has the potential to promote students' learning (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kaplan, 2002), this study therefore tries to explore the use of online collaborative writing in ESL writing classes with the students of a community college in Hong Kong. It attempts to examine if online collaboration (including peer feedback) can help improve students' writing in an asynchronous learning environment.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In order to explain the motives that determine the decision to adopt online technology for the study, a short description of the situation in the teaching of English writing in the tertiary level of Hong Kong and the current use of computers in the local context is given in this section.

1.1.1 TEACHING WRITING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL OF HONG KONG

In Hong Kong where English is used as a second or foreign language, writing is a very important language skill that students are expected to manage well to prepare for their future careers. As such, it has always been an important component in major public examinations and the majority of English-language courses offered in Hong Kong post-secondary institutes and universities put a strong emphasis on training students' writing skills, whether it be Writing for Academic Purposes or Writing for Specific Purposes.

In the area of teaching writing at tertiary level, most of the English-language writing courses are designed to improve students' academic performance within their degree/sub-degree programs or prepare students for the kind of writing tasks they will have to do in their fields of specialization after they graduate. The differences between the courses is reflected in the content, in which the first ones would teach students how to write up research papers required for their degree courses and the second ones would teach students the types of writing required on the job and business, such as email, proposals, reports and newsletters.

Regarding delivery methods, the English-language courses offered by the tertiary institutes of Hong Kong are mainly taught by the traditional teaching mode, which means face-to-face teaching. Although computers have permeated all aspects of our lives for nearly a decade and the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has promoted the employment of IT in education, its use in the local context is “still not very smooth” (Chiu, 2001). In the process of promoting the use of computers in the Hong Kong tertiary institutes, there are still a lot of constraints (Chiu, 2001). As Kekkonen-Moneta & Moneta (2000) state, “while online learning has been found successful in the West, little is known of its suitability in the Chinese context”. In recent years, there seems to be increasing discussions on making use of the online collaborative mode, such as Ng & Ma’s (2002) research on creating an innovative model to foster web-based collaborative learning for their students in the Department of Information and Applied Technology of the Hong Kong Institute of Education. However it seems that such programs are designed mainly by educators or researchers of the Science and IT streams. We still do not know enough to arrange collaborative learning using the online mode, especially in the field of language teaching.

1.1.2 REASONS WHY THE USE OF COMPUTERS IN THE ESL WRITING CONTEXT IN HONG KONG IS NOT COMMON

Despite the possible benefits that the use of technology can bring to ESL writing classrooms, such an approach still seems not very common in Hong Kong. There are a number of reasons that explain why the use of computers in the ESL writing lessons of

the tertiary level in Hong Kong is uncommon.

Firstly, it appears that second language teachers in Hong Kong are not ready to accept and use this new method in their writing lessons. Some of them still regard computers as too innovative to be applied to writing and have qualms about their effectiveness in promoting students' writing skills. It seems that there requires a change of teachers' attitude towards the innovation; however, as change may require re-learning or re-doing things or involve uncertainties, most of them tend to maintain the status quo by avoiding it. To them, it is also time-consuming to learn a new skill that may affect their job security. As Fuller (2000) states, they may think that if courses can be done in an online mode, they may be made unimportant or even redundant. Though teachers are always regarded as the major agents to bring about changes to education, they sometimes may constitute a hindrance to change.

In addition to the hindrance of teachers, there seems to be a lack of an environment to promote the use of computers and peer collaboration in the Hong Kong tertiary context. As for colleges or universities, the introduction of technology to ESL writing lessons may require a lot of practical, administrative and financial investment. In other words, more funding is required. As Jamlan (2002) mentions, to successfully implement online learning, "a supportive technological infrastructure must be in place, and it must be resourced with the human expertise necessary to design curriculum, offer student support and teach effectively" (p. 152). A successful incorporation of technology into a course may require a lot of resources (both financial and human) to ensure a good course design (with sufficient technical support) and good implementation procedures (with smaller class size or more tutors for the course).

Another reason relating to the rare use of computers in ESL writing lessons at the tertiary level in Hong Kong may be related to the learning style of Hong Kong students. Hong Kong Chinese students, who closely resemble other Asian students, dislike displaying their opinions or emotions publicly. Most of them prefer working alone and listening to the teacher only as they see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by learners (Rao, 2001). This may be due to the influence of the deep-rooted Confucian belief of Chinese people. Most of the Hong Kong students are found to be passive recipients of knowledge who always depend on the teacher's guidance or instruction for what they should be doing in the learning process. They are not used to working with others or exercising their own initiatives (Wong & Trinidad, 2004).

1.2 RESEARCH MOTIVATION AND RELEVANCE

1.2.1 RESEARCH MOTIVATION

Dissatisfaction with the current practices of the local context has generated a lot of reflection about my way of teaching writing to my tertiary students. It seems that the current practice of the teaching of ESL writing has generated a situation in Hong Kong in which as teachers, we have to read and mark numerous writing tasks; at the same time however, it is very rare that our students can work with others or read one another's work. This practice disregards the fact that writing should be an interactive activity (Porto, 2001) and "a process of collective inquiry" (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003) in which students can work together to discover, share and exchange information, or a collaborative venture in which students can help one another in the drafting, revising

and editing process (Bekins & Merriam, 2004; p. 235).

It appears that real communication through writing is seldom found in the current ESL classrooms at the tertiary level of Hong Kong. As for most of the students, their aim of completing a writing task is to get a good grade or high marks, and because accuracy is viewed by many second language teachers as an important criterion of getting high marks, students seem to care more about the use of grammar than the content. For teachers, most of them do not regard themselves as readers. Instead they may only think of themselves as examiners or markers. Thus this may tend to give rise to some negative attitudes towards writing among students.

Firstly, some students may only see writing as a test of grammar, vocabulary and punctuation, but not as a tool of communication. They may tend not to consider whether their writing conveys their intended meaning in the best way or think of the interests and viewpoints of their possible audience when writing. As a result, they appear to focus more on accuracy as this is what the teacher expects.

Secondly, some students may not realize the importance of revision of their work. They just submit the first draft as their final product in the writing lessons. Even if they do revise, they may aim to improve the form, but not the idea. As ideas are not considered important to students, sometimes they may simply be neglected because the writer is not sure about the form.

Thirdly, it seems that writing is often regarded by students as a competitive (rather than co-operative) activity. Learners only try to get high marks by making fewer grammatical mistakes. Some of them do not see writing as an activity in which they

can share and co-operate with others.

Lastly, they may tend to adopt a passive and unquestioning attitude towards the teacher's comments on their work. The thing they concern the most is often their grade. As a result, however responsible and careful teachers are in correcting their work, some of the students do not seem to learn anything from it.

Having good English writing skills is considered to be very important in Hong Kong in terms of getting a job with good prospects or obtaining further educational opportunities even after the handover of sovereignty to Mainland China; however, the current teaching approaches in Hong Kong seem to have generated the above negative attitudes among students towards writing. It is these kinds of attitudes that have inspired me to make an attempt to suggest some changes to the present situation by using the technology and peer collaboration together in my ESL writing classrooms. It is believed that peer collaboration can bring about changes within the current situation (Troffer, 2000) as "opportunities for learning through written interaction with others provide students with a writing focus and an understanding of audience that will allow them to understand the practical uses for written communication" (Blair, 2003).

1.2.2 RESEARCH RELEVANCE

Collaborative learning is also a concept of great relevance to the current Hong Kong education scene today. The Government of HKSAR has called for a continuing development of learner's skills in collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, self-management and study (Education Commission, 2000) in its education

reform. "Learning to learn" is its underlying principle, and collaborative learning is the approach that can help create a group of new learners that can match the changing need of the current situation. Moreover, the publication of "Information Technology in Education: Way Forward" (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004) has affirmed the commitment of the Government to sustaining the development of IT in education as it emphasizes the importance of having a more learner-centered teaching environment with the use of IT in improving students' learning outcomes. All these initiatives imply that there are needs for new training or education in the local context. The emergence of new information technology can then enable us to provide a new learning environment that is suitable for the nurturing of this new group of learners. I hope this thesis will contribute to the discussion in this aspect, so that more new methods and systems can be developed to utilize the online learning mode to enhance the writing skills of ESL learners worldwide.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The proposed study attempts to explore the use of online collaboration in ESL writing lessons with Hong Kong tertiary students. The underlining assumption of the study is that online collaboration can help improve students' writing skills by

- motivating them to write
- enhancing their sense of audience
- teaching them the importance of revision
- reducing stress in writing
- cultivating positive attitudes towards writing

Specifically, the purpose of the study is to find the answers to the following questions:

1. Does online collaboration help improve students' writing? If so, does it help
 - 1.1 motivate them in writing ?
 - 1.2 increase their sense of audience?
 - 1.3 teach them the importance of revision?
 - 1.4 reduce their stress in writing?
 - 1.5 cultivate positive attitudes towards writing?
2. Is peer help beneficial to the students' writing process?
3. What are the limitations of the use of online collaboration in the proposed context?

1.4 THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is divided into six parts. The introductory chapter here provides a context for the study as a whole. Chapter Two discusses the issues that are related to online collaborative learning. It explains what collaborative learning is, its relationship with information technology and the ESL writing context, and the related research literature. Then the chapter considers the major theories and principles of online course design. Chapter Three shows the design framework of the study. Chapter Four illustrates an overview of the findings of the study. In Chapter Five, implications for future teaching and research are discussed. The conclusion of the study is then presented in the final chapter.

The study itself is small-scale and is exploratory in nature, but I hope that it will provide some insights for educators and researchers who are interested in pursuing the subject of online collaboration further.

Chapter Two

Theoretical background and framework

In an age of information technology, a revolution has started in education with the use of computers in classrooms. As this development has progressed, governments and educators have been looking for different ways to incorporate the use of technology into the curriculum to enable schools and instructors to draw on the benefits of this useful teaching tool. It appears that the increased awareness of and attention to the use of technology has affected the teaching of writing in the ESL context.

The traditional teacher-centered approaches in which teachers are regarded as the sole authority in class seem to have resulted in a lack of motivation and weak communication skills of learners. The use of information technology may offer chances for promoting peer interaction in the ESL writing context, in which learners' initiative and autonomy can be cultivated and writing skills can be enhanced.

In this chapter, there are three sections. The first section attempts to explore the nature and theories of online collaboration in education while the second section examines the reasoning behind implementing online collaboration in the ESL writing classes and the research work in the area. The last section presents an overview of the principles of online course design.

2.1 WHAT IS ONLINE COLLABORATION?

To design an online collaborative learning environment, we first need to examine the notion of online collaboration to determine the required elements that facilitate online collaborative learning. Therefore in this section, I first discuss the nature of collaborative learning in order to provide a conceptual background to this study. Following this, the way in which computers can aid collaborative learning and the theories that inform online collaborative learning are given.

2.1.1 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning is in fact not a new teaching concept in education. It has a long historical tradition and has been studied for many years. Two strong advocates of collaborative learning are Piaget and Vygotsky, who point out that learners can learn better in an environment that encourages co-operation and interaction. Piaget believes that learners can learn by constructing knowledge themselves and new experiences can help in generating new knowledge (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998: p. 40). In addition, Vygotsky (1978) contends that learners can perform at higher intellectual levels when working collaboratively. The underlying principle of collaborative learning is based upon these two important beliefs of constructivism, which are identified as cognitive and social. Cognitive constructivists believe that the creation of knowledge occurs when the learner interacts with the environment, while social constructivists emphasize the importance of allowing discussion, interaction and collaboration among learners. As identified by Sherry, Billing & Tavalin (2000), the collaborative and constructivist learning environments are similar in a way that they

both value the creation of a context in which interaction amongst individuals can result in co-creation of knowledge (p. 109).

Two other prominent advocates of collaborative learning, David Johnson and Roger Johnson (1999), have provided some theoretical bases for collaborative learning by pointing out that positive social interdependence can allow learners to achieve more than they do in competitive and individualistic settings. According to them, collaborative learning is facilitated by the provision of an environment where learners can work with other peers in attaining shared learning goals and maximizing the achievement of themselves and their peers (Xun, Yamashiro & Lee, 2000).

A great deal of research has been done in this area and results have indicated that the collaborative process can result in better motivation, higher performance and better thinking skills (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1990; Bruffee, 1993; Slavin, 1996). It is found that collaborative learning allows learners to engage actively in the process of knowledge construction through discussion and information sharing. As Edwards & Clear (2001) point out, collaborative activities increase students' involvement with the course materials and with peers when they work in groups in finishing an assigned academic task. Research has also shown that working in groups facilitates the development of critical thinking and self-monitoring skills (Cresswell, 2000). Moreover, collaborative learning is found effective in enhancing students' satisfaction with learning (Kulik & Kulik, 1979: p. 72), thus encouraging them to be more active in class involvement.

2.1.2 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING VIA THE INTERNET

Along with the development of information and communications technology, the use of computers and the Internet has started to play an increasingly important role in education. In fact, networked computers are a good tool for encouraging collaboration in learning. According to some research findings, computer supported collaborative learning has become an innovation to improve teaching and learning (Järvelä, Hakkarainen, Lipponen & Lehtinen, 2000) as communication within the learning communities (students and instructor) can be facilitated by the use of a computer-supported communication system. In addition to the completion of tasks, learners can discuss and learn from their knowledge and experiences of each other. Collaboration can easily occur with the use of asynchronous and synchronous computer supported communication systems. A synchronous communication system operates in real-time as in the case of chat rooms or computer conferences. An asynchronous communication system, on the other hand, occurs when the intended recipients of the messages are off-line, which means that there is always a time gap between sending a message and receiving a response. A typical and probably the most well known form of asynchronous communication is e-mail.

The effectiveness of online collaborative learning has been revealed in various studies. Previous research results generally show that learners are more willing to collaborate and are more capable of helping one another to achieve better results if they are allowed to engage in an online collaborative learning environment (Lee & Chen, 2000; Su, Chen, Chen & Tsai, 2000). This is echoed by Hiltz et al. (2000), who point out that working collaboratively online may lead to higher motivation among learners. In addition, research literature indicates that the use of the online communication tools

can enable a revitalized and more effective pedagogy (Wellman, Quan-Hasse, Witte & Hampton, 2001; Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson & Crawford, 2002; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). The results of a study conducted by Haynes & Billy (2003) on the use of a web-based learning environment for a course in Anatomy and Physiology with the Nursing and Sports Sciences students at Douglas College show that the learning process of students was greatly enhanced by the web-based elements and the learning of difficult topics was a more pleasant experience for students. The findings have confirmed some of the previous claims that the Internet can become an effective learning tool in bringing about positive learning impacts, both in terms of users' motivation (Haataja, Suhonen, Sutinen & Torvinen, 2001, Paulsen, 2001) and learning efficacy (Boudinot & Martin, 2001; Kim, Park, Lee, Yuk & Lee, 2001).

In an effort to look more closely at how computer-mediated communication can become an effective tool in education by changing the nature of interactivity in classrooms, research has also been conducted on the effectiveness of an online collaborative learning environment. In an article entitled "Building Classroom Community at a Distance: A Case Study", Rovai (2001) points out that the establishment of online community can provide learners with an opportunity for cognitive scaffolding, collaborative thinking and social construction. The results of a survey conducted by Kanuka (2005) on the use of a text-based internet learning environment with students in an education program of Western Canadian research university have also shown that online communication technologies can help create effective collaborative and cooperative learning environments that have the potential to facilitate high level of learning.

The advances in communications technology affect not only our daily lives, but also the ways in which we learn. The above research review indicates that the online collaborative process can result in better motivation, higher performance and better thinking skills, and is thus an effective tool to promote learning.

2.1.3 THEORIES OF LEARNING IN ONLINE COLLABORATION

The analysis of the literature devoted to collaborative learning in the previous section reveals that there are many advantages to learners if they study in an environment that allows collaboration; therefore, it seems useful to look at the theories that can help develop such a learning environment.

Collaborative learning involves the creation of an instructional situation in which students can interact with one another to promote learning. Nachmias, Mioduser, Oren & Ram (2000) identify the “theoretical roots” of this approach as the following:

- perception of learner as an active agent responsible for the construction of her or his knowledge
- perception of knowledge as a social construct
- perception of the teaching environment as a facilitator of individual and social learning process

In fact these theoretical roots match the three cognitive development theories given by Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye & O'Malley (1994) in explaining the collaborative learning systems:

- socio-constructivist theory
- socio-cultural theory
- shared cognition theory

In my study, these cognitive development theories offered a theoretical basis to develop the online ESL writing course for exploring the effectiveness of online collaboration in my context.

Socio-constructivist theory

This theory emphasizes the role of learner in constructing knowledge. It is derived from the thinking of Piaget (1928) that the construction of knowledge takes place when learners can engage in interaction with others that leads to cognitive conflicts within themselves (p. 204). Based on this theory, knowledge comes from individual minds. Thus it is very important that educators can create an active learning environment in which learners can individually construct knowledge. Socio-constructivists tend to focus on building on learner's prior knowledge and learner's interaction with the learning environment. As Honebein, Duffy & Fishman (1993) state, "knowledge is constructed by individuals through their experiences" (p.88). Hence learners should be able to integrate previous experiences with current ones. This process allows learners to utilize their schemas to interpret and modify information, which can result in the construction of new knowledge (Kearsley, 1998).

Socio-cultural theory

In contrast to the socio-constructivist theory, the socio-cultural theory focuses on promoting learning in the context of social interaction. This theory is advocated by Vygotsky (1978, 1986). He stresses that the cognitive development of a learner takes place in collaborative processes. It is through participating in collaborative learning activities that learners can achieve something that they cannot do before and in the process, knowledge construction occurs as a result of internalization of social interaction. Learners interact and share their ideas in the process of solving a problem and discovering new knowledge (Schrage, 1991: p. 36). As a result, “cognitive abilities and capacities themselves are formed and constituted in part by [these] social phenomena” (Vygotsky, 1978: p. 109).

Shared cognition theory

A central assumption of the shared cognition theory is that an active learning environment is important for learning to take place. The shared cognition theory focuses on the social environment that allows collaboration to happen. This means that learners should be provided with an environment which is interactive, learner-centered and exploratory, so that they can learn through the process of self-discovery. As Savery (1995) puts it, we have to assist learners in getting the ownership of their learning process by engaging them in problem solving process (p. 33). To achieve meaningful learning, problem-solving tasks should be able to stimulate and activate students, so they can see the relevance of the tasks to their lives. Authentic and contextualized tasks help to facilitate the creation of new knowledge. As Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy & Perry (1992) argue, “we must maintain the complexity of the environment and help the student to understand the concept embedded in the multiple

complex environments in which it is found” (p. 26).

Shared cognition emphasizes the learning process rather than the teaching process. The creation of facilitative environments that can encourage self-learning is important and learners should be given the opportunities to explore knowledge themselves, which means they should be able to learn how to learn. According to Von Glasersfeld (1995), teachers are no longer "mechanics of knowledge transfer", rather they are more like a "midwife in the birth of understanding" (p. 384). Their role is not only to give knowledge but to provide an environment which facilitates the knowledge construction process of learners.

2.2 WHY WE NEED ONLINE COLLABORATION IN THE ESL WRITING CONTEXT

The development of information technology appears to have significant effects on all aspects of learning. Over the last decades, more research has been conducted to find out how technology can be integrated into the daily classrooms to initiate learning. With English remaining the dominant language of online communication (Warschauer, 2002: p. 62), it is important, therefore, for second language teachers to assess the relationship of technology and collaboration to second language writing and the possibilities of promoting collaborative learning in the ESL writing classrooms with the increasing use of technology.

Online collaboration is an instructional strategy that can be applied to writing classrooms to improve learners' learning and writing skills. Research has shown that the use of collaborative learning exercises can help improve knowledge acquisition

(Bonk & Wisner, 2000; Alkhateeb & Jumaa, 2002). To determine the suitability of the use of online collaboration in the ESL context, it is important to understand the possible benefits it can bring to learners. Therefore in the following sections, some of the major benefits of using collaboration in the ESL writing context are presented.

2.2.1 PROMOTING ACTIVE LEARNING

Collaboration may help to create new relationships in ESL writing classrooms. Unlike traditional classrooms where learners may be viewed as only the receivers of knowledge, learners can now have more control over their learning. Learner control means that the learner can take control of what, when and how he/she learns. This is a very easily perceived benefit of online learning. The benefits of learner control include an increased sense of personal responsibility for learning and a realization of individual differences, according to Ewing & Miller (2002). By creating an open and interactive environment, learners can become more responsible for their own learning. The most obvious change of behavior is a significant increase in participation. Greater participation implies greater discussion and collaboration. In traditional ESL writing classrooms, learners seem to participate only when required or asked. In online classrooms, they not only are provided with more chances to choose their own topics for writing, they can also work together to complete the tasks or help one another in improving their work. “[Learners] in a collaborative learning environment are active learners, who construct knowledge, rather than passively absorb it” (Andres, 2002).

2.2.2 IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS

Technologies may change the way writing is taught, but can they really help improve learners' writing skills? The rationale for using computers in ESL writing lessons is that good writing can be made possible by creating a sense of audience/community in writing, attaching importance to feedback and revision, reducing stress of writing and enhancing mutual help. It has been found that these aspects can be realized more easily via the use of technology because technology promotes collaboration and expands the learners' writing community, which in turn helps to make learners "more aware of the importance of audience in their writing, and gain more confidence as writers" (Cantrell, 2003). These aspects of the writing process will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Cultivating a sense of audience

Writing should not be merely an isolated activity, as it is a learning process in which learners should be involved in real communication. Writing is a process that involves the expression of one's ideas and feelings in linguistic form, so it should be viewed as a social activity (Cabral, 2003) in which writers interact with readers (Coulthard, 1994; Pagano, 1994) through their written work. Having a sense of audience is essential if learners are to become effective writers who can understand who they write for and the purpose they have in writing. As a result, they will be able to produce texts that are not just "an exercise in linguistic composition", but achieve real communication with readers (Widdowson, 1984: p.64). The "audience-addressed" approach is essential for the preparation of real-world writing for our learners (Ede & Lunsford, 1984: p. 156).

In contrast to traditional ESL writing rooms where writing may be read/evaluated by the instructor only, the learners in an online writing classroom not only write for instructors, but also for peers and other people (if published). Learners can then experience real responses. Rather than writing for an unreal reader, they can now engage in real communication. The presence of potential online readers gives the learners a sense of audience in the writing process. They will realize the importance of taking into consideration the interests, needs and language level of their readers in the writing process. “This kind of awareness is often more difficult to develop in the traditional classroom when students are producing the conventional essay for the ‘general reader’” (Trupe, 2002). An environment that allows collaboration can therefore enhance the sense of audience among learners in the writing process.

Enhancing the importance of feedback and revision

Another essential aspect of English writing courses is providing feedback on learners’ writing practices. Having feedback is important to learners as it helps to “teach skills that help learners improve their writing proficiency” and produce written texts with fewer errors and more clarity (Williams, 2003). This can enhance learning and enable learners to improve their linguistic knowledge and understand more about the skills of writing as a result of receiving feedback; however, the common way for learners to get feedback seem to be from their teachers in the traditional writing classrooms. In fact, both recent research and practice have supported the use of peer feedback in ESL writing classes (Rollinson, 2005). Even a piece of good writing requires revision, which means that all learners need to rewrite their work (Chenoweth, 1987), a process in which the comments of others can be especially useful. Peer response can enhance the sense of/the need for revision and lead to better quality of work (Mendonça &

Johnson, 1994: p. 765). It has been mentioned before that ESL learners should write for real communication, so a response from a real reader will encourage the learner writer to be more attentive to the demands of the reader and, at the same time, will also promote mutual learning between learners as they will be involved in a “highly complete socio-cognitive interactions involving arguing, explaining, clarifying and justifying” (Rollinson, 2005).

Reducing stress of writing and promoting mutual help

With the creation of a writing community in the online ESL classroom, learning may become more learner-centered and egalitarian, thus turning out to be less intimidating and more accessible. As a result, peers may be more inclined to work together in accomplishing tasks. Writing is especially appropriate in peer work because according to Morris (2001), learners “work more with each other in developing a shared product rather than listening as a group to the teacher or performing independently”. And as writers, individuals may become less stressed as their peers provide assistance to them, thus reducing their sense of individual exposure. The writing community can also help to cultivate the sense of interdependence, which encourages learners to engage in the community and help one another in the writing and revising process. As Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb (2000) state, online collaboration allows students to gain a sense of togetherness as they share and clarify ideas (p. 307).

2.2.3 DEVELOPING HIGHER ORDER THINKING SKILLS

Higher order thinking is a way to approach problem solving and to think critically (Bloom, 1956). The ability to think critically is essential if individuals are to live, work, and function effectively in our current and changing society. Research has

shown that technology applications can support higher-order thinking by engaging students in authentic, complex tasks within collaborative learning contexts” (Valdez, 2005).

In today’s competitive world environment, it is essential that learners are trained to think critically and creatively. They should also be able to analyze and solve problems independently. The ability to construct lessons in a way that can cultivate higher order skills has become increasingly important. In general, one way of developing higher-order skills among learners is through online collaborative learning. Different kinds of technology may help to develop different kinds of higher-ordering skills. Email and all sorts of discussion forums promote reading, writing, criticizing and problem-solving skills; Internet searching promotes learners’ reading, researching, exploring, inventing and thinking skills; word-processing promotes writing, organization, analyzing and inventing skills. Researchers (Mayer, 2001; Brahler, Quitadamo & Johnson, 2002, Saundercook & Cooper, 2003) have pointed out that technology can enhance collaboration among learners and can eventually help in the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

2.2.4 ENHANCING INTERACTIVITY

Traditionally, ESL writing classrooms are the places where learners work on their own on their written work. Online collaborative writing provides an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and views. Writing is an information-sharing process by means of which learners can shape their opinions based on the comments of others. Contrary to traditional ESL classrooms, ideas are not confined only to those provided by the

instructors. Moreover, since learners have to give comments on others' work, the more responses they make, the more they will be aware of the importance of the use of language in writing, as online communication relies almost entirely on a written format. As Harrington, Rickly & Day (2000) state, "in online environments, much more communication takes place through writing, as class discussion takes place through writing" (p. 8).

The use of technology could encourage discussion about writing since computer communication can be done either synchronously or asynchronously. These modes allow learners to have more chances to engage in discussing others' work and helping one another to improve their work. Their writing becomes a response to discussion that will stimulate further discussion. The creation of "responsive and active learning environments" (Cicognani, 2000; Hannafin & Hill, 2002: p. 77) leads to an improvement of learning effectiveness of this group of students since online collaboration pedagogy utilizes peer help in constructing knowledge (Xun, Yamashiro & Lee, 2000; Andrewartha & Wilmot, 2001).

Having a thorough understanding of the benefits of the online collaborative mode of learning is important to any implementation of online writing classes. The review in this section shows that the use of technology can be an effective tool in the ESL writing environment. In many cases, the writing skills of students can be further enhanced through discussing and working together which in turn cultivates a sense of independence and inter-dependence.

2.3 RESEARCH REVIEW OF THE USE OF ONLINE COLLABORATION IN ESL WRITING

This section provides an overview of the current research work relating to the use of online collaboration in the ESL writing context. It is hoped that the review will provide an understanding of the dynamics of the field and some implications for the present study.

The research on the use of online collaboration in ESL writing could be broadly classified into three areas. The first involves investigations into the benefits of online collaboration compared with conventional learning methods. The second comprises studies on peer feedback and response. These studies also extend to examining the features and patterns of discourse found in the feedback and response. The third focuses on the use of authentic learning tasks in online ESL writing lessons. Each area identified is considered in the following sections.

2.3.1 STUDIES ON THE BENEFITS OF ONLINE COLLABORATION

First, numerous studies have been carried out in an attempt to discover whether students with online collaboration opportunities learned better than students with traditional methods in ESL writing lessons. The use of online collaboration has focused largely on bringing about changes in student writers' attitudes and on writing resulting from the use of information technology tools, such as email. Most of these studies have documented a number of favorable impacts on the use of online collaboration in the ESL writing context, including increased audience awareness, motivation and willingness to make revision.

For instance, Caroline Ho's 2000 study, "Developing Intercultural Awareness and Writing Skills through Email Exchange", examined the use of online collaboration in a writing project between primary level pupils from two schools, one in Singapore and one in Birmingham (UK). The participants were asked to produce a web site with details of the voyage of a British warship en route from UK to Hong Kong via Singapore. Through the use of email, they exchanged information including draft texts and finally designed the website for the presentation of the materials researched. The researcher tried to examine the collaboration between the teachers and pupils from the two countries. Her study shows that the use of online collaboration has helped to "develop pupil's confidence, language skills, creativity and sense of awareness of intercultural concerns". Moreover, students are found to be more motivated and positive towards writing.

Another study conducted by Jor (2000) with a group of Hong Kong university students was used to examine the effectiveness of online collaboration in developing students' English proficiency, competence and confidence. The participants in this study had to finish a collaborative writing project with international exchanges involving three other institutes in the completion of a research paper. The institutes were Soochow University in China, Pui Ching Middle School in Hong Kong, and Bennetts College in North Carolina. The communication tools they used included email, bulletin boards and chat rooms. The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methods in measuring the course effectiveness, and the results showed that there was a modest increase in the writing scores of the students after they had participated in the course. In addition, the students generally welcomed the use of collaboration and the increase of interactivity in the writing process.

Roseanne Greenfield, in her 2003 article “Collaborative E-mail Exchange for Teaching Secondary ESL: A Case Study in Hong Kong”, points out that the majority of the participants in her study “made significant progress in writing, thinking and speaking” through the exchange. This resulted from a study examining secondary ESL students’ attitudes towards and perceptions of a collaborative email exchange between a Form 4 (10th grade) ESL class in Hong Kong and an 11th grade English class in Iowa. In the study, the participants were asked to co-operatively plan, negotiate and complete an anthology. Both the qualitative and quantitative data showed students’ positive responses towards the use of collaborative writing model and the possibility of using collaborative exchanges in enhancing second language learning.

Esrawy (2004) used both in-class and online instruction modes in a writing course for graduate students in an academic writing class at the American University in Cairo. The aim of the course was to help students improve their academic writing skills. The in-class instruction was devoted to the development of the writing skills of students, while the online instruction (email communication) was used for teacher-student and student-student communication in which teachers responded to students’ questions or sent them comments on their work, and students could exchange comments and help each other in improving their work. In the writing course, students had to complete three essays and three drafts for each essay. The student comments on the use of email for submitting their essays and communicating with the teacher and other students were found to be very positive, and the researcher pointed out that combining in-class and online instruction was beneficial for the students as there was more interaction both in-class and out of class, thus enhancing students’ learning experience.

These data suggest the importance of promoting online collaborative writing in the ESL context as they show that online collaboration can be a motivating component of the ESL writing classroom, which can either be used alone or combined with face-to-face instruction.

2.3.2 STUDIES ON PEER FEEDBACK AND RESPONSE

A second area of research has explored the usefulness and patterns of peer feedback and response in the ESL writing context, both within a class and between students in different classes. It has been suggested that peer feedback and response can promote learning (Davies, 2000). With the use of technology, learners can be provided with an environment where they can communicate and share their ideas to solve problems and complete tasks together, and can develop both their thinking and social skills through the use of language, so that learning effectiveness can be greatly enhanced by increased communication (Schultz, 2000; Venville, Wallace, Rennie & Malone, 2000: p. 23). Although most of the research shows that students enjoyed the process of interaction, some of them did not find peer feedback and response useful or helpful (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Berkow, 2001; Ferris, 2003).

In assessing students' responses in the use of both online and face-to-face responses, DiGiovanni & Nagaswami (2001) conducted a study in two pre-college ESL writing classes at a Community College in Philadelphia. After step-by-step training in providing face-to-face peer responses, the students were asked to exchange their first drafts with their partners to practice the process. With the foundation set for the face-to-face peer review, students were then given training on online peer review. The

online assignments, which involved student-to-student interaction, were then assigned to the students. The students' perceptions on the use of the two different forms of peer review were collected in a questionnaire survey. The results of the study showed that students found the peer review process useful. They welcomed the use of both face-to-face and online peer review, and the researchers agreed that frequent online interaction could help students become more critical and effective negotiators. The researchers also found that "computer conversations are a form of hybrid communication that allows students to respond spontaneously, yet offers them the opportunity to reflect on their ideas, rehearse their responses, and respond at their own pace" (p. 269).

In a similar vein, Tuzi (2004) studied the use of peer comments as an aid to revision in writing among 20 ESL learners in a college in Pennsylvania. The students wrote, responded and revised on a database-driven web site designed for the writing course. In addition to online peer comments, students also received oral feedback from friends, peers and tutors. The results showed that students preferred face-to-face feedback to online feedback, though they found that online feedback was useful in revision. In addition, Tuzi found that the training students received before the writing process was useful in enabling them to be more effective responders and to be more aware of some of the areas of concern in writing and giving feedback.

Other studies have examined the discourse used by ESL students in online interaction, comparing it with face-to-face discourse (Jeon-Ellis, Debski & Wigglesworth, 2005; Fitze, 2006; Hewett, 2006). When compared to the discourse functions and syntactic structure of ESL students' writing, Sotillo (2000) found that students' online discussion produced conversation that resembled face-to-face talk in terms of

discourse functions: requests, apologies, complaints and responses. However, the syntactic structure of the interaction was comparatively more complex and included a combination of both written and oral features.

In evaluating the way Chinese L2 writers use the Internet as an alternative writing space to produce rhetoric, Bloch (2004) studied how they responded on the Internet to a television segment on Chinese spying. Their Internet discussion included traditional forms of Chinese rhetoric expressed in English, constituting a mixture of discourse to provide meaningful written discourse.

Fitze (2006) also found that the discourse in written electronic conferences displayed greater lexical range, and that students tended to produce more discourse demonstrating interactive competence. In addition, Hewett's study (2006) included linguistic analysis of the online discourse of students, and the results showed that students' interactions in the writing process were both idea-development focused and task-oriented.

In short, the above research has provided some assurance that students generally found the use of online peer response a useful tool for allowing greater interaction between writers and audience. This finding is consistent with the literature in this area that has reported on the benefits of using online peer responses in the ESL writing context. However it is important to note that not all students found peer comments useful for improving their work. It also appears that feedback training is essential if we want students to be effective responders.

2.3.3 STUDIES ON THE USE OF AUTHENTIC TASKS IN ONLINE ESL WRITING INSTRUCTION

A third prominent theme in recent research on online ESL writing is on the use of authentic tasks that involve collaborative exchange using computer networks. Most of the studies on authentic web-based projects of ESL students in local and cross-cultural collaboration have showed that they could help promote active learning and participation among learners.

Gu's (2001) investigation of the use of authentic tasks with information technology revealed that they had potential in motivating learners and bringing about positive learning effects. His investigation took the form of a case study of a cross-cultural collaborative online writing project which involved 20 Chinese students at Suzhou University and 28 American students at Southern Polytechnic State University of Georgia. The participants on both sides worked in groups to conduct a series of investigations into either business opportunities or culture-related topics in China or in American. The final group product was a research report shared with their partners on the other side. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to evaluate student views on the use of authentic web-based project learning and its impacts on them. The researcher concluded that the task had allowed students to have an authentic communication and publishing opportunities, thus motivating the learners, improving their writing literacy and promoting active learning.

A study by Fang (2002) further supports the view that web-based authentic project tasks can help develop learner motivation, autonomy and thinking skills. Fang organized and investigated a research project for 32 junior students at the School of

Foreign Languages of Suzhou University. The research project was a collaborative activity integrating students' language, research and technology skills. Students were formed into groups, chose their own research topics, searched the Internet for information, designed questionnaires in English, completed a social investigation and published their research reports on the Web. All the writing activities, such as making questionnaires, analyzing data and writing research reports, were done with computers. In the process, all the communication between the facilitator and students as well as the interaction among students was conducted online. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the end of the project to measure if the web-based project promoted learner autonomy. In the researcher's view, involving students in web-based authentic project tasks can stimulate the development of academic, critical and electronic literacies of learners.

The benefits of using web-based authentic project tasks were further explored by Kurek (2006), who carried out a web-based training, with an emphasis on the framing of research tasks and the use of deep learning strategies (which involve those of synthesis, analysis, evaluation, hypothesizing and decision making), in the process of the completion of a research project for the promotion of deep learning. The participants of the training were a group of sophomore college students who needed to improve their research skills. The training aims were to teach students how to use Web resources critically for research tasks and academic writing. By engaging in the training in different stages, the participants were found to have acquired sufficient skills in approaching complex research tasks.

Taken together, these studies point to the positive learning results that web-based authentic project work can bring to ESL writers. The positive effects include greater student collaboration, authenticity, higher motivation and improved writing quality (Yu & Yu, 2002).

2.4 DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The advance of technologies has created new opportunities for language teaching. The extent to which the teaching of ESL writing will benefit from this development will be determined by how effectively course developers can embed the use of technologies into the curriculum. Anagnostopoulou (2002) points out that “as practitioners we have to be aware that online learning experiences can be designed in a number of ways, some of which provide learners with richer online learning experiences than others” (p.1). In this section, some underlying principles are explored to provide a design framework for the online ESL writing course of this study.

2.4.1 SELECTING THE APPROPRIATE APPROACH TO COURSE DESIGN

“The transition to online [collaborative] learning means that [ESL instructors] will have to acquire new skills, not only in using technology” (Jeffries, 2000). The emphasis is to provide a learning setting and process where constructivists’ learning principles, such as using learner collaboration to expand their realm of knowledge, can be implemented. So how should learning be designed in the online platform?

Development of online learning mode

According to Singh (2003), “the first-generation e-learning programs tended to be a repetition or compilation of online versions of classroom-based courses”, which did not result in desirable learning outcomes. The reason behind could be the misconception course designers had about online courses. They thought that the implementation of an e-learning course was all about posting course materials online only. This might be due to the insufficient knowledge they had about the pedagogy of running an e-learning course or the utilization of technology in creating an interactive learning environment. This phenomenon gave rise to a realization that a sudden change to the e-learning mode might not favor the creation of a context that could lead to effective learning. Hence, in the second generation of development, an increasing number of course designers begin experiencing with blended learning (a hybrid mode), which is a combination of technological delivery with face-to-face interaction and is based on constructivist principles. The aim of implementing blended learning courses is to “join the best features of in-class teaching with the best features of online learning to promote active independent learning and reduce class seat time” (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002).

Blended learning mode

Research has indicated that the blended learning mode does not only provide more choices but also is more effective. As Garnham & Kaleta (2002) point out, blended learning courses can provide more benefits to learners than purely face-to-face teaching or totally online courses. A study done by DeLacey & Leonard of the Harvard Business School (2002) has found that “students not only learned more when online sessions were added to traditional courses, but student interaction and

satisfaction improved as well”. A similar result appeared in another study carried out by Thomson NETg in 2003, which shows that learners using blended strategies learned faster than those using e-learning mode only. Additionally, “blended learning course design [can] seek to leverage that which is best done in-person in combination with that which is best done online” (Bonk, 2005). It is an approach to “bring together the best of both face-to-face and online learning” by building “from each to create a new, more effective learning experience for students. Morrison (2003) even recommends the use of blended learning in all learning environments.

According to Esnawy (2004), the use of a blended learning mode, which combines both face-to-face with online learning modes, has been implemented in many writing classes since the “different forms of interaction provided by blended learning facilitate student-student and student-teacher communication, support the classroom, and enhance learning”. Sharma & Fiedler (2004) also point out that blended learning mode can “support a combination of structured and unstructured learning interactions, support exploration of individual and group interests simultaneously and perhaps provide a mechanism for individuals and groups to explore their conversational learning and knowing processes beyond the acquisition and accumulation of pre-defined bodies of knowledge” (p. 544).

2.4.2 CHOOSING THE COMMUNICATION TOOLS THAT SUPPORT COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning is a major aspect of the online learning environment. It refers to the creation of a context where learners can interact while completing a learning task. It is through the sharing among learners that the learning process begins. Thus online

learning environments should offer a mechanism to promote the interaction process among learners, learners and teachers, learners and course content and “allow collaboration [product] among learners sharing common goals” (Olguin, Delgado & Ricarte, 2000).

Interaction and collaboration can be facilitated through the use of computer-based communication tools, which can be either asynchronous or synchronous. Asynchronous technology facilitates text-based communication between people who communicate at a different time period, while synchronous technology allows people to communicate simultaneously (Edwards & Clear, 2001).

To facilitate learner collaboration and allow instructors to carry out collaborative projects online, it may be beneficial to incorporate computer-mediated communication tools; however, when choosing a computer-based communication tool for use in the online learning lesson, it is important to ensure that learners can collaborate efficiently “in order to achieve an uniform evolution in terms of the quality of the acquired knowledge” (Olguin, Delgado & Ricarte, 2000). It is found that computer-mediated communication can bring about different advantages to the learning process (Randall & MacGregor, 2005). Firstly, it allows the continuation of the learning process (in the form of online discussion) beyond the regular class schedules. Moreover, it eliminates the communication distance between learners and the instructor, which results from the deep-rooted authoritarian image of instructors in traditional classrooms. With the use of the communication technological tool in the online learning platform, learners can also work collaboratively with their peers and the instructor on a more equal basis for the mutual sharing of knowledge. Other advantages are that it facilitates access to information (like the course materials and others’ work), allows easy and fast

transmission of information (like the submission of assignments or comments) and provides space for record keeping.

2.4.3 ORGANIZING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING GROUPS

A crucial element for the successful implementation of collaborative learning is the willingness of the learners to work together in a constructive way. Effective collaboration requires the creation of appropriate collaborative learning groups (Caley, 2000) that can cultivate a sense of community to facilitate collaboration (Tannacito, 2001).

Group size

The design of a collaborative learning environment should consider the number of members in each group. To determine the appropriate group size for online collaborative learning, course developers have to take into account the group goals and purposes (Piezon & Donaldson, 2005) that are directly linked to the outcomes the course developers want the learners to achieve. As Noble, Ingleton, Doube & Rogers (2002) state, “the optimal number of students working together will depend on your perception of what the task/project requires and whether there are enough tasks to be allocated to each member”. In general, four is believed to be the optimum group size for effective student learning. As Oakley, Felder, Brent & Elhadj (2004) state, at least one person is likely to be passive if the team has five members. However, Noble, Ingleton, Doube & Rogers (2002) point out that “for problem-solving tasks and large projects a group of four to six may be best” and that there should not be groups of more than six as special skills are required to handle a group larger than six.

Group heterogeneity/homogeneity

Another major aspect of forming a collaborative learning team is to decide the group composition. Jucks, Manuela & Tatar (2003) believe that group composition has a direct relation with learner achievement. Group composition should take account of the ability levels, learning styles, culture or gender of members, and may be heterogeneous and homogeneous. Heterogeneity means that there is a mix of ability levels, learning styles, cultures or gender in the group, while homogeneity refers to the similarity of learners in terms of ability, learning style, culture or gender. The crucial factor discussed by most of the researchers (such as Jucks, Manuela & Tatar, 2003) in group composition when forming collaborative learning team is the ability level of learners. According to Noble, Ingleton, Doube & Rogers (2002), it is likely that heterogeneity (ability differences) can help promote learning more than homogeneity. This is agreed by Oakley, Felder, Brent & Elhajj (2004), who point out that forming groups of ability heterogeneity can have benefits for both strong and weak learners. Weak learners can learn effective learning approaches from strong ones and get tutoring from them. Strong students can benefit from teaching others.

Self-selected/instructor-formed groups

When organizing collaborative learning groups, the other issue the course instructor has to decide is whether the groups are to be self-selected or instructor-formed. Some of the researchers support instructor-formed groups (Noble, Ingleton, Doube & Rogers, 2002; Oakley, Felder, Brent & Elhajj, 2004) as otherwise strong learners tend to group with peers who have the same ability levels (Oakley, Felder, Brent & Elhajj, 2004), leaving weak learners to form their groups themselves. As mentioned before, in a

well-functioning group, the weak learners should be able to get tutoring from strong learners and strong learners can be given the opportunities to learn by teaching the weak ones. If the strong ones team with the strong ones, it will only polarize the groups (Noble, Ingleton, Doube & Rogers, 2002). However, according to Mitchell (2004), some researchers prefer letting learners choose their group members as they state that self-selected groups seem to work best in small classes or in a context where learners already know one another, since “positive social relationships enhance the effectiveness of group work”. Mitchell (2004) himself suggests taking a balance between teacher-selected groupings and student-selected groupings and points out that learners may sometimes react to social pressure in choosing their own group mates.

2.4.4 DESIGNING TASKS THAT CONSTITUTE TO COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

In working towards creating independent and self-motivated learners in the online learning environment, it is important to consider the development of effective learning tasks. The design of online learning tasks needs to take into account the following factors:

Create tasks with interactivity

According to constructivists, effective learning is a process in which learners construct knowledge through interacting with one another. Thus interactivity should be a major concept behind the design of learning tasks as learning is expected to occur when learners collaborate with each other during the activity (Borges & Baranauskas, 2003).

Interactivity in the educational context involves students responding to information, seeking feedback on their responses, reflecting on the feedback (Huang, 2002: p. 33) and acting appropriately to tailor their personal learning experiences to effect knowledge formation (Laurillard, 2002). In other words, learners can control the pace of learning and become more active participants (Kettanurak, Ramamurthy and Haseman, 2001), thus enabling them to “learn faster and retain knowledge longer” (Andrisani, Gaal, Gillette, Steward, 2000).

Create tasks with authenticity or in a simulated reality

Under the influence of constructivist philosophy, the focus of learning has been shifted from teachers to learners and course materials are socially situated to relate more to the real life situation, with the use of authentic activities increasingly popular in educational environments (Herrington & Oliver, 2003). The use of the Internet has become a more creative way to provide authentic environments and tasks for learners (Herrington, 2005) and its use has been found to have many benefits for online learners (Reeves, Herrington & Oliver, 2002; Herrington & Oliver, 2003; Herrington, 2005). For instance, authentic activities can motivate and encourage learner participation by involving learners in problem solving within realistic situations and providing contexts where learners can apply the knowledge they have learnt. Additionally, as O'Reilly (2000) states, “there is a need to humanize the online experience with greater compassion, empathy and openmindedness” by providing authentic learning settings to enrich the experiences of learners. According to Herrington, Reeves, Oliver & Woo (2004), authentic tasks should have the following characteristics:

- Authentic tasks have real-world relevance
- Authentic tasks are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity
- Authentic tasks comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time
- Authentic tasks provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources
- Authentic tasks provide the opportunity to collaborate
- Authentic tasks provide the opportunity to reflect
- Authentic tasks can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain-specific outcomes
- Authentic tasks are seamlessly integrated with assessment
- Authentic tasks create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else
- Authentic tasks allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome.

The above research literature mentions that “authenticity” is one of the major criteria for collaborative task appropriateness; therefore, simulations seem to be an ideal type of activity for ESL student writers since they allow students to perform authentic activities in the kind of rich communicative environment that they will encounter in real life (Jose & Marco, 2003). As Bennett, Harper & Hedberg (2002) point out, simulations “allow learners to transfer their knowledge from formal education to practice, and so provide opportunities for meaningful learning”.

Create tasks that require positive interdependence

It is also important that a high level of task interdependence is created to achieve success in online courses (Piezon & Donaldson, 2005). In other words, the tasks should be designed so that individual group members recognize the importance of their roles within the group. Each member has to recognize that his/her contribution is important to the success of the end goal. Recognizing this will affect the learners’

individual performance, as Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett (2004) have pointed out that learners will reduce their effort if they think that the things they do will not affect the overall outcome. Therefore the online group effectiveness will increase if everyone is contributing to the task (Piezon & Donaldson, 2005).

2.4.5 DEFINING THE INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Unlike instructors in traditional classrooms, it seems that online instructors need to possess not only knowledge of teaching writing, but also an open mind about how technology can effectively be adopted in the new paradigm so as to bring out the best educational effects on learners. In addition they may need the skills required to implement online lessons, including an understanding of the functioning of the hardware and software used in the course. As can be seen, their role is different from that in the traditional writing class.

Being a facilitator

One of the skills the online instructor needs is to encourage social interaction (Muirhead, 2000) and to provide a learning setting and process where ESL learners can collaborate to expand their realm of knowledge. Constructivists believe that students should be given the opportunities to explore knowledge themselves, which means they should be able to learn how to learn. It appears that online instructors should be able to provide multiple representations of knowledge for students to explore, with the teacher being more of a facilitator than a supplier of information. Their role is not to give knowledge but to structure an environment/learning community to facilitate the interaction and collaboration of learners, thereby activating their knowledge construction process (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind & Tinker, 2000: p. 17; Knowlton, 2000: p. 7; Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002: p. 25).

Being a coach

In a learner-centered environment where students have to take more responsibility for their learning, clear instruction and guidance must be provided to facilitate all aspects of this learning (Lefoe, Gunn, Hedberg, 2001). If learners are expected to be more active in their learning, the instructor has to provide more guidance or training so that students can work effectively on their own or with others, and be more willing to participate in the learning process (Thanasoulas, 2000; McNamee & Roberts, 2002). To succeed in online collaborative learning, learners should be helped to develop, acquire and practice skills for effective online collaboration in the context of a structure provided by the instructor (Kemery, 2000: p. 243). For instance, before actually beginning the online course, the ESL instructor must ensure that learners know how to use the computer (including the tools), and how to access and navigate the web. Training programs should be provided for any learners who do not possess the relevant skills or knowledge for the course. Clear explanation on the required behavior, roles, course design and content should also be given. Most importantly, guidance should be given to let learners know how to work effectively in a collaborative environment (Curry, 2001).

Additionally, the underlying principle of online learning is that learners can actively participate in their construction of knowledge. This activity requires learners to regulate and monitor their learning process. It is therefore important for the instructor to “help learners develop the self-regulation needed to exercise learner control intelligently” (Roueche, 2002). In addition to time management skills, learners should be taught how to describe, analyze and criticize others’ work appropriately in writing lessons. This view is shared by Naidu & Bernath (2002), who point out that “learners

often work independently with self-instructional study materials need help with information gathered independently and/or collaboratively”. These skills are especially important for learners who engage in writing lessons and could be taught by giving exemplary documents or providing guidelines for evaluation so as to teach them how to analyze others’ work and give effective comments.

Being a monitor cum an observer

During the writing process, the instructor needs to be a monitor, checking the process of learners so as to adapt the facilitation to what the learners need (Donar, 2004). For instance, if the group members do not collaborate well, the instructor has to talk to them to find out what the problem is and help them make changes if necessary. Moreover, the instructor should take the role of an observer rather than a controller during the commenting stage. He/she has to refrain from dominating the process. One of the issues the students need to pay attention to is when to incorporate peers’ comments in the collaborative writing process. As pointed by Hansen & Liu (2005), “it is more beneficial for students if the teacher’s comment are not given on the same draft (or step in the process) as utilized for peer response” as students tend to be dependent on teacher’s comments more. The essence of using peer response in the writing process is that learners should take the responsibility for their own learning, and the purpose of using collaborative writing is that learners can be autonomous writers by working together with their peers. Thus it would be better if the instructor can be an observer who will only comment on the learners’ work after they have finished revising their work having taken into account their peers’ comments in the writing process.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Earlier research investigating computer-mediated communication has allowed us to have a better understanding on the use of online collaboration in the ESL writing context. Summing up the literature reviewed in this chapter, online collaboration can be a useful aid in ESL writing classrooms. Through the incorporation of online collaborative learning mode, it is believed that students can develop a positive attitude towards writing and achieve effective writing outcomes. Research findings suggest that language educators should use online collaboration to help students to enter into a new realm of collaborative learning and a new knowledge creation process. The literature on online collaboration has also underlined the importance of creating an environment that can empower ESL learners to be effective writers. Based on the implications of these investigations, the design of the study was worked out and will be presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Design of the Study

The study is designed to determine if online collaboration when used in ESL writing classes can help improve the writing of learners. The researcher designed and implemented an ESL writing course combining the use of an asynchronous communication tool (i.e. email) and peer collaboration with a group of learners from a Hong Kong community college. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Does online collaboration help improve students' writing? If so, does it help
 - motivate them to write
 - enhance their sense of audience
 - teach them the importance of revision
 - reduce stress in writing
 - cultivate positive attitudes towards writing
2. Is peer help beneficial to students' writing process?
3. What are the limitations of the use of online collaboration in the proposed context?

In this chapter, the design of the study is presented to show how the data that enabled these questions to be addressed were collected and analyzed. The features of the study are explained and their relevance to the research questions is justified in the following sections.

3.1 SETTING

The study was conducted with 36 higher diploma (intermediate level) students of a community college in Hong Kong in the second semester of 2004-2005. The community college that the participants came from provides career training and post-secondary education opportunities for students who have completed secondary education in forms five or seven. The courses they offer include both associate degree and higher diploma programs. The higher diploma programs in which the participants were involved were career-oriented. The program that the participants took was Marketing and Management.

The English course in the community college was a generic program that all higher diploma students had to attend and pass before they could graduate. It included general English modules for year one students and business English modules for years two and three students. In this study, the participants were all form seven graduates, so they were admitted directly to the intermediate level (year two of the course) and were registered for the business English module. In the first semester, the English Business course was entirely conducted in face-to-face learning mode, but course content, including exercises and quizzes, was provided online as supplementary practice. Some online discussion tasks on the topics of the chapters were also given as a preparatory exercise to familiarize students with the online discussion format since the WebCT learning platform was provided to students by the publisher of the course book.

In the second semester, the students and the instructor met in their regular face-to-face English lessons every week for three hours, in which they were taught the regular curriculum of the College (Business English). However, the writing module was changed into a hybrid format for this study for fourteen weeks: a mixture of classroom teaching and web-based activities. In other words, the course developer incorporated a writing course with online elements into the regular English curriculum. There were three writing tasks in total for the students throughout the semester. Face-to-face lessons on the basics of the writing genres of the tasks, related language items and criteria for good writing were given prior to the start of the online writing process, with the use of an email system provided by the students' course book "Business Communication" (Krizan, Merrier & Jones, 2005).

The author of this thesis acted both as a researcher and the instructor of this study, helping with course design, implementation and evaluation. An experienced teacher who taught students of the same level was invited to be the observer. The study attempted to collect students' feelings and attitudes towards the use of online collaboration in the ESL writing lessons, so there was no inclusion of a control group; however, there was a comparison of the first drafts and the subsequent revisions produced by the participants in order to investigate how online collaboration and peer responses actually helped improve students' writing (the first and second research questions of this study).

3.2 PARTICIPANTS

The participants (n=36, 28 females, 8 males) were all studying on the first year of a full-time higher diploma program in Marketing and Management at the Community College of the School of Professional and Continuing Education of the Hong Kong University.

They were similar in age, mostly in their early-twenties (20-24), and all Cantonese speakers. They had all finished their Advanced Level Certificate Education which is usually taken in Form 7 and had studied English for over 16 years. Some of them did not receive passes at the 'E' grade level in English in the Hong Kong Advanced Certificate of Education Examination but all of them had received passes at the 'E' grade level in English in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, which is usually taken in Form 5. Their English results in HKCEE and HKALE suggested that they were intermediate level students whose grammar and vocabulary was good enough to communicate in an online environment. A minority of them had limited full-time work experience, such as being a salesperson or a clerk. Most of them had part-time jobs as the private tutors of primary or secondary children.

All had studied Composition Writing for more than ten years in primary and secondary schools. This indicates that all the participants had knowledge of English writing. In addition to the online writing course, the students had to study other skills relating to business English in the weekly English lessons required by the College in the traditional face-to-face learning mode classes. The students were placed into their English classes randomly by the College's administration office rather than on the

basis of their English proficiency level or open examination results.

Most of the students were able to handle basic IT applications since they had had computer lessons in their secondary schools. This was proved by the results of the pre-course questionnaire survey (Appendix 1) that was carried out at the beginning of the online writing course (in the orientation session) to survey students' online learning experiences and opinions on the use of the WebCT interface of the English course in the first semester. The results from the questionnaire survey showed that most of them were novice users of the online learning mode and that they did not oppose the use of this type of learning method.

A majority of the respondents (85.3%) indicated they had experience of using the computer but they had not used it for a course before. Only three of them (8.8%) had previous experience using computers for online courses. Although 61.8% of respondents stated that they had participated in some individual online lessons before, most of them had little experience of using the computer for online courses before engaging in the WebCT interface of the English course in the first semester, when they could use the online learning functions offered by their course book. Nearly half the students (41.1%) expressed their preference for using the online learning environment.

All of the participants were Chinese with English as a second language. As typical students of secondary education, they tended to be passive in their study styles as they preferred to work individually and depended a great deal on their teachers for their learning. This coincides with Pierson's findings (1996) that most Hong Kong students were unwilling to challenge teachers or other peers by asking questions. This is mostly

due to the traditional belief that teachers should be respected for their knowledge and abilities, and challenging teachers or others by asking questions is disrespectful. In addition, Hong Kong Chinese students prefer not to interact with other learners in the learning process since they are “wary of activities that might make them highly visible to others” (Lam, 1997: p. 65). As such, the design of the online writing course was intended to encourage students’ participation by including both their group and individual contribution. Moreover, their performance and participation were closely monitored.

3.3 COURSE DESIGN

The English writing course developed for this study followed the blended learning mode described in the previous chapter (underpinned by the constructivist principles), in which the instructor met the class face-to-face during the normal lessons, 14 times during the semester, and the learners could engage in online discussion and evaluation of others’ work. In addition to the rationale provided above on the use of blended learning courses, my other reason for designing the course in a blended learning mode is the consideration of the maturity of my participants as e-learners. As most of them did not have the experience of engaging in online courses, I took into account the possibility that they might find it hard to adjust to a totally online learning mode. The course was then designed as a hybrid to provide more learner support. The face-to-face meetings were used in the provision of background information, course content, requirements (including timelines and the type of comments to be given to their peers on their written work), and training. Online collaborative opportunities were created within the email system, in which the learners were required to complete

writing tasks either individually or with their group members and give comments on the others' work.

3.4 TASKS

The design of the tasks of this study involved a common goal, which was to create an environment for students to practice the use of online collaboration in their writing process. The three tasks used in the online course were created on the basis of the principles mentioned in the previous chapter, which were to provide an authentic, motivating, interesting and supporting context so that students could fully utilize the power of technology for learning and interaction, and at the same time, contribute to the realization of the learning objective (Mavor & Trayner, 2001).

3.4.1 RATIONALE

One major concern about the use of the online writing course is the tasks designed to encourage the collaboration of the students. Several important issues emerging from the research discussed in the previous chapter were adopted in this study for the task design of the online writing course. These included a task design that could enable team-based problem solving, real-life experience, interaction, autonomy in student learning and peer support. They should also be able to promote a high level of interdependence among students. Based on these, three writing tasks/activities were created to provide and enable a collaborative learning process. These three activities formed a series of interrelated tasks enabling students to experience the online

collaborative writing process. Tasks 1 and 2 were used to familiarize students with the operation of the online learning mode and the use of online collaboration. They were both simulated tasks requiring students to put themselves into a situated business context involving creating writing tasks. The objective of Task 3 was to consolidate the skills of students in online writing collaboration, which was an authentic or simulated task embedded in project-based learning design. The underlying concept behind was to involve students in a real-world project through which they could foster workplace competencies such as teamwork, communication, planning and problem solving.

Regarding the format of the three writing tasks, the first one was an individual task and the other two were group tasks. In the individual writing task, the students finished their writing individually and were then given help to revise their texts by their peers. In the collaborative writing tasks, the students finished a task on a specific topic and genre by working together. Online group discussions were included in all the three tasks to allow peer-to-peer collaboration, sharing of knowledge and the construction of understanding through problem-solving. Each facet of the tasks was designed to encourage involvement in the process of writing collaboration.

3.4.2 DESCRIPTION

Task 1 - Writing a short report

The design of Task 1 was to familiarize students with the operation of the online writing process used in this study. A simulated task related to the writing of short reports for a particular person of a group was given. The students were asked to finish

a short and informal report individually for the Marketing and Managing Manager of their college, summarizing the views of higher diploma students (who were their schoolmates) on the effectiveness of the learning facilities and environment in the community college (Appendix 2). To make the writing task authentic, the students had to collect real data by carrying out a small survey interviewing at least ten students of the College on their views on the topic before compiling their report. The students were then required to send their first draft to at least two of their group members for comments (they were mostly in groups of five). All email messages had to be copied to the instructor, so that she could monitor the comments students made and their progress. The final output was a result of the collaborative work of the student writer and the comments of his/her peers. Guidelines and a time schedule for the whole process were provided for students' reference (Appendix 3).

Since it was the first time most of the students had been asked to write up an English report, the basics of report writing and issues regarding the conduct of research (such as questionnaire design) were introduced in regular face-to-face lessons. The students were also taught about the layout of a short report and the language structure that they might find useful in report writing (Appendix 4). In order to prepare students to participate in the peer response process, they were then given two examples of short reports (Appendix 5) and were asked to examine them closely, analyzing them in terms of layout, content and the use of grammar and punctuation. Finally they had to decide which of the two was more effective and give reasons in a discussion session.

This type of activity not only familiarized student writers with the workings of the online collaborative learning mode, but it also presented a task within a real context

that could be used by students, thus fulfilling Roberts' recommendation on task design (2002).

Task 2 - Writing minutes

The purpose of Task 2 was to familiarize students with the concept of the use of online collaboration and to provide them an opportunity to apply the principles and skills acquired in the previous task. The writing approach taken for this task was therefore truly collaborative as students worked together to complete a writing task. As in Task 1, the students were given a simulated task in which they were asked to create "minutes" for a meeting conducted by their classmates (Appendix 6); however, this task required them to co-construct a written outcome, rather than just giving comments on each others' drafts.

In this task, students were asked to work in their groups and plan for a face-to-face meeting to discuss the issues relating to the organization of the opening ceremony for the Third International Student Conference which would be held in Hong Kong. They had to take the roles of the members of the organizing committee of the conference who were representing different sectors, like students or the government. They had to conduct the meeting (for about 20 minutes) in front of the instructor and one observer group consisting of four to six of their classmates (chosen randomly from the class). The observer group needed to take notes of the meeting they attended. After the meeting, each member had to submit the main points they noted down to their group members by email. Each of them had to comment on the points given by others. Then the leader allocated each member the responsibility for writing up a draft for part of the minutes in form of a paragraph, which they had to send to their group for comments. Based on the comments of group members, the writer of the particular

sections could make amendments, and the final drafts were then forwarded to the leader for compilation. The final work was sent to members for comment once again, before being submitted to the instructor. A set of guidelines and the time schedule of the task (Appendix 7) were also given for the student's reference. Finally the instructor gave comments and a grade.

Prior to the start of the writing task, the participants were taught about the layout and types of minutes required (Appendix 8). Besides minutes writing, they were also introduced to the principles by which a meeting is conducted including the roles of the different participants in a meeting and the language used in expressing opinions and negotiations.

Research has showed this type of speaking task could allow learners to move through the simulation so as to test and develop their knowledge and skills by assuming a role in a simulation task (Strategic Management Group, 2005). The intention of assigning roles was to designate responsibility within the group and to ensure that each member could make a contribution. Further, the task provided both authentic and interactive environments for students to try out meeting and minutes-writing skills. At the same time, the students could experience the use of interactivity and positive interdependence, which are considered key elements in online collaboration, and in the writing process.

Task 3 - Writing a long report

After the students had established a familiarity with the online learning process from the first two tasks, Task 3 provided an opportunity to consolidate their skills in the use

of online collaboration in ESL writing. It was hoped that the students would be able to get a more complete picture on how online collaboration could be utilized in the writing process after exploring the sequence of activities and resulting issues of implementation in Task 2.

In Task 3, the students were asked to produce a formal report for the government of Hong Kong in the capacity of a consultancy group on the views of the public relating to the “Concept Plan of Lantau”, a development plan proposed by the government for Lantau Island (an outlying island of Hong Kong) (Appendix 9). As in Task 1, the students had to work in groups and carry out a survey to collect people’s views on the Concept Plan and write up a report of their findings and recommendations. However, in this task, the scale of the survey was considerably larger than in Task 1 as each group had to interview at least 30 Hong Kong citizens or tourists. The report was also more complete in its format since the students had to include an abstract and sections dealing with implications and conclusions. In other words, the report was longer and required more detail.

This was a challenging piece of writing to complete as the students had to carry out research to obtain findings and analyze the data in order to make recommendations. The first challenge that they faced was to design a suitable questionnaire for carrying out the research. Although they had learnt some basic issues regarding research design in task one, they still had little knowledge about creating a questionnaire that could help them to get the answers for their research questions. Other than the grammatical problems students had in formulating questions, they also found it difficult to think of relevant questions for their research. Therefore, they needed a great deal of feedback and guidance when designing the questionnaire. At the beginning of Task 3, the

instructor spent a couple of weeks teaching and guiding students on the design of their questionnaires in the face-to-face lessons.

The task was also difficult in that students had to carry out research with real people by themselves and analyze the data they obtained. They had to get at least 30 interviewees for their questionnaire survey and then analyze the results according to the pre-determined research questions or objectives. The instructor provided close supervision and guidance during this process since this was crucial for preparing them for the online writing process required in the next phase. Face-to-face lessons were conducted to teach them how to conduct a questionnaire survey and analyze the resulting data.

To supplement the introduction of report-writing in Task 1 and prepare students for the write-up of the longer, formal report required in Task 3, the students were also given some additional information and exercises on the written components of the task, such as the introduction, conclusion and recommendation sections of a formal report (Appendix 10).

In practice, the members of each group were required to collaborate and combine their efforts in both data-collecting and writing processes. After they had completed the survey, each member had to work individually on the interpretation of the data they had collected and had to share their work and ask other group members to comment on it. Then the group leader assigned each member the responsibility for writing up one or two parts of the report. All this had to be carried out according to the time schedule set by the instructor (Appendix 11). In the process of drafting their parts of the report, the students were given opportunities to receive other members' drafts on

their sections. They had to create their drafts by taking into account the useful information provided by others. After that, they had to send out their drafts to every member for comments. They then worked on their drafts again, taking into account the useful comments and suggestions of their members. Finally they had to send their final drafts to the group leader who then compiled the whole report for submission to the instructor.

This task involved the students in a simulation designed to promote a high level of interactivity and collaboration, thus enabling learning from both the process and the final output.

3.5 GROUP STRUCTURE

In the writing course evaluated in their study, the participating class was divided into groups of four to six according to their own choice. There were seven groups in total. The design of group size, group composition and ways of forming groups followed the principles discussed in the previous chapter.

After the first semester, students knew each other well through the class activities. Thus at the beginning of the second semester, the instructor asked the 36 students to form 7 self-selected groups of 4-6 for the three writing tasks. Although researchers have found that 4 to 5 seems to be the optimal size for a group, the instructor allowed some of the groups of this study to be 6 when taking into consideration the complexity of the final task.

Since the review of research literature in the previous chapter has indicated the importance of creating an environment that can result in successful collaboration, a fixed group structure, in which grouping remained constant throughout the whole course, was chosen for this study. The reason was that the researcher believed that it would be easier for students to establish a sense of community (Tannacito, 2001) if they had repeated collaboration with the same colleague.

Moreover, the reason for letting students choose their groups was that they knew one another well after the first semester, so they would be more cohesive and cooperative if they could work with peers of their choice. In addition, based on the experience of forming groups for their project work in face-to-face class activities and project work in the first semester, the instructor believed that there would be less conflict among students who had worked well together before.

By examining the groupings finally made by the students themselves, it was found that all of them were of mixed ability – a situation that is believed by some researchers to be one of the criteria for creating a well-functioning team.

3.6 COMPUTER-BASED COMMUNICATION TOOL

In this study, text-based asynchronous technology (i.e. email) was chosen as a means of enhancing the collaborative learning of learners because it could enable large groups of people to interact and discussion details could be retained. Another reason for choosing this tool was that it was a function provided by the WebCT platform of the Business English course book of the students. A distribution list with the email

address of every participant, including the instructor, was already created in the system to facilitate the dispatching process. My intention to use email was to aid learner collaboration in their writing tasks and to provide a supportive learning environment where they could improve their quality of work by getting feedback from their peers as class time was usually not sufficient for them to develop a collaborative writing together or receive comments from one another. Theoretically, they could work at any time and at any place with the use of the email system since they did not need to be online at the same time. This advantage is noted by Simpson (2002) who states that “asynchronous communication in the form of email messages is an effective medium for exchanges in collaborative learning projects” since learners can have more time for thinking and writing their comments. Unlike synchronous communication (e.g. the use of chat-rooms), asynchronous communication focuses more on careful writing than on the speed of turn-taking. Asynchronous computer-mediated conference has been found in a great deal of research as having value in supporting collaborative learning process as “it offers flexibility in the use of time and space” (Sgouropoulou, Koutoumanos, Goodyear & Skordalakis, 2000). In addition, the participation and interaction of learners in online discussion is found higher (Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004: p. 245) in such an environment.

3.7 THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

The instructor’s role in the course was divergent and flexible. First, she planned for the course content and chose the appropriate form of technology for the course. Then she designed the learning environment, combining individual and group work, face-to-face meetings and asynchronous discussion. During the course her role was

limited to being a coach and observer, and to giving guidance and observation. The instructor gave the information and instructions for the tasks through face-to-face teaching. She also monitored the progress of students by designing the time schedule for each task. In this course, the instructor resorted to the role of an observer, keeping track of students' behavior and performance. To avoid reducing students' motivation and discouraging the students from giving their comments to others, the instructor tried only to intervene to remind students of the need for quality in their comments and of the importance of meeting deadlines. For the purpose of the study evaluation, her observation for each task was recorded in the reflective summaries which were cross-checked against those given by learners in the evaluation stage.

Unlike the instructor-controlled learning environment, the instructor helped develop a learner-controlled learning system by changing her role to that of a facilitator and coach, and later, a monitor and an observer to provide guidance and support to learners during the writing process. The goal of this arrangement was to create a learner-led learning environment where conversations and co-operation between learners become the principal elements in the learning process.

3.8 TRAINING AND PROCEDURES

In order to have successful implementation of online collaboration, according to the research reviewed in the previous chapter, it is important to train participants in giving effective responses and provide them with extensive guidance for completing online writing tasks. Hence, to facilitate the implementation of the online writing course requirements in this study, the course developer designed a training session and a set of procedures that could be followed for the completion of the writing tasks.

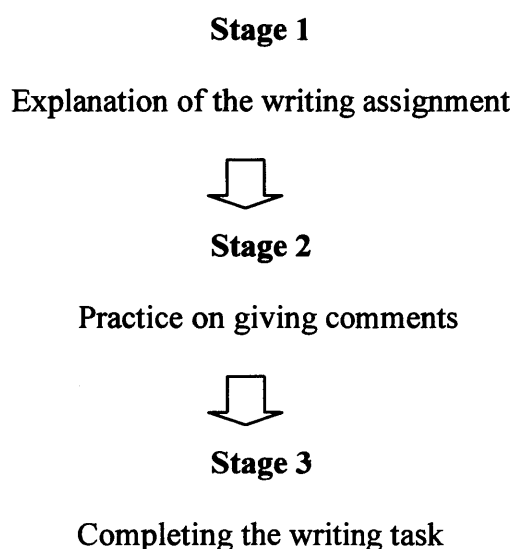
3.8.1 TRAINING

In order to prepare students for the process of online discussion, at the end of the first semester, they were asked to work on a task that helped practice giving and responding to online responses. To do that, they were required to respond to online topics given by the online discussion forum of the WebCT platform provided by their course book. Then they had to read their peers' work and give responses to its content. The purpose of this task was to get students to know how to give and respond to others in an online environment. As a result, the students would then be better prepared to assist each other in their online writing tasks. To avoid students concentrating on grammatical errors only, they were told to focus more on content. The teachers then discussed some of the comments and responses with them in the face-to-face classes.

In addition, before the writing course started in the second semester, the instructor hosted a face-to-face orientation session for the students. The session served a number of purposes. First, students were given an introduction to the goals, scope and rationale of the course. Second, the orientation provided students with more knowledge of the online learning tool (i.e. the email system) used in the course. Third, it was important for the instructor to give them information on the implementation or procedures to be followed in the online course. As Thanasoulas (2000) & McNamee & Roberts (2002) state, course developers need to offer sufficient guidelines, direction and support (both technically and psychologically) for learners, so that they will be more willing to participate in the learning process.

3.8.2 PROCEDURES

In preparing learners for each of the writing tasks, the following stages of preparation were designed to make sure that the students understood the process of writing and giving comments in an online format before each task started:



Stage 1: Explanation of the writing assignment

Face-to-face teaching was conducted before the implementation of each task. The classroom teaching which occurred at the beginning of the task gave students information about the task: the topic, guidelines, format, language required, work schedule and the evaluative criteria. The evaluative criteria were also provided for each of the assignments, so that students could better fulfill their assignments and know how to evaluate others' work.

Stage 2: Practice on giving comments

In order to develop students' requirements for good work and familiarize them with constructive ways of judging others' work, they were given some of the work in the same genre and asked to share their comments on it in face-to-face lessons. This also provided an understanding of exemplary work which they could make reference to in their subsequent writing and commenting process.

Stage 3: Completing the writing task

The students had to finish their drafts and final work according to the guidelines and the language items taught and send them to group members for comment according to the work schedule set by the course developer. Finalized drafts were worked out with the help of the peer responses and sent to the instructor. Finally, the instructor commented on the students' work and they received a grade for the group work as well as marks for their individual performance in the writing process.

3.9 DATA COLLECTION

Given that the purpose of the study was to understand if online collaboration can help improve students' writing skills by motivating them to write, enhancing their sense of audience, teaching them the importance of revision, reducing stress in writing and cultivating positive attitudes towards writing, the study focused on collecting students' perceptions in all these aspects.

Taking into account the time and financial resources available, survey questionnaires were used in eliciting data regarding the research objective, as questionnaires are an

effective method of collecting quantitative descriptions of the different perceptions of the study population towards the three research questions.

In addition, in order to capture the various perceptions that may exist among students in the use of online collaboration in writing classes and to verify the responses from the questionnaires, a mixture of qualitative data collection techniques was used in the study: students' reflective summaries, interview scripts, observer notes, students' written work and online responses. The students' post-course questionnaire survey findings, interview scripts and students' reflective summaries were used mainly to collect data that tell if online collaboration helped improve their writing and peer help was beneficial to their writing process. To assure the trustworthiness of the findings, a triangulation of various forms of data (instructor's reflective summaries and observer notes) were employed to allow cross-checking of data and interpretations from different sources and explore ways of better structuring the online writing lessons. A further way to promote trustworthiness was to use the participants' written work and peer responses to verify the data and check if the interpretations are reasonable.

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources were collected throughout the fourteen-week course. The quantitative methods helped to generate generalizable results obtained in a reliable way and capable of being displayed in a clear way, while the qualitative methods helped give rich and detailed understanding of the problem being studied. Hence these two methods could "build upon each other" (Sells, Smith & Sprenkle, 1995: p. 200) to increase the validity of the research findings. The results obtained from one evaluation method could then be used to confirm those obtained from the other evaluation method and to help expand the breadth of the research.

3.9.1 QUESTIONNAIRES

The post-course questionnaire (Appendix 12), which was made up of 42 questions relating to the three research questions of the study, was to be answered on a five-point Likert scale (with 5 being the highest score). In addition, there were 10 open-ended questions (including a warm-up question). Among the 42 items requiring responses in the Likert scale, 9 statements were designed to elicit students' general perceptions of the usefulness of online collaboration (No. 19, 23-26, 33, 37-38, 41). Another 8 statements were used to evaluate the effectiveness of peer help (No. 20, 27-32, 34). 24 statements were designed on the basis of the design elements of the online course so as to find out the limitations of the use of online collaboration in this study (No. 1-18, 21-22, 35-36, 39-40). The last statement (No. 42) was used to elicit the overall feeling of the participants towards the course.

The remaining 10 open-ended questions allowed students to reflect more on the use of online collaboration, so that more detailed information could be collected for the research questions. The questionnaire was piloted in April 2005 with 10 students to test the appropriateness of the format and the language used in the instrument. The students' feedback on the design and language of the pilot questionnaire informed a number of minor revisions in the instructions accompanying the questionnaire.

For convenience of observation and analysis, simple descriptive statistics for the numerical values from the Likert scores were calculated. The mean scores and standard deviation of students' responses on each question were also worked out. All the answers to the open questions were typed and collated under responses to each question.

3.9.2 REFLECTIVE SUMMARIES

The students were requested to keep a reflective summary (at least 100 words after the completion of each writing task) in which they recorded their personal feeling towards their online writing experiences or the implementation of the tasks in the course. Guidelines for writing the reflective summaries (Appendix 13) were provided. It was believed that through this activity, students could connect their thoughts, feelings and experiences to the learning activities they had engaged in, and as a result, develop new understandings (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985: p. 19). Writing reflective summaries can also be an effective way of collecting data as Wright (2003) points out, noting that reflective journals are helpful for research work since researchers can “document progress in a more systematic fashion, so that the magic that happens can be studied and evaluated”.

3.9.3 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

A semi-structured focus-group interview was chosen as a data gathering technique in this study and was carried out at the end of the online writing course. This was because the research required information concerning interviewees’ perceptions on the usefulness of online peer interactions to writing and opinions on how online peer interactions could help improve writing. It might become difficult if structured interviews were done since rigid questioning might discourage interviewees from providing detailed elaboration. The semi-structured interview had several advantages: the researcher could include specific, well-defined questions determined in advance, while at the same time allow for elaboration of responses and subsidiary questions

(Sudman, 1982), build questioning to capture insights and perceptions to increase comprehensiveness of data (Patton, 1990), cross-check what had been observed or recorded so as to close gaps in data, and gather data from each interviewee in a somewhat systematic way to allow comparison of data.

Six students (two of good English writing standard, two of average English writing standard and two of poor English writing standard) who were randomly selected from these three categories were invited to attend a one-and a half hour interview with the researcher in May 2005 after the completion of the online writing course. The resulting interview was recorded with the permission of all the interviewees and transcribed for use (maintaining the identities of the interviewees as confidential). The questions used in the interview were generally related to students' perceptions on the usefulness of online collaboration, effectiveness of peer feedback and improvements that could be made for the course (Appendix 14).

For the usefulness of online collaboration, the questions were the following:

- What was the most useful aspect of the online English writing course?
- Has writing online improved your writing or communication skills? If yes, in what ways?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of doing group writing tasks online?
- Do you think online collaboration can help improve your writing skills? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

For the effectiveness of peer feedback, the questions were:

- What do you think about the comments made by your group members?

- How did you treat the comments made by the group members about your work?

For the limitations of the use of online collaboration in the course, the questions were:

- What do you think were the specific challenges you encountered in participating online?
- Have you any other comments about how to improve the delivery of this course?
- Are there any comments you would like to share?

Probing questions were asked in response to the answers given by students in the interview. The interview was transcribed and the answers were used to counter-check the data from the questionnaire and the reflective summaries.

3.9.4 OBSERVATION

There were two types of observations in this study: participant observation and peer observation. In this study, the researcher was the participant observer, who was involved in designing and implementing the research. She kept reflective summaries as a record of the whole process as well as detailed comments after observing the implementation of each writing task. On the other hand, the peer observer did not take part in the course but oversaw the whole process. In the case of this project, an experienced teacher who taught the same course in the traditional mode was invited to be the peer observer and fill in a questionnaire (Appendix 15) after observing the whole course. She was an experienced ESL writing instructor who was involved throughout the process to help identify the problems that need solutions and

improvements.

These observations could provide information which the researcher could get from an unstructured and flexible setting, enhance her understanding of the situation and context, and check against bias and prejudice from data obtained from other sources.

3.9.5 STUDENTS' WRITING AND E-FEEDBACK

The participants completed three writing tasks that were used in the study: one individual and two group tasks. Each task consisted of producing a final product and one to two revisions. For the analysis of the written work, the peer comments on the first or second drafts of the three writing tasks were compared with the revisions on the final drafts to determine the extent to which the participants incorporated peer comments into their revisions and the usefulness of the peer comments on improving students' writing.

For Task 1, a sub-sample of writings of seven students, who were randomly selected from each of the seven participating groups by the researcher, was analyzed, in which the first drafts and the subsequent revisions were compared to examine the extent to which peer comments facilitated revision. Random sampling was chosen because of time and resource constraints. Written work (the first and second drafts of Task 1) of a selected student is shown in Appendix 16. As for Tasks 2 and 3, analyses of the writing was conducted with a participating group, in which the greatest quantity of peer feedback and revisions occurred. A purposive sampling method was employed in order to make more different types of feedback and revision types available for analysis from the target population. Because of the exploratory nature of the study,

generalizability was not of immediate concern. Moreover, the reason for choosing only one participating group to carry out the analyses of writings was that Tasks 2 and 3 required students to collaboratively produce one final product. Samples of written work of the selected group for Tasks 2 and 3 are collected in Appendix 17. To facilitate the analysis, I adopted Tuzi's modified revision analysis rubric (2004) in this study. The writing analysis rubric I used identified the purposes of revisions the student writers made based either on peer comments (for the three writing tasks) or information from peers' drafts. The analysis rubric is as follows:

Table 3.1: Analysis rubric used for evaluating the purposes of revisions

Purpose	Example/explanation (<i>in italics</i>)
Grammar	We interview 40 local residents.
	We interviewed 40 local residents.
Impact	The impact of the development to HK will be great.
	The impact of the development to HK will be enormous .
Meaning	We carried out a small-scale questionnaire survey.
	We carried out a questionnaire survey with sixteen people on phone .
New information	The conference will be held in HK Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wanchai.
	The conference will be held in HK Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wanchai. It is an annual event of the International Student Union.
Structure/layout	<i>The organisation of ideas in a paragraph or the whole essay is changed for giving clearer ideas.</i>
Spelling	We seeked the help of the HK Youth Association in getting student helpers.
	We sought the help of the HK Youth Association in getting student helpers.
Not needed	<i>A particular phrase, sentence or section is deleted since the content is either incorrect or redundant making the section unnecessary.</i>

In addition to the analysis of the writings, the components each response contained were examined. Samples of students' e-feedback for tasks 1, 2 and 3 are shown in Appendix 18. Table 3.2 below provides the e-feedback rubric used in the analysis, which was simplified from the response analysis rubric modified by Tuzi (2004). The data obtained from the analysis of the revisions and e-feedback helped to determine if peer feedback was useful for improving students' writing.

Table 3.2: Response analysis rubric used for evaluating peer responses

Components	Example
Advice and suggestions	"I think the conclusion should be more detailed." "You can change the order of the first two sections."
Questions	"How many of your interviewees were tourists or local people?"
Quick fixes	"The transportation is so convenient than the past The transportation is more convenient than the past."
Praise	"The methodology section is very clear."
Criticism	"The first sentence of the Introduction is not necessary." "You didn't mention the findings for Question 8."
Requests	"Can you explain what the development themes are at the beginning of Section B?"
Useless advice	<i>The comment/suggestion given is either wrong or unhelpful to the improvement of the draft.</i>

3.10 DATA ANALYSIS

For the purpose of this study, the data originating from the above sources were collected at different stages. Then they were collated and first analysed broadly to determine categories that related to the research questions of the study. More

detailed analyses were then carried out so as to reach conclusions about each of the research questions and maintain the internal consistency of the data. The data analysis process can be described as follows:

As a first step, the responses to the post-course questionnaire (Appendix 19) were organised and transformed into percentages and mean scores. The next step was transcribing the interview tape. Then the interview transcript (Appendix 20), the observer report (Appendix 21), the reflective summaries from students (Appendix 22) and the instructor (Appendix 23) were read so as to develop ideas about categories and relationships relevant to the research questions. The final step was to analyse the written work of student writers by comparing the drafts and the revisions and evaluate peer feedback by identifying the changes student writers made based on peer feedback.

Following this, the data were arranged into categories that could allow the comparison of the categories. It is important to synthesize the differences between qualitative and quantitative data from the mixed-method evaluation, in which qualitative data can be used together with quantitative data and vice versa.

In this study, a four-step approach was be used to evaluate the results from multiple sources:

Step 1: To record the results from each data set

Step 2: To assess the findings of each data set against the pre-set evaluation questions

Step 3: To compare the similarity and differences of the findings of the data sets

Step 4: To find out and interpret the relationship among the findings of the data sets

3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the beginning of the study, the participants were informed of the aims of the study and its possible benefits to them and other students learning to write in English (Appendix 24). Then the ethical concern of informed consent, confidentiality and potential harm were addressed. Informed consent was sought from the college and students (Appendixes 25 & 26) to collect data and carry out analyses. All the participants were assured that they would have access to the observer notes and the interview transcripts that related to them. All the written documents based on their data would be available to the participants for comment on request. At each phase of the study, the data collected were discussed with the participants. Moreover, informed, written consent would be asked for before the release of findings to the public.

Another area of ethical concern is confidentiality. In order to protect the identity of the student participants of this study, codes or numbers were assigned to each of them. Careful consideration of issues of confidentiality was made to enhance the validity of the findings as participants usually feel more comfortable in giving their views if they are satisfied in respect of the ethical dimension of the study.

In addition, it is also necessary to minimize any potential harm to participants resulting from publication of research findings or data. To address this concern, the participating teachers and students in this study were told that they would be asked to comment on the releasing of the data before they were published.

Finally, extra precautions were taken in view of the fact that the researcher was also the instructor of the online course of this study. The research has addressed this issue by incorporating ethical considerations into the data collection method. Firstly students who wrote the post-course questionnaire were anonymous with regard to individuals. This means that questionnaires could not be connected to individuals. As an additional safeguard, the instructor was not in the classroom when the questionnaire survey was conducted.

3.12 CONCLUSION

This was a study that employed a mixed-mode evaluation approach. The main focus of the analysis was concerned with the feeling and attitudes of the participants towards the use of online collaboration in ESL writing lessons. The methodological tools used in this study were all based on written documentation, which included questionnaire survey, reflective summaries, interview scripts, observer notes, students' written work and online responses. It was hoped that the use of different data sets could help establish the validity of my representations in this study.

Chapter Four

Findings and discussion

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The findings in this chapter represent a synthesis of what were observed in this study with the group of ESL students who participated in the online writing course described in the previous chapter. Among the 34 respondents (two of the participants were absent on the day of evaluation), the male and female distribution was 25% male, 75% female. Since the difference between data obtained from the male and female respondents is insignificant, they are reported as a single group.

The findings were collected from multiple data sources, including the questionnaire, the interview summary, the observer reports, the reflective summaries, the written course work and the students' e-feedback. For easy reference, the data from these sources are identified in this chapter by a code representing the sources (Q=questionnaire, I=interview; R=reflective summaries and E=e-feedback). The task number is also given (T1, T2, T3) when the data are taken from reflective summaries or e-feedback. As for data from interview scripts and the questionnaire, no task number is given since students' comments for the three tasks in these sources were mixed together. When the data from an individual student are used, they are reproduced in the participants' own unedited words with an identifying number (S1, S2, etc.). Thus R-T3-S6 indicates data obtained from Student 6 in relation to Task 3 in the reflective summaries. In addition to these data sources, observations of the instructor cum researcher were embedded in the discussions of the research questions.

To address the first and third research questions on the usefulness of online collaboration and the limitations of its use in the study, both the quantitative data from the pertinent questions of the post-course questionnaire and the qualitative data from the open questions of the questionnaire, interview summaries, observer notes and reflective summaries of students were used in the analysis. As for the post-course questionnaire, 34 students' responses to the research questions were calculated to arrive at mean scores and percentages (as shown in Figures 4.1 - 4.14). The mean score of each statement is calculated and the standard deviations (SD) are given to enable a check on the variability of the mean distributions. The percentages are obtained by adding together students' responses in the top two categories of the five-point scale (strongly agree-5, agree-4) for the relevant statements. Complete results showing the percentages, mean scores and standard deviations are presented in Appendix 19. In addition, the unedited versions of the relevant comments collected from the second part of the questionnaire (open-ended questions), the interview summary, the reflective summaries of students, and the observer report were also used for the interpretation of the data for the research questions.

To address the second research question on the usefulness of peer help in the writing process, other than the data from the sources used for the first and third research questions, an analysis of a subset of student' written work and peer e-feedback was carried out to evaluate for the usefulness of peer e-feedback in the writing process and to check the validity of the data obtained from the other sources. Tuzi's modified revision and response analysis rubrics (2004) were adopted in this study to analyse students' writing and e-feedback respectively.

4.2 THE USEFULNESS OF ONLINE COLLABORATION IN THE ESL WRITING PROCESS

4.2.1 DATA FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

There were 9 statements (items 19, 23-26, 33, 37-38 and 41) of the questionnaire which focused on the students' perceptions of the usefulness of online collaboration. The relevant items are grouped into five main categories to elicit students' responses towards the following:

- increase in motivation
- enhancement of sense of audience
- promotion of importance of revision
- reduction of stress in writing
- cultivation of positive attitudes towards writing

Increase in motivation

Two statements in the questionnaire (items 19 and 25) sought to find out if online collaboration (including peer responses) could help motivate students to learn or write more in the writing process. The results are shown in Table 4.1:

Table 4.1: Students' comments on the increase in their motivation

Comments	Mean scores	SD	Positive Responses
Online collaboration motivates my interest in writing.	3.44	0.75	46.9%
Peer-to-peer learning was highly encouraged by the online learning mode.	3.66	0.47	65.6%

Table 4.1 presents a fairly positive response from students on the aspect regarding their motivation to learn and write after engaging in the collaboration process of the online writing course. The mean score (3.66) demonstrates that students generally felt that the online learning mode had encouraged them to learn from peers. Of the 34 respondents surveyed, a considerable of them (mean=3.44; P=46.9%) agreed that online collaboration had motivated their interest in writing.

Enhancement of sense of audience

In statement 23, students were asked if they agreed with the statement that online collaboration (including peer responses) could help them be more aware of the sense of audience in the writing process. From the response of Table 4.2 (mean=3.56), it seems that nearly half of the respondents (53.1%) claimed that online collaboration had helped them to be more aware of the sense of audience in the writing process. Comments from the interviews with some of the respondents gave more elaboration to this aspect:

By reading others' comments, I can know what audience think about my work and then I can revise it according to the useful comments.
(I-S3)

It [the online writing process] helps me to be more careful. I checked my work for more times before I sent it out as I knew members would comment on it. (I-S4)

Table 4.2: Students' comments on their enhanced sense of audience

Comment	Mean score	SD	Positive Response
Online collaboration could help me be more aware of the sense of audience in the writing process.	3.56	0.56	53.1%

Promotion of importance of revision

Respondents were asked in statement 24 to evaluate if the online writing course had helped them to realize the importance of revision in the writing process. In Table 4.3 (mean=3.69), most of the respondents (65.7%) agreed that online collaboration could help them be more aware of the importance of revision in the writing process. This phenomenon is best illustrated by some of the respondents' comments in the interview:

I read their comments and make changes based on the useful ones.
(I-S2)

We got more chances to revise our work as we need to finish many drafts and make changes according to others' comments. (I-S6)

Table 4.3: Students' comments on the promotion of the importance of revision

Comment	Mean score	SD	Positive Response
Online collaboration could help me be more aware of the importance of revision in the writing process.	3.69	0.63	65.7%

Reduction of stress in writing

In statement 26, respondents were asked if they agreed that online collaboration could help reduce their stress in writing. As illustrated in the response in Table 4.4 (mean=3.69), most of the respondents (68.8%) agreed that online collaboration could help reduce their stress in the writing process.

Table 4.4: Students' comments on the reduction of stress in writing

Comment	Mean score	SD	Positive Response
Online collaboration could reduce my stress in writing.	3.69	0.77	68.8%

Cultivation of positive attitudes towards writing

There were four statements (items 33, 37-38 and 41) in the questionnaire relating to the positive attitudes towards writing generated by online collaboration. Table 4.5 shows that respondents generally liked doing writing tasks online (mean=3.53) and enjoyed the online writing lessons more than the traditional ones. Nearly half of them (mean=3.41) regarded themselves as a more effective writer in this online writing course and believed that their writing skills had improved (mean=3.41).

Table 4.5: Students' comments on their positive attitudes towards writing

Comments	Mean scores	SD	Positive Responses
I like doing the English writing tasks online.	3.53	0.79	59.4%
I enjoy the online writing lessons more than the traditional writing ones.	3.78	0.89	65.7%
I believe my writing skills have improved using this online course.	3.41	0.78	43.8%
I have learned to be a more effective writer in this course.	3.41	0.74	50%

4.2.2 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The positive effects of using online collaboration in ESL writing lessons can be found in the following aspects:

- increase in motivation
- enhancement of sense of audience
- promotion of importance of revision
- reduction of stress in writing
- cultivation of positive attitudes towards writing

Increase in motivation

Firstly, the data from the post-course questionnaire showed that online collaboration could help motivate students to learn from their peers; however, the students did not perceive that online collaboration was very helpful in motivating their interest in writing, especially when they had to deal with a task that required a longer period of time to finish or more complicated procedures. As McLoughlin & Luca (2000) point out, motivation to learn in the online writing process has a close link with the task design. They emphasize that learning activities must be planned to engage learners in an experiential manner.

This is reflected in the students' comments from the reflective summaries they made after finishing each writing task. Significant differences in their motivation to learn could be found in the responses of some of the students made for Task 1 (Short report) and Task 3 (Long Report).

Though the genre of writing was the same, Task 3 was comparatively longer and more complicated; thus students were expected to spend more time on it and were involved in more procedures, for instance, they had to make a questionnaire, go out to carry out interviews and conduct analysis. In addition, in the process of completing Task 3, students had to collaborate with others by contributing to all parts of the report,

commenting on others' work and making revisions based on peer feedback.

Task 1 was shorter and simpler as students were required to complete a very short questionnaire, conduct an interview with 10 people, complete a 500-600 word report on the own, send it to other group members for comments and then revise it based on peer responses.

The responses given by three students in the reflective summaries for Task 1 contrast markedly with those they gave for Task 3. This can be illustrated by the comments some of the students made for the two tasks:

Student	Comments	
	Task 1(Short report)	Task 3 (Long report)
R-S17	Comments from them [peers] are useful for me to improve my work and know more about what mistakes I have made. I have learnt a lot on this assignment with the help of my members.	I would rather prefer the traditional method for doing this report because it is not troublesome and each of us can concentrate on our responsible part.
R-S30	In general, the online English lessons is quite good and useful to me.....the online learning is interesting because we can do tasks online, convenient to me, save time. the process of writing long report on WebCT is complex because the steps are so many.
R-S31	Using online collaboration for doing assignment is quite useful. I need not print out the work and can receive others' comment to improve my work.	It is a long process. Everybody should do every part of the report.....

The comments they made coincide with the findings from the post-course questionnaire that the respondents regarded online collaboration more helpful in encouraging learning from peers than to writing.

Enhancement of sense of audience

As shown by the findings of the questionnaire, another benefit of online collaboration on writing is that students generally become more aware of the importance of audience awareness after engaging in the course. The percentage may not be high enough to prove that there was a significant change among the students; however, it can be sufficient to prove that there was a change of attitudes among students.

In traditional writing classes, some students may feel very nervous and under a great pressure when they are asked to finish a writing task for they know they have to write for the teacher – their only audience – who will evaluate their performance, particularly in the use of grammar. They usually write with apprehension. In the present study, students were provided with an environment where they could get a larger and more varied audience to read their work and they knew that this audience would provide feedback on how their work could be improved. In addition, they could become the audience for their peers. This kind of environment has gradually cultivated a sense of audience among students in their writing process, which they found beneficial. According to Bloch (2004), “the internet allowed these writers to receive comments from a real audience with a real purpose but without the artificial constraints of a face-to-face classroom.....” As some of the students reported in their reflective summaries and comments from the questionnaire:

As audiences are my classmates, which are at the same level as mine.
Therefore comments given by them will be useful in helping me to improve my writing skills. (R-T1-S16)

The benefit of WebCT is we can see how other working and improve ourselves. I learn how to consider others comment. It is good for my group member give comment to me. (R-T1-S24)

It is more interesting when learning the writing skills. It is more real.
(Q-S15)

The cultivation of sense of audience among students in their collaborative writing process was regarded by the peer observer of this study as a feature of the pedagogy of the online writing course, as she said in her report:

Through the process of collaborative evaluation and writing, students can become more aware of a sense of audience.

Nevertheless, there were students who still regarded the teacher as the real audience that could give grades and marks (as revealed in the interview). It is probably due to the authoritarian role of the teacher that persists in Chinese classrooms. This coincides with the finding of Anderson (2002), who pointed out that teacher feedback to second language writers is often regarded as the most important.

Promotion of importance of revision

The positive response students made to the question that asked if online collaboration could help them be aware of the importance of revision in the writing process demonstrates that most of them (mean: 3.69) realized the need to revise within the writing process and looked upon this practice as a good way of improving their writing. The interview and the reflective summaries show that some students found that revision was useful to the improvement of their writing and that they liked doing it. One of the students put the following in her reflective summary:

As I need to give out my first and second draft for comments, this gives me a chance to make amendments on my work before giving out the final draft. Therefore I prefer this learning format to the traditional one. (R-T1-S16)

Another student in the interview also regarded revising as helpful to improve her writing skills. The reason was:

We got more chances to revise our work as we need to finish many drafts and make changes according to others' comments. (I-S6)

“Not only do students get feedback that they can consider for revision, they also become better critical readers as well as writers in the process” (Centre for Writing Excellence, 2004). As students tend to make revisions in their work in the writing process, they may take more responsibility for their own learning, thus allowing them to be more independent of the teacher inside and outside of the classroom. This training process may widen the horizon of the students and empower them to be more autonomous in their future learning, as illustrated in the report of the peer observer of this study:

Besides increasing their sense of audience, online collaboration has enabled students to be more responsible writers.

Reduction of stress in writing

It was observed that in this e-learning environment where students could take responsibility for their own learning and benefit from a supportive network with collaboration and co-operation provided, most of the students ($m=3.69$) found that they became less stressed in their writing process.

With the emergence of a learning community created by online collaboration in this study, students could learn from one another, share their ideas and work together towards common goals. There was collaboration and communication, not competition and isolation anymore. The comments of students in the questionnaire indicate that

they liked the online learning mode more than the traditional one since they found it “more interesting” and could get the “comments from peers” in the process. This view is consistent with the findings of Mabrito and Self, as reported by Tannacito (2001), who point out that online learning platform could help provide a “non-threatening” and “reduced-risk” environment for student writers.

Cultivation of positive attitudes towards writing

When the students were asked in the questionnaire, most of them stated that they enjoyed the online writing lessons more than traditional ones and that they liked doing the writing tasks online. This finding corresponds with the analysis in the previous section. In addition to the benefits of being more interesting and getting comments from peers, the majority of students appreciated the “convenience” given by the online learning mode. As some of the students commented in their reflective summaries:

Submitting works online is very convenient, and I can get the responses from group mates immediately. Therefore I think this format of learning is very efficient and can save time. (R-T1-S16)

The online learning is interesting because we can do tasks online, convenient to me, save time. (R-T1-S30)

I think it is convenience and save time because after I finished the work, I can immediately send to WebCT email and hand in my work. I do not need to print it on paper since I think it is quite trouble. (R-T1-S17)

Convenient and time-saving as we didn't need to come out to discuss our work-we could do it online. (I-S1)

Other reasons given by the students in support of the use of the online learning mode included the flexibility allowed for students in the writing process. According to the comments from the interview, the flexibility could be found in the time given for

completing the tasks and the technical help available for them to complete their work.

As some of the students in the interview reported:

Online writing is better as in the traditional lessons we have to finish the tasks within a short time. We are constrained by time and the quality of writing will be affected. (I-S3)

Online writing can help us to learn more as we can have the grammar check after writing by using the computer. (I-S4)

I prefer online writing as we can have more time for doing the task and I can use some of the software to finish my work, such as Microsoft Word. Some software can also help to correct my spelling or grammar, such as Doctor I (an e-dictionary) which can help to check the use of vocabulary and give the translation of words from Chinese to English. (I-S5)

It is, however, noteworthy that some of the students did not think that their writing skills had been improved using the online writing course or that they had learnt to be an effective writer in this course. This may largely due to the lack of timely responses from their peers and quality of comments they received in their group, as observed by some students in the interview:

[Online collaboration is] not very useful in helping us to improve the writing skills. It would be more useful if we could work with someone who was of higher standard.....(I-S1)

Some of the members did not follow the deadlines and this affects the work progress. (I-S3)

As pointed out by the peer observer of the study in her report, “students sometimes experience difficulty deciding on the validity or relevance of peer comments”, thus reducing their confidence on the effectiveness of online collaboration in improving

their writing skills or helping them to be effective writers. It is true that not many peers could produce useful comments as this was the first time that they tried online collaborative writing tasks, but as Rollinson (2005) states, “by giving students practice in becoming critical readers, we are at the same time helping them towards becoming more self-reliant writers, who are self-critical and who have the skills to self-edit and revise their writing” (p. 29).

In summary, most of the participants agreed that an online writing environment had motivated them to write, expanded their awareness of audience, enhanced their use of revision. In addition, they felt more comfortable in working online as a result of greater peer interaction. They also regarded the online writing environment as more convenient and able to help them to become more effective writers. However, it is notable that some of the students did not think that their writing skills had improved because of peer help since they found that the comments provided by their peers were not helpful. This reveals that more training or practice is needed to help students to give constructive and helpful comments to each task.

4.3 THE USEFULNESS OF PEER HELP IN THE ESL ONLINE WRITING PROCESS

4.3.1 DATA FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

Eight statements (items 20, 27-32 and 34) relating to the usefulness of peer help were asked in the questionnaire. As shown by Table 4.6, most of respondents (mean scores=3.84 and 4.03 respectively) agreed that peer responses were useful in helping them to correct their work and improve their writing skills. Nearly half of them

(mean=3.47; P=46.9%) claimed that they enjoyed working with their peers in the writing process. Most of them (mean=3.69; P=59.4%) felt comfortable when discussing the tasks with their peers, regarded that they worked well with one another and their interaction was valuable. It is, however, interesting to know that only half of them thought that the comments made by them (mean=3.53; P=53.1%) or their peers (mean=3.56; P=50%) were useful when they were asked for the second time to evaluate the effectiveness of peer comments. In the second time, more respondents (+15%) chose '3', which meant "neutral or uncertain", as their answers to the usefulness of peer response.

Table 4.6: Students' comments on the usefulness of peer help

Comments	Mean scores	SD	Positive Responses
Peer responses were useful for correcting my work.	3.84	0.71	71.9%
Feedback from peers on my work was useful to the improvement of my writing skills.	4.03	0.85	71.9%
I felt comfortable discussing the task with my group mates.	3.69	0.81	59.4%
I worked well with my group mates.	3.78	0.74	59.4%
I found the interaction with my peers was valuable.	3.75	0.79	59.4%
I could give useful comments to other members on their work.	3.53	0.97	53.1%
I found the comments of other members useful.	3.56	0.86	50%
I enjoyed working with peers in the writing process.	3.47	0.90	46.9%

4.3.2 DATA FROM THE STUDENTS' WRITING AND E-FEEDBACK

In order to determine the usefulness of peer help in the students' writing process, a subset of the drafts produced for the three writing tasks was analyzed to find out the extent to which the participants incorporated their peers' comments into their revisions. Since Task 1 was an individual writing task, one student was randomly chosen from each of the seven participating groups for the analysis process. As Tasks 2 and 3 were collaborative group writing tasks, two different groups of five students were chosen for the analysis of the changes they made together for the two tasks. Since two of the seven students whose Task 1 drafts were studied were also members of the Task 2 and Task 3 groups whose drafts were studied, the total number of different students whose writing was evaluated in this way amounted to 15. The reason for choosing the two groups for analyzing Tasks 2 and 3 was that the number of drafts and e-responses they produced was relatively more than those of the other groups. In addition to the analysis of the writings, the e-feedback of their peers on their drafts was also analyzed to identify the components each response contained.

Students' writing

The fifteen student writers posted a total of 56 drafts, 37 first drafts and 19 revisions for the three writing tasks. A revision could include anything from the change of a punctuation mark to rewriting sentences or the addition of a whole section. Table 4.7 summarizes the number of drafts and revisions that the student writers produced for each task and sent to one another and the instructor by email. In Task 3, each participant of the group had to work on the five sections of the report (i.e. introduction, methodology, findings, conclusion and recommendations), so each one needed to

produce on average five first drafts, and the total number of first drafts produced was therefore expected to be around 25. As for the final drafts of Tasks 2 and 3, each group submitted only one since the participants collaborated to finish the writing tasks.

Table 4.7: Summary of the number of submitted drafts and revisions in the writing tasks

Writing tasks		#1 (n:7)	#2 (n=5)	#3 (n=5)	Total
First drafts		7	5	25	37
Revisions	<i>Second drafts</i>		5	5	10
	<i>Final drafts</i>	7	1	1	9
Total drafts		14	11	31	56

Using the rubric modified by Tuzi, which was detailed in Chapter three, a comparison was made between the first draft and the revisions made in the subsequent drafts after the students received the e-feedback of their peers in each of the writing tasks. There were a total of 20 recorded revision changes based on peer e-feedback. Table 4.8 summarizes the data from the comparison.

The analysis indicates that most changes were made for “meaning”. The main purpose of the revision was therefore to make meanings clearer to readers, for instance, by adding in percentages for the actual findings or including questions used in the questionnaire. Addition of “new information” ranked second as a motivation for revision based on peer feedback. Changing “grammar”, “structure” and “spelling” were also the purposes for amending the texts among the student writers in the three tasks.

Table 4.8: Purposes of revisions in student writers' work based on e-comments
(no. of revisions made=20)

Purposes	Task 1(n=7)	Task 2(n=6)	Task 3(n=6)	Total
Grammar	2			2
Impact				
Meaning	8	2		10
New information	5	1		6
Structure/layout	1			1
Spelling	1			1
Not needed				
Total	17	3		20

In addition, since Tasks 2 and 3 were collaborative group writing tasks in which students had to contribute to every section and ultimately be responsible for the writing of a particular section of the report, the revisions student writers made to the sections for which they were responsible were also assessed. Table 4.9 illustrates the types of revisions student writers after reading others' notes on their sections. There were a total of 15 recorded revision changes based on the information from members' notes.

The analysis shows that most changes made by student writers based on their members' drafts focused on adding new information, for instance adding in a whole section on the details of interviewees in the methodology section of the long report. Changing "grammar" or "spelling" were also the purposes for revisions based on the information of peers' notes in Tasks 2 and 3. This suggests that the most beneficial aspect of having peers to work together for the writing tasks was providing more additions to the work.

Table 4.9: Purposes of revisions in student writers' work for Tasks 2 and 3 based on members' notes (no. of revisions made=15)

Purposes	Task 2 (n: 6)	Task 3 (n: 6)	Total
Grammar	2	1	3
Impact			
Meaning			
New information	8	3	11
Structure/layout			
Spelling	1		1
Not needed			
Total	11	4	15

Online peer responses

Following the modified response analysis rubric of Tuzi (as described in Chapter 3), the content of the e-responses which were sent to the student writers in the writing of the three tasks was analyzed. Each message was separated according to the receivers (Tasks 1 and 2) and the different sections of the drafts (Task 3) and coded using the rubric. More than 209 components were identified in those responses. Table 4.10 summarizes the type of components found in the e-responses that the peers sent to the student writers in the three writing tasks. The amount of praise was far greater than the other components (about 90). Advice or suggestions were the second most common message components the student writers received. The amount of criticism and useless advice was similar, which ranked third and fourth in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10: The components of the e-responses from peers in the three writing tasks
(no. of e-responses: 47)

Components	Task 1(n: 17)	Task 2(n: 15)	Task 3(n: 15)	Total
1. Advice/suggestions	17	25	10	52
2. Questions		1		1
3. Quick fixes	6	1	2	9
4. Praise	21	42	27	90
5. Criticism	8	10	15	33
6. Requests				0
7. Useless advice	18	1	5	24
Total	70	80	59	209

To conclude, the analysis of the revisions and e-responses shows that online collaboration and peer feedback did have a positive impact on the improvement of students' writing. Their benefits were found mainly in making meanings clearer and providing new information to the drafts. The findings also show that students were strongest on giving praise though most of them tried to follow the instructor's advice to focus on the improvement of content and development of ideas by giving suggestions, advice and criticism in these areas. It is also important to note that due to the nature and operation of the tasks, there were significantly more e-responses for Task 1 than for the other two tasks.

4.3.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In confirmation of the results of the previous sections on the usefulness of using peer help, the findings of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of students' revisions and e-feedback in the writing process are further discussed here.

Changes on revisions based on e-feedback

Most of the changes students made on their drafts based on peer feedback were on making meanings clearer and adding new information. For instance:

Making meanings clearer

“it would be better if you can include the name of the person who suggest the ideas.....” (E-T2-S1)

Adding new information

“ If you can point out what is their final decision may be better.”
(E-T2-S1)

In addition, it seems that e-feedback had a greater impact on student writers' revisions in Task 1 (n: 17) than in Tasks 2 (n: 3) and 3 (n: 0). This may probably due to the differences in the nature and writing process of the tasks. Since Task 1 was an individual task and the operation process was comparatively simpler than the other group writing tasks, students might find it easier to give comments to their peers and to act on those they received in the group writing tasks. Another interesting observation is that e-feedback was given primarily on the initial drafts and the subsequent drafts received fewer comments. This could be due to the misconception of students that peer comments were more useful for the first drafts or the limitation of time in the middle and later stages of the collaborative writing process in Tasks 2 and 3. With respect to the message components of peers, despite the fact that more than 50% of the response components written by peers were found unhelpful to the improvement of the drafts (as 43% consisted of praise and 11.5% of useless comments), the findings did show that the student writers had given more comments on the macro level problems, such as the improvement of content or the development of ideas (as 24.9% and 15.8% were respectively about advice or making changes to

the content or ideas and criticism on the content and ideas of the drafts), rather than on the micro level problem like the change of grammar). Examples of the message components on advice or suggestions and criticism are as follows:

Advice or suggestions

“It is more clearly to specify the result by using the percentage.”
(E-T1-S7)

Criticism

“you forgot to add your name and position at the end of the report.”
(E-T1-S4)

The above finding did show that the training student writers received on giving comments before the commencement of the writing tasks had some influence on them though it was unable to prove that the students had been trained to give quality feedback, since they still produced a lot of unhelpful comments.

Changes on revisions based on members' drafts

In Tasks 2 and 3, student writers had to work collaboratively as each one was responsible for writing a particular section. Hence, they needed to make amendments to their drafts based on the information of members' drafts besides making changes to their own drafts based on peer feedback. They had to select useful pieces of information from members' drafts since some of it might be either incorrect or not necessary. The results of quantitative analysis of student revisions based on the information of members' drafts show that most of the students (especially in Task 3) made very little or no change to their drafts after reading others' work. This may be due to the fact that they did not trust their peer work or had no time to refer or select the useful materials from their peers' work. However, it is interesting to note that the

revisions that most of the students made based on the information of peers' drafts were on adding new information (73%). For instance, in Task 3, one of the student writers added in the information of the interviewees after getting the relevant information from her group member. Most of the new additions to the work were found suitable and helpful in the improvement of the work by giving more detailed information.

Usefulness of peer help on student writers' writing process

Though we could find some negative comments expressed by the students on the use of online collaboration, particularly peer help, as mentioned in the previous section, most of the students' reflective summaries and responses from the questionnaire and interview shared one common feature: they spoke highly of peer help. This is also reflected in students' reviews in the reflective summaries:

I can get the comment of my writing exercises from my group mates. After I have received the comment, I can improve my work before I send to the tutor. Getting the comment from my group mates can let me know more ideas of my work also. (R-T1-S36)

I need to write comment among my group member, this task can help me to learn the good point and layout from other members' work, this can help me to know many point that I miss. Also, when I receive the comment from other members, their comment is useful for me to have further improvement. (R-T1-S12)

However, an interesting finding was that the responses students gave to three similar statements regarding peer feedback or comments in the questionnaire was somewhat different:

Comments	Strongly agree +agree	Neutral/ uncertain	Strongly disagree +disagree	Mean scores	SD
#A. Peer responses are useful for correcting my work.	71.9%	25%	3.1%	3.84	0.71
#B. Feedback from peers on my work is useful to the improvement of my writing skills.	71.9%	25%	3.1%	4.03	0.85
#C. I found the comments of other members useful.	50%	40.6%	9.4%	3.56	0.86

Though students rated highly the usefulness of peer responses to their correction of work and improvement of writing skills, the findings suggest that some of the respondents became uncertain about the effectiveness of peer feedback/comments when they were asked to make the evaluation again. This may reflect the fact that some of the respondents were still unsure about the effectiveness of peer responses, and this may explain why 15% of them switched to “neutral/certain” when asked for their opinions again (#C). Their uncertainty or ambiguity may stem from their “difficulties deciding on the validity or relevance of peer comments” as pointed by the peer observer of this study. On one hand, they seemed to have received a lot of comments from peers; on the other hand, they were not sure about their validity, so they tended not to adopt them for use in their work. Comments of students from the interview and reflective summaries can best explain this phenomenon:

I usually got positive comments-the good ones-not really the helpful ones. (I-S3)

Some of the comments are very general, like ”good”, “fair” not very helpful for improving the work. (I-S4)

Not very useful in helping us to improve the writing skills. It would be more useful if we could work with someone who was of higher standard. (I-S1)

I'm not sure whether what I 'learnt' from group mate is correct or not. I find no direction in learning from others' work. (R-T1-S23)

Despite the contradictory comments regarding the effectiveness of peer responses shown above, the results of the questionnaire survey appear to support the view that students in general had favorable perceptions of peer help. It seems that they enjoyed the interaction between them and peers during the writing process and this helped create a positive attitude towards writing (Rizk, 2001). As Crank (2002) states, "in the process of guiding them to online peer response, we activate their learning, calling upon them to demonstrate and trust their innate and their recently acquired standards for good writing". We may therefore conclude that peer help is beneficial in the writing process since it generated more interaction between peers, thus enabling the development of positive attitudes towards writing.

4.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE ONLINE ESL WRITING COURSE

4.4.1 DATA FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

With the aim of better assessing the effectiveness of the online ESL writing course, it is important for the researcher to be informed of students' perceptions of the course that they had participated in. In the questionnaire, the students were asked to assess the following areas with regard to the online writing course, so that the limitations of the online writing course could be revealed in the following aspects:

- course design
- tasks
- course features
- operational and technical arrangements

Course design

Respondents were asked in statements 5-8 to evaluate the design of the online writing course (including the materials used in the class). The results are summarized in Table 4.11.

Table 4.11: Students' comments on the design of the course

Comments	Mean scores	SD	Positive Responses
The design of Task 1 (short report) familiarized with the operation of the online writing process.	3.84	0.71	71.9%
The design of Task 2 (minutes) familiarized me with the concept of online collaboration	3.66	0.59	59.4%
The design of Task 3 (long report) consolidated my skills in the use of the use of online collaboration in English writing.	3.63	0.74	59.4%
The design of the course content was useful to my learning.	3.78	0.78	62.6%

Table 4.11 shows that most of the respondents (mean=3.84; P=71.9%) agreed that the design of Task 1 had familiarized them with the operation of the online writing process of the course. It also appears that some respondents (mean scores=3.66 and 3.63 respectively) felt that Tasks 2 and 3 (minutes and long report) could help them in understanding the concept of online collaboration and consolidating their skills in

using it. The results (mean=3.78; P=62.6%) show, in general, that the design of the content of the online writing course was beneficial to the learning of the respondents.

Writing tasks

In statements 12-17, 21 and 35, respondents were asked to evaluate the appropriateness and usefulness of the writing tasks of the course. Table 4.12 summarizes the result.

Table 4.12: Students' comments on the appropriateness and usefulness of writing tasks

Comments	Mean scores	SD	Positive Responses
The tasks were suitable to our level.			
Task 1 (Short report)	4.16	0.71	81.3%
Task 2 (Minutes)	4.13	0.78	81.3%
Task 3 (Long report)	3.84	0.84	62.5%
I had sufficient time to finish the tasks			
Task 1 (Short report)	3.84	0.75	68.8%
Task 2 (Minutes)	3.84	0.75	68.8%
Task 3 (Long report)	3.19	0.88	31.3%
Collaboration was built in through the tasks.	3.81	0.63	68.8%
I felt comfortable taking part in the group writing tasks.	3.59	0.70	46.9%

The results of Table 4.12 reveal that over 80% of the respondents (mean scores=4.16

and 4.13 respectively) were satisfied with the design of Tasks 1 and 2 (short report and minutes) in terms of their appropriateness to respondents' level and the time given to finish them. The responses given to Task 3 relating to appropriateness to respondents' level were also favorable. Of the 34 responses, 62.5% (mean =3.84) regarded that the task was appropriate to their level. However, the responses given relating to the time available for the task contrasted markedly with those given to Tasks 1 and 2. Only 31.3% (mean=3.19) said they had sufficient time to finish the task. Several comments made by the respondents in the questionnaire and the reflective summary also referred to the insufficient time available for the Task 3:

When I am doing the long report writing, there are a lot of think to do
(Q-S7)

I think the whole project is a bit too rush. It would be better if there could be a longer preparation time. (R-T3-S22)

The workload is too large for us. We have to work according to the timetable each week. (R-T3-S10)

I think it's a bit waste of time as we have other projects to do at the same period. I don't think we have enough time to finish them all. (R-T3-S1)

The workload is heavy and time management is a critical factor for finishing the work. (R-T3-S20)

Course features

When asked, in statements 9, 18, 22, 39-40, about their comments on the features of the online writing course, respondents gave a generally positive response, as Table 4.13 shows. A majority of them (mean score=3.88; P=71.9%) found that the email system used in the course was helpful for interacting with their peers and that it could

promote their collaboration (mean=3.66; P=65.6%). In addition, half the respondents (mean=3.72; P=53.1%) stated that the use of the online mode made it easier for them to complete the tasks and their confidence of using computers had increased (mean=3.59; P=53.2). It is, however, noteworthy to find out that only a minority of them (mean=2.88; P=25.1%) considered that it was easier to discuss the tasks online than face-to-face.

Table 4.13: Students' comments on the features of the course

Comments	Mean scores	SD	Positive Responses
The use of the email system was helpful to my interaction with my classmates.	3.88	0.82	71.9%
Collaboration was built in through the use of email.	3.66	0.47	65.6%
Having the online features made completing the tasks easier.	3.72	0.91	53.1%
It was easier to discuss the tasks online than face-to-face.	2.88	0.99	25.1%
My confidence in using the computers has increased.	3.59	0.96	53.2%

Operational and technical arrangements

In statements 1-4, 10-11 and 36, the students' perception of the operational and technical arrangement for the course was probed. The responses are summarized and illustrated in Table 4.14.

Table 4.14: Students' comments on the operational and technical arrangements

Comments	Mean scores	SD	Positive Responses
I was given a good introduction on the writing process before starting the tasks.	3.84	0.75	75%
I understood clearly the requirements of the tasks before starting the tasks.	3.91	0.76	65.6%
I was able to use the email system effectively for completing the tasks.	4.22	0.93	81.3%
The support provided by the instructor with this online course was sufficient.	3.69	0.63	59.4%
Clear timelines and due dates were given.	4.09	0.91	68.8%
It was good that we could choose our groupings.	3.88	0.89	65.6%
It was easy to learn how to participate in the group writing tasks.	3.81	0.58	71.9%

As illustrated in Table 4.14, most of the respondents appeared to be satisfied with the operational and technical arrangements made for the course, such as the introductory sessions of the tasks (mean=3.84; P=75%), the clarity of the requirements given for the tasks (mean=3.91; P=65.6%), their skills in using the email system (mean=4.22; P=81.3%), timelines and due dates given (mean=4.09; P=68.8%), ways of grouping (mean=3.88; P=65.6%) and participating in the group writing tasks (mean=3.81; 71.9%). Over half of the respondents (mean=3.69; P=59.4%) regarded that the support provided by the instructor with the course as sufficient.

Overall, the findings above show that the respondents had a positive perception of the online writing course. This is further confirmed by the responses to the last statement of the questionnaire (item 42) in which the respondents were asked if they were satisfied with the course. Nearly two-thirds of them (mean=3.75; P=65.7%) showed

satisfaction over the online writing course.

4.4.2 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

On the whole, most of the students in this study found the course design helpful and enjoyed the use of online collaboration and peer help in their writing lessons; however, there are some areas in which the use of online collaboration and peer help are found not very effective, according to the comments of students from the interview, questionnaires and reflective summaries.

Task setting

An interesting result of the study is the comparatively low ratings for Task 3 in terms of the time allowed for completion and the appropriateness to their level. This might suggest that a more careful re-design of the task. In addition, the low ratings to the statements that asked if the students felt comfortable taking part in the group writing tasks and if it was easier to discuss tasks online than face-to-face might be related to the dissatisfaction of some of the students with Task 3.

Moreover, it was found that students favored a task that was simple in its design. As reflected from the reflective summaries, Task 1 (short report) received more positive comments than Tasks 2-3 (minutes and long report) generally. Since Task 1 required students only to finish the short report on their own and then revise their work once based on the comments of peers, it was comparatively simpler than Tasks 2-3 in which students were required to produce more drafts and make more comments. Coupled with the tight work schedule and the uncooperative attitudes of peers, some of the students voiced their preference for Task 1 in the interview:

I like the way we did the 'Short Report' since I didn't need to co-operate with others to finish my work and I could get their comments after I finished my work. I don't like the way we did the 'Minutes' and the 'Long Report' as one member failed to submit the work on time, the whole group would be affected. (I-S2)

Technological use

When evaluating the technological component of the online writing course (the use of email system of the WebCT), some of the students praised the use of email for submitting their essays and communicating with each other. As one of the students reported in the interview:

The most useful aspect to me is the email system because it is efficient, which is much better than the Yahoo. It is quick to upload the document. (I-S5)

However, there were also students who criticized in the interview on the email system provided by the WebCT:

It was troublesome to select the names of group members out from the long list given. (I-S5)

The sending or receiving time shown in the messages is not about the local time, it is about the US time. (I-S2)

As revealed above, the shortcoming of the email system of the WebCT is that students could not create a group distribution list that they could use for dispatch. Every time when students sent their work to their group members, they needed to select the names out from the long list that included the names of the students from the six English classes the instructor taught. This procedure had to be repeated when students sent out

their work for comments or compilation.

Group dynamics

A major goal of the online writing course was to provide students with the opportunities to construct knowledge when working together in groups. In this study, students were allowed to form their own groupings with the group size set at 4-6. The result was that seven mixed-ability groups of four to six were formed to work on the three writing tasks collaboratively. It is, however, interesting to note that some high-ability students reflected in the reflective summaries and interview that they thought their peers were not very helpful in assisting them in improving or completing their work. They found that the comments and ideas of their peers were either “not correct” or “not useful”. They even worried that their performance would be undermined by their group members since they would receive the same grade or marks, as mentioned in one of their reflective summaries:

..... if the comments of the group members are not correct, it will affect the overall grade of an individual's work. (R-T1-S14)

The lack of useful peer feedback from group members may account for some students' negative feelings towards the use of online collaboration and peer help in the writing lessons.

Peer help

An important feature examined in the previous section was the usefulness of peer help in the online writing process. As indicated in the findings, the value of peers lies in their supportive function rather than as critical readers of each other's texts. As some of the students mentioned the following in the reflective summaries when they were asked about the most useful aspect of the course:

I would like to say that it is really happy to work with my group members. (R-T3-S35)

It is good to share different points of minutes, finally we can get the good result of the product and satisfy of our team co-operation.
(R-T2-S9)

As a member in the group, I think it is very good for each of us to be responsible for a particular part of the report since workload can be evenly distributed. (R-T3-S16)

The major problem of peer help identified by students is that the peer feedback was of limited use. The students of the study (particularly the higher ability ones) regarded their peers as failing to make useful comments/ideas on their work. For example, two students commented in the interview:

As some of the group mates pointed out, even they themselves were not sure about the reliability of their comments when they sent out to me. (I-S1)

Some of the comments are very general, not very helpful for improving the work (I-S4)

In addition, although the tasks were designed to ensure that there was equality of participation in the sense that all students had an equal chance of participating in the discussion in their groups, the findings show that some of them did not actively join the activities. Nor did they observe the deadline for submitting comments or their contributions to the work. This not only affected the progress of the whole group, it also defeated the objective of the course in which all of the students were expected to collaborate and contribute ideas to help one another. This phenomenon was recorded by some of the students in their reflective summaries:

..... members post the work on WebCT so late and don't give comment, the sender can't get suggestions to improve the quality of the work. (R-T3-S30)

But the progress may be out of control if one of the member didn't co-operate. As a result, I can't complete the task---a bit stressed as I did hard in my group's task. (R-T2-S23)

Teacher's role

The course design was intended to let the instructor take a less prominent role during the discussion among students. It was hoped that more space could then be created for students' voices by doing so. Within this context, the students could feel that their discussion was of value and that they could share ideas and create meanings collaboratively.

However, the teacher-student relationship shown in the study seems to be indicative of Confucianism which values the teacher as the sage and the repository of knowledge. It is not surprising to find that only 59.4% of the respondents (mean=3.69) from the post-course questionnaire survey considered the support from the instructor was

sufficient. The following direct quotes from students' post-course questionnaire are representative of the general responses when they were asked about the improvements for the course:

The teacher should be more interactive with students. (Q-S8)

The teachers give comments to our works. (Q-S10)

Lecturer can give comment before finalize the whole report. (Q-S24)

Miss can give comments to us before I send the final draft. (Q-S34)

It is obvious that the participants in this study felt a sense of uncertainty without the instructor's comments on their work as there is a tendency among ESL students in Hong Kong to wait for the teacher for guidelines or comments on their work. The evaluation shows that they appear not to trust their peers' comments and want more input from the teacher. This was also pointed out by the peer observer of the study:

Tutor gives comments and grades students at the final stage. This approach can train students to think independently and be more critical when evaluating peer comments. However, the overall quality of interaction in the course might be compromised.

4.5 CONCLUSIONS

In the analysis of this chapter, high standard deviations appeared in most of the responses to the statements of the questionnaire. This may be due to the small sample size of this study, as this is often the case in small-scale research. However, the discussion in this chapter can still confirm that online collaboration, including peer help, does have a positive impact on student writers in the writing process. But

specifically how does online collaboration help improve students' writing? The data from this chapter indicate that online collaboration was very helpful in raising student writers' awareness of the sense of audience and reducing stress in the writing process. Moreover it has some positive effects on motivating students to write and in improving their attitudes towards writing. The data also show that student writers became more aware of the importance of revision after participating in the online course despite the fact that only a small amount of revision was found in their work based on the comments or work of others. Taken together, these findings suggest that online collaboration can be a worthwhile pedagogical tool for improving students' writing since it provides chances for students to have greater interaction with others, and as a result, creates an opportunity to negotiate meanings, reflect on and revise on their work.

Additionally, it was found that peer help appeared to be especially beneficial to the students' writing process as a co-operative writing environment can positively affect the quality and degree of participation of students in the class activities. In the online peer response process, learning can be activated since student writers have the chance to critique others' work in response to the comments of others. However, it is important to note that the students need to be adequately trained for the benefits of the peer feedback to be fully realized. Further, the data in this chapter show that peer feedback worked better to explain extended meanings and explore more new ideas. Thus when the peer response process is properly managed, peer help can have positive effects on students' writing.

With regard to the limitations of the use of online collaboration in this study, most of the comments were on the usefulness of peer feedback, the degree of teacher

intervention, and the appropriateness of task and group design. The data suggest that course designers should be mindful of the difficulties students have in giving good quality feedback before involving them in the online response process. More training and practice has to be provided to student writers on providing more quality feedback and encouraging more collaborative learning in the writing process. Moreover, there should be an appropriate use of teacher intervention in the process so as to facilitate students' learning. The data also suggest a more careful consideration of group composition and task design for the current study.

It is hoped that this discussion has contributed to the rapidly developing interests in the field of online collaboration in ESL writing lessons. Thus the next chapter will discuss the implications for online ESL collaborative writing arising from this study.

Chapter Five

Implications and recommendations

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Though the study is somewhat limited in its scope, it gives some tangible points of reference, which in turn contribute to a better understanding of the issues concerning the implementation of online writing courses for tertiary level students in the Hong Kong context. These include ways of structuring ESL online writing lessons so as to make an effective use of online collaboration, issues that needed to be considered when designing online courses for the Hong Kong context, and other possible areas for further investigation. Thus in this chapter, the implications of the findings are discussed with respect to these areas. In order to present a more complete picture on the implications, the limitations of the study are given in the final part of this chapter.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR STRUCTURING ESL ONLINE WRITING COURSES

The current study shows how students engaged in an online writing environment reacted differently from the way expected in a traditional one. Since it was the first time for them and the instructor to participate in the online learning and teaching mode, the weaknesses displayed were unavoidable. Therefore, other researchers or educators need to take into consideration the limitations identified in the study if they would like to have an effective implementation of the online collaborative learning in their future ESL writing lessons.

Firstly, more training and practices on how to give and receive the most useful

comments needs to be provided prior to the start of the writing tasks. During the current study, it is found that some of the students were passive and unwilling to give their comments, and did not provide responses at the required time. Even worst, the study shows that some of them did not know how to give comments though they had been given guidelines or briefings before the start of the tasks. In that case, their group members had to suffer as they could not have the useful comments of their peers for improving or collating their work. This has greatly undermined the effectiveness of online collaboration.

In improving the communicative responsibility of students, students should be made more aware of the issue of time management. Also, even if they gave comments, they tended to give some very general ones or just focus on the aspect of grammar. This may be due to the lack of former experience in doing the writing tasks in the online mode. It is, therefore, proposed that a more complete and thorough training program aiming at equipping the students with the skills of giving effective comments be given prior to the implementation of the course. As the peer observer of the study suggested in her report, “students can then learn what to look for when reviewing others’ drafts and how they can make their comments more concrete”. Training students can help them be more effective responders and highlight the areas that they need to be concerned when writing and responding.

Secondly, the assistance of the instructor should be enhanced in the writing process of students as students commented in the questionnaire, interview and reflective summaries showed that some of the students felt that there should be more of teacher’s assistance in the writing process. The assistance here means the feedback to their work. This is a reflection of the students’ long-held traditional belief of the role

of teacher as the only repository of knowledge. It is important that the concern of the students in this aspect be addressed in order to enhance the effectiveness of online collaboration. This is agreed by the peer observer of the study who suggested in her report that “the tutor can consider providing feedback to students at an earlier stage before their final submission”. Nevertheless, the instructor should remember that the amount of his/her intervention in the group learning process should be minimized.

Thirdly, in the process of planning, the course developer should try to create writing tasks that require simpler procedures and shorter length. The result of the study shows that some students were confused by the complexity of Task 3 (long report) and the substantial workload attached to the task. In fact as the instructor of the course, I admit that the writing required in Task 3 was long and repetitive. Students had to complete and comment on many drafts before finalizing their work. This might generate the negative feeling towards the online learning mode and account for their dissatisfaction over the course.

Moreover, inter- and intra-group co-operation should be strengthened. In the present study, the online writing environment provided a new avenue for students to receive feedback from peers; however, for the sake of management, students could only receive comments from their group members. As the groups were of mixed abilities here, some of the high-ability students commented that their group mates could not give them useful comments for improving their work. This may account for the low ratings they gave for the usefulness of peer help and the negative comments they made for the effectiveness of online collaboration. In the interview, a student even suggested ‘putting the students of high ability in one group and the poor ones can be mixed with average ones’. However, this practice may generate the inferior feelings of the weaker

students in the class and they may not benefit much if they only work with those of similar level. A possible way of tackling this problem is to incorporate inter-group co-operation in the writing process, so that students can receive input from other people other than their own group members. This corresponds with the suggestions made by the peer observer of the study:

A possible incentive for students to collaborate more online is to allow inter-group interactions and comments.

One area for further investigation is how to foster meaningful exchanges among groups of mixed English abilities.

In addition to the provision of opportunities for students to have an expanded audience, it is also important to strengthen intra-group co-operation. The study shows that the co-operation varied among groups. Some of them enjoyed their co-operation a lot while others did not. As reflected in the interview and reflective summaries, some of the students pointed out that they got irresponsible members who did not observe the deadlines or submit their work. To ensure that there is a smooth running of the system and that everyone in the group works and contributes, it is suggested that a more complete penalty and reward system should be introduced. This is also proposed by the peer observer in her report:

In relation to the problem of students not adhering to deadlines, a penalty can be imposed on those who submitted their work.

Furthermore, the major technological component of the course – email - should be improved. The user-friendliness of the technology employed in an online course can be a crucial factor contributing to students' positive attitudes towards the effectiveness

of the course. In the interview and reflective summaries, some of the students expressed their dissatisfaction over the use of the email system of the WebCT platform chosen for this online writing course, and this could be a limiting factor in their interaction. It is thus suggested that the existing email system be able to:

- generate group distribution lists so as to provide ease of use for senders
- show the correct sending and receiving time of messages (i.e. the local time, not the US time, as at present)
- provide sorting functions so that messages can be sorted according to senders, receiving time or subjects

It is hoped that issues raised in this section will be applicable to other learning contexts facing the same challenges of working with technology. However, it must be emphasized that the generalization of the results of this exploratory study are limited by a number of dependent variables.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGNING ONLINE COURSES FOR THE HONG KONG CONTEXT

Although the study was small in scale, it has demonstrated a few features that may have implications for course developers and researchers who would like to design online courses for the Hong Kong context. The following areas are points of relevance for further discussion:

5.3.1 THE LEARNING STYLE OF HONG KONG STUDENTS

As has been studied, in traditional Chinese classrooms, students seem to be mostly passive recipients and there is usually relatively little involvement on the part of the students in the lessons. The teacher is often viewed as an authoritarian figure responsible for the provision of knowledge, whom the students will not dare to challenge. In the context of the present study, the students were required to participate actively and interact with peers to complete their work. The feedback they gave on their involvement in the lessons was very similar to the instructor and peer observer's observation. For example, most of them enjoyed the process of interacting with their peers and found it interesting to have chances to read others' work and co-construct the groups' writing, but they admitted that they did not take the comments of their peers seriously since they were uncertain about their validity and would like to wait for the teacher's feedback, which they trusted more. They also tended not to give negative comments to their peers since most of them said they felt embarrassed when doing this and they did not want to create conflicts.

As a result, the comments they gave were usually very general or focused on the correction of grammar. Thus the quality of interaction Hong Kong Chinese students have in an online course will be greatly undermined by their learning style. In this case, course developers or research should take note of this issue when designing online courses for the Hong Kong context. It is likely that there will be a change of their learning style if students can be given more training to change their mind set and if more requirements relating to the kind of involvement they should have can be set so as to enable them to monitor their performance in the online learning process.

5.3.2 THE CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS IN THE HONG KONG TEACHING CONTEXT

Second, some practical constraints of the Hong Kong teaching environment are another issue that course developers and researchers should take note of before designing an online course. Teachers in Hong Kong schools and colleges usually have comparatively large class size compared to those of foreign institutes. Coupled with more rigid teaching schedules, teachers may find it difficult to provide for the time and human resources involved in setting up and running an online course. If this is the case, it would be necessary for the course developers and researchers to consider making adjustments in the course structure or content to adapt to the Hong Kong context. In the present study, though the participating class consisted of 36 students only (relatively less than my other four classes which had about 40 students), it was still difficult for the instructor (that was the writer) to handle and monitor the many drafts and communicative messages produced by the students. If an online course has to be implemented on a larger scale, the course developers and researchers have to ensure that the human and material resources required are available.

5.3.3 THE READINESS OF THE PARTICIPATING TEACHER

The last issue of concern is the readiness of the participating teacher for the use of online collaboration. The success of an online course depends a great deal on the attitudes and knowledge of the teacher. Writing teachers in Hong Kong who are used to the traditional delivery method of writing lessons may be unwilling to try out the

new teaching method as changes usually imply uncertainty and an increased workload. Their reluctance to learn about the application of online lessons or change their roles to be facilitators may induce the ineffectiveness of the online lessons. In Hong Kong, online learning is still an innovation for most of the teachers, and more training will be required to bring about a change in their attitudes towards the use of online collaboration and to give them a better understanding of the key issues relating to the implementation of the online course. Unlike the present study, the course developer may not be the instructor of an online course or the course may need to be introduced to other instructors. It is thus important for course developers and researchers to check the readiness of the participating teacher for the online course, in terms of their attitudes and knowledge, before implementing the course.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A number of questions emerging from the study have led me to suggest the following directions for further research in online ESL writing classrooms.

5.4.1 DEGREE OF TEACHER INTERVENTION IN THE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROCESS

One important question that was raised from the findings of the study is the amount of teacher intervention in the collaborative learning process in an online writing lesson. An effective teacher of the online learning environment should be able to create an environment for learners to express themselves and to share ideas freely; however, at the same time, the teacher should be able to provide sufficient support, direction and

guidelines for online learners. This poses a question on the degree of teacher intervention that is appropriate to the collaborative learning process. It will thus be useful for researchers to examine how much teacher intervention in the collaborative learning process is required to bring about the optimal contribution to learning effectiveness in an ESL writing lesson and the areas that require more teacher intervention.

5.4.2 THE IMPACT OF E-FEEDBACK ON THE REVISIONS OF STUDENT WRITERS

Another area that is worth investigating is the impact of e-feedback on the revisions of student writers. Though the current study has investigated the impact of e-feedback on students' revisions, only a small number of students were involved in the analysis process. Thus it might still be helpful to look in detail at how technology influences ESL writing by focusing on how e-feedback impacts on ESL writers' revisions. The results may assist researchers to better understand how e-feedback and online collaborative writing can impact on ESL writing and suggest ways to better incorporate the online writing environment into ESL writing programs of the Hong Kong context.

5.4.3 THE IMPACT OF DIFFERENT WAYS OF ESTABLISHING GROUPS

The results of this study have strong implications for group work. Students in the study point out that the ineffectiveness of the online collaboration in their groups may

be due to the low ability of some of their group mates. It appears that student perception and learning might have been influenced by the type of grouping students have. It would be interesting for future research to look at the potential impact of mixed ability groupings and single ability groupings on interaction and the effectiveness of online collaboration. Furthermore, it would also be important to study the impact of group composition (heterogeneous versus homogeneous), group size, self-selected grouping and appointed grouping on the effectiveness of online collaboration. This line of inquiry would have important implications that are particularly well-suited for supporting the use of online collaboration in ESL writing classrooms.

5.4.4 THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE COLLABORATION ON STUDENTS AT OTHER LEVELS

Only a small number of ESL college students were involved in the study. In comparison with my other classes at the same level, they had greater enthusiasm for English learning and higher level of English proficiency. The results of the study might have been different if I had worked with a different group of students. It is likely that further research on online collaboration with students at different levels and with different degrees of motivation may contribute significantly to the validity of the value of using online collaboration in ESL writing lessons. Future investigations can be aimed at finding out whether online collaboration is more suitable for higher or lower level students. Also, research could also focus on which specific aspects of e-feedback are useful to the students at different levels.

5.4.5 THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT GENRES OF WRITING TASKS

The present study puts a strong focus on business writing. The courses with an emphasis on academic writing or other types of writing might face different challenges for learning with technology; therefore, more research will be useful in investigating the effectiveness of online collaboration with different writing genres and identifying the difficulties and challenges each one has to face.

5.4.6 PATTERNS OF STUDENTS' INTERACTION DURING THE ONLINE DISCUSSION PROCESS

Further study may be required to see clearly how students interact with one another in the online discussion process. One of the most useful aspects of the online learning process that students pointed out in their post-course survey of this study is an increase of interaction between themselves and their peers. Online writing courses can provide a context in which students engage in some authentic discussion with their peers. It would thus be interesting and more helpful to see how peers talk about their writing in their online discussion process and the ways students ask questions, give responses, support one another and revolve conflicts in the process, since the investigation done in this aspect in the current study only covered a small number of participants. More large-scale studies will be required to give detailed results.

5.4.7 THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT RESEARCH METHODS

This study demonstrates that assessment of online collaborative writing will involve the complex issues of audience, task design, group composition, peer response, teacher intervention, training and guidance. It therefore appears that it is rather difficult to find out the details of online collaborative writing through short-term classroom-based investigation. Thus it may be more helpful if longitudinal case studies or other types of interpretative qualitative studies can be carried out to explore the effects of the use of technology on the ESL writing context. In addition, large-scale corpus analyses can be conducted with different tertiary institutes on students' online writing work to compare the different uses of lexical, syntactic or rhetoric features resulting from instruction in this mode.

5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In order to acquire a complete picture of the study, some of its limitations need to be specified as they may influence the interpretation of the results presented in the previous sections. These limitations arose from the scale of the study, the time constraints, nature of the writing tasks and the participating students.

Firstly, this was a small-scale study using only one of the intermediate level classes of the higher diploma programs of one community college in Hong Kong. The results might be more reliable and representative if more classes of the same level, either in the same college or other colleges, could participate. This is because even at the same level, the standard of English of the students can sometimes vary a lot.

Secondly, in this study, online collaboration was only carried out in three writing tasks with an intermediate level class, which had not experienced the procedure before. The activities they had engaged in could only provide them with a brief idea about online collaboration. The students still needed time to get used to the whole process. The genuine effects of online collaboration on the students might not be so obvious unless they could practice it thoroughly, frequently and continuously.

Thirdly, it is possible that the results might be different if alternative writing genres were given. In this study, the genres of three writing tasks used were restricted by the college's curriculum. This was because the students had to have the same teaching content to prepare for their final examination. Therefore, in order to avoid disturbing the normal operation of the system, the study was undertaken in the present context of the College.

Lastly, it was likely that the higher diploma students chosen for the study might not be very accustomed to online collaborative writing. The reason was that they only had chances to post some of their views on a particular topic in the first semester and never had the experience of collaborating with other peers in their writing lessons in an online mode before. They might not be used to criticizing others' work, especially in an online platform. Also students might have difficulties in giving and sharing their ideas because of the lack of confidence and experience.

Despite these limitations, we should keep on making classrooms more stimulating, student-centered place for language learning. Educators and researchers who are interested might take note of the implications of the results presented in this chapter for the further study of their own.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The exploratory study had three purposes: The first purpose was to find out if online collaboration could help improve their students' writing by (1) enhancing their motivation; (2) increasing their sense of audience; (3) teaching them the importance of revision; (4) reducing their stress in writing and (5) cultivating positive attitudes towards writing. The second purpose was to evaluate the extent to which peer help is beneficial to the students' writing process. The third purpose was to investigate the limitations of the use of online collaboration in the context I examined. It seems that all the purposes, to varying degrees, have been accomplished.

Despite the limited number of subjects and scope of the research, the results of this study suggest that online collaboration has potential in motivating ESL learners, enhancing their sense of audience, reducing their stress, making them more aware of the importance of revision and helping them to cultivate positive attitudes towards writing. It appears that combining in-class and online instruction is beneficial for the students. The inclusion of the online component here supported the class and allowed effective use of class time, which enhanced learning. Students enjoyed the benefit of interacting with the other students both in-class and out-of-class; hence the use of online collaboration, whether as an out-of-class resource or for student-student communication, should be encouraged.

Further, students participating in this online writing course generally have responded very positively to the content and method of the course. At the end of the course when formally asked if they were satisfied with the course, two-thirds of the respondents responded favorably. However, it is interesting to note that half of the respondents did not agree that the course contributed a great deal to the improvement of their writing skills. This may be due to the lack of useful comments from their peers and the un-co-operative attitude of some of the group members. The benefit of peer help was found more in sharing work and ideas. The instructor and the peer observer of the study had opportunities to assess the effectiveness of the online writing course through observing the process and products of the students' online and written work. They also felt that the greatest benefit of the online learning mode was creating an environment for students to interact and share ideas.

As the study draws its data from only a small group of learners, it does not claim much generalizability. The goal of the investigation reported here is to attempt to describe the process, results and participants' feelings about this particular online writing course. The online era is just beginning in Hong Kong. As online communication continues to develop and expand, it will pose challenges not only to how we teach writing, but also to our very conceptions of what it means to write. The results presented in this report attempt only to stimulate thinking by more researchers into how a more appropriate application of online writing courses might be developed for the tertiary level students of Hong Kong.

In brief, the essence of this study can be better summed up by the quotation below:

When collaborating online, using asynchronous and synchronous online tools, participants should be able to get results that are better than the results they would have gotten working individually. (Hofmann, 2003)

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APPENDIX 1

Pre-course questionnaire (with results)

Total responses: 34 (2 students were absent on the day of evaluation)

Q1 Is this the first time you have taken a course online?

	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	11	32.4
No	21	61.8
Missing	2	5.9
Total	34	100

Q2 How would you describe your previous experience with computers?

	Frequency	Percentage %
I never used a computer before	0	0.0
I never used a computer much before	1	2.9
I have used computers, but have not used it for a course (before entering the College).	29	85.3
I have had other classes, or similar educational experiences, using the computer	3	8.8
Missing	1	2.9
Total	34	100

Q3 How are you enjoying the online learning environment?

	Frequency	Percentage %
Very much	1	2.9
Generally fine	13	38.2
Nothing special	18	52.9
Not much	1	2.9
Missing	1	2.9
Total	34	100

Q.4 Which aspect(s) of the online learning environment do you like the most?	Q.5 What has been the most difficult area so far?	Q.6 What would you suggest improving the online environment we are using?
	Sometimes, the computers do not work. The time for doing task online is too short. There is some contingency occurs.	Spend more time on online environment.
The quizzes, since it is more interesting like the crossword puzzle. It feels like playing online games.	Still not familiar with the use of the online course.	Making more use of it.
In the Revision area, the quizzes are quite good.	Not all the resources in the online environment are used.	It should be widely used in many ways, like forum, for sharing learning experience.
Discussion Area, share comments. Quizzes, know much more about the chapters & test myself.		
No	no	become more interesting
Online quiz		Should have some interesting games.
I like conducting quizzes online because it is convenient and I can know my result immediately.	I find it difficult to complete comprehension exercises online.	I suggest the instructor can give more guidelines about how to use the WebCT platform.
Writing comments online, because I can read other people's comments. We can have sharing about opinions.		
Can arrange the time myself and the location also.		
Very convenience to assess, save time.		More graphics would be interesting and attractive.

Q.4 Which aspect(s) of the online learning environment do you like the most?	Q.5 What has been the most difficult area so far?	Q.6 What would you suggest improving the online environment we are using?
It is convenience in online learning environment. I can do it not just at class but at home. It can save the notes.		Try to introduce more about the online study because not all students can use it very well.
M.C. I like to choose and click	When the internet doesn't work properly.	I would suggest you to increase home online tasks.
Because on-line class is more interesting than traditional class.		
	It is difficult for students to communication with teacher in internet.	
Each person have the right to use computer and it is funny and the time pass quickly so that I won't feel tired.	The form of writing, e.g., reference, report and the content of the textbook, so confusing & maybe the points in the book are very common.	We can do more activities online, e.g., watching movies and do exercises.
	Type on computer is very difficult, and print on paper is better than on that screen when test or message part.	Do more simple things rather than chat room.
	Waste time to type my ideas and post it. And I need to click/find the right page to post on it.	
	Difficult to adopt, trouble to log in, too much function of the website, easy to confuse.	
I would like to have a lesson to have a online learning because we won't forget to have a work and we can do it with the classmates.	Easy to forget to do the tasks. Not always have company to do the task.	

Q.4 Which aspect(s) of the online learning environment do you like the most?	Q.5 What has been the most difficult area so far?	Q.6 What would you suggest improving the online environment we are using?
	Instructions are not clear enough, too many icons.	Use more colorful wording or background, if possible, add some pictures on the web.
	It is very difficult for me to remember my login ID and passwords.	We can use the website more in the lesson may be better.
Quiz, because I can tests the level of my understanding of textbook.		Nothing
	Nothing special. Seldom to enter the online course and do it online.	Be more motivate.
	The network is unstable.	
It can let me know the score at once and I think this formal is quite interesting.		Nothing.
	The operation is quite complicated. It took me a lot of time to handle or submit a homework.	Some guidelines should be provided. Such as Q&A section or other basic instruction to use the program.
No	On-line test	Use computer play English games or watch film.
	The computers always broken.	
	It is not easy to use. Not much time for spending on the online course.	
I like the interactivity most because I can learn something from others' work. And I can find other materials appropriate for my learning.	I can't always get access to the computer. Thus, it's difficult for me to develop an on-line learning "habit".	Post more useful, course-related materials as attraction.

Q.4 Which aspect(s) of the online learning environment do you like the most?	Q.5 What has been the most difficult area so far?	Q.6 What would you suggest improving the online environment we are using?
The flexibility. Since you can do your work at home. Also there are games for fun as well as learning. NICE!		
We can get the result after doing the Quiz immediately.		

APPENDIX 2

Instructions for writing the short report

THE SITUATION

Ms Jane Lee, your program manager, asks you (the Executive Officer) to write a report for her (date of making the request: January 31, 2005), by February 24, 2005, on the views of higher diploma students of HKU SPACE Community College on the effectiveness of the learning facilities and environments of the Community College.

THE APPROACH

1. The Task

Familiarize yourself with the subject of the report so that you know exactly what you are required to do.

2. The Layout

There are many ways to set out a report. One simple layout useful in many cases is the following:

- **Abstract**

Give a summary of the main points of your report

- **Terms of Reference**

State what you are reporting on, who asked you to make the report, and the date by which the report is required if you are given one.

- **Methodology**

State what action you took to collect and analyze the facts concerning the subject of the report.

- **Findings**

State the facts you discovered. It may be helpful to number these.

- **Conclusions**

State what you, the writer of the report, think about the facts. Provide comments which will be useful to the person who commissioned the report (Ms Jane Lee). You may find it helpful, as with the Findings, to number these.

- **Recommendations**

State your practical suggestions as to what should be done (to help improve the learning facilities and environments of the Community College). You then sign the report and put your position in the company underneath your signature. Finally add the date.

Notes:

Collect the data from at least 10 students in the higher diploma programs of the Community College. Your report should be around 500 words.

APPENDIX 3

Guidelines for peer evaluation and time schedule for short-report writing

A. Guidelines for peer evaluation

1. Has the writer fulfilled the purpose of the report?
2. Is it written at a level appropriate to its audience?
3. Are its facts correct?
4. Is it comprehensive?
5. Is all the information included relevant?
6. Are the layout and presentation well thought out?
7. Is the style clear, concise and professional?
8. Does the abstract summarize?
9. Does the introduction adequately introduce the discussion?
10. Is the discussion organized logically?
11. Does the conclusion section interpret, analyze and evaluate?
12. Are the recommendations reasonable?

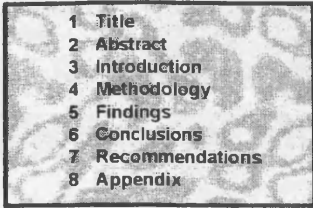
B. Time schedule

- Week 1: Introduction of report writing and explanation of the task
- Week 2: Drafting and writing
- Week 3: Drafting and writing (Feb 18-deadline for posting)
- Week 4: Giving feedback (mainly focusing on the format, content and organization of ideas) to at least three members of your group on their work
- Week 5: Re-drafting and submission of your work to the instructor (Mar 4 - deadline for submission)

APPENDIX 4

Handouts on report writing

A. Layout

WRITING SKILLS		Writing Short Reports	
Writing Short Reports			
Planning and Organising		Few readers will read every word of this section. So start with the most important, follow it with the next most important, and so on.	
<p>WHEN writing reports, make your audience's job as easy as possible. Use short words, short sentences and keep to the point, just as you would in any other kind of writing.</p> <p>First you need to plan and organise the report carefully. Before you write a report you need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ define its aim(s)/objective(s) carefully;■ investigate the topic thoroughly, and■ organise the information into sections.	Title <p>A short report won't need a title page, but should have a title. The title is usually the same as the subject heading.</p>	Conclusions <p>The conclusions are your main findings. Keep them brief. They should say what options or actions you consider to be best and what can be learned from what has happened before. So they may include or may lead to your recommendations.</p>	
Defining the Objective <p>This helps you to be clear about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ why you are writing;■ what to include;■ what to leave out; and■ who your readers are. <p>If you can express the objective in a single sentence, so much the better.</p>	Abstract <p>The abstract is a summary of the report. Keep it between 80 and 120 words.</p>	Recommendations <p>What should be done in the future to improve the situation? The recommendations should be clearly connected to the results of the rest of the report.</p>	
Investigating the Topic <p>How you do this depends on the topic and objective. You may need to <i>read, interview, experiment and observe</i>. Get advice from someone more experienced if you need to.</p>	Introduction <p>The introduction identifies the subject, the objective, and the plan of development of the report. The subject is the "what", the objective is the "why", and the plan is the "how."</p> <p>State the subject and objective as clearly and concisely as possible, usually in one sentence.</p> <p>Use the introduction to provide the reader with any background information which the reader will need before you can launch into the body of your paper. You may have to define the terms used in stating the subject and provide any relevant background information.</p>	Appendix <p>The appendix is for material which readers only need to know if they are studying the report in depth. Relevant charts and tables should go in the findings where readers can use them. Only put them in an appendix if they would disrupt the flow of the report.</p>	
Organising the Report into Sections <p>Your job is to make it easy for the readers to find the information they want.</p> <p>In short reports of less than 4 pages, readers should have no trouble finding their way around. However, you will still need to take care in how you organise the information.</p> <p>Short reports can be set out in eight parts, but you won't always need them all. This will depend on the nature and the complexity of the report. In fact, very simple reports are often written like a memo with only paragraphs dividing the sections.</p>	Methodology <p>The methodology describes the methods you used to collect your data. This is often included in the introduction.</p> Findings <p>The findings is the main body of the report. It is likely to be the longest section, containing all the details of the work organised under headings and sub-headings.</p>	Layout <p>The use of headings and sub-headings allows readers to get the information they are looking for quickly without having to read through the whole report. Use <u>underline</u>, bold and <i>italics</i> to make the headings stand out. Numbering and indenting headings to the right will improve access. Use bullet points for lists. Don't try to pack too many words onto a page. Use double line spacing between paragraphs and triple line spacing between sections. The 'white space' will help the sections to stand out from each other.</p>	

Taken from *The Language Key*

Writing Short Reports

WRITING SKILLS

Style

Report writing should be objective, i.e. focusing on actions, events and situations, rather than on the person(s) performing them. The passive voice is used to achieve this focus, although it should not be overused.

Language

Always bear in mind who your target audience is when choosing your language. If you are writing a highly technical report for your boss, who is also an engineer, you can use the jargon of your field. If, however, the readers are from varied backgrounds, then you will have to explain the jargon and terminology.

Your language should always be clear, concise and precise.

When you have finished your report, it is common to write a memo to the person who requested it. You should enclose your report with the memo.

To: Mr K S Wong
From: Amy Soo
Subject: Report on Survey of Telephone Manner

I have completed the report on the survey of telephone manner as you requested in your memo dated 18 June 1999. You will find the report enclosed.

You will be pleased to hear that the overall performance of staff was very satisfactory. However, there are still some aspects which could be improved.

If you have any questions, I will be happy to answer them.

Sample Short Report

Subject: Survey of Telephone Manner

1 Abstract

In conducting the phone manner survey, 400 calls were made to randomly selected staff. Approximately nine out of ten of the calls met the testing criteria: 'Answering the calls within three rings', 'Saying good morning/good afternoon', 'Being polite' and 'Returning calls within 24 hours'. The majority of the unsatisfactory calls failed on the testing criterion of 'Being polite'. It is recommended that the company continues to promote the importance of courtesy in all aspects of customer service.

2 Introduction

Asian Commercial Bank is well-known for its excellent customer service. We need to encourage staff to maintain this standard of service.

In a memo dated 18 June 1999, Mr K S Wong, Senior Staff Relations Manager, requested me to conduct a survey of telephone manner among our staff.

The objectives of this survey are to:

- Assess staff telephone manner;
- Identify aspects neglected by most of the staff; and
- Recommend further action.

3 Methodology

The four testing criteria were as follows:

- Answering phone calls within three rings;
- Saying good morning/good afternoon;
- Being polite; and
- Returning calls within 24 hours.

400 staff were then selected as survey targets by the random selection computer system and each member of staff was tested once. A total of 400 calls were recorded and evaluated.

4 Findings

The following is a summary of the main findings. For more detailed statistics, please refer to the charts and tables in Appendix 1.

4.1 Overall Performance

Of the 400 calls recorded, 87% met the four testing criteria.

4.2 Unsatisfactory Calls

Of the unsatisfactory calls, the percentages of those failing to meet the testing criteria were as follows:

Being polite	60%
Saying good morning/good afternoon	30%
Returning calls within 24 hours	20%
Answering phone calls within three rings	10%

5 Conclusions and Recommendation

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that:

- Most of the staff have a good telephone manner; and
- Lack of courtesy is the main reason for poor telephone manner and the aspect usually neglected.

In view of this, it is recommended that the company continues to promote the importance of courtesy in all aspects of customer service.

Taken from The Language Key

B. Writing skills exercises

WRITING SKILLS

Business Writing Skills Exercises

Business Writing Skills Exercises

Test Yourself 1



IMPROVE the layout of following extract from a report using: line-spacing, paragraphing, capital letters, numbering, bullets, indentation and a different type-face for the heading.

Methodology

The following documents were inspected: contractors' all risks insurance policy, loan agreement and tranche B notice of drawing. An internal meeting was held with Mr Francis Ng, team leader of Corporate Lending Team 3C. A consultation was held with Johnson Stokes & Masters, the syndicates's legal advisor.

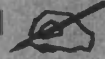
Test Yourself 2



WHICH SECTION of a report do the following extracts belong in. Write a number next to each sentence. Numbers should correspond to the sections listed in the box on page 12 (e.g. 6 = Conclusions).

A	It appears clear that the staff turnover in our bank is more serious than in other similar-sized banks and financial institutions.	6
B	Those selected were attached to up to four different departments for about 10 months and then posted to one of our overseas branches.	
C	In short, the report sets out to review the local demand for cigars.	
D	The aim of this report is to evaluate the possibility of the proposed repayment schedule.	
E	The borrower is unable to comply with the existing repayment schedule in the long run.	
F	I was instructed to analyse the impact on the drawing of the construction facility of the Lee Gardens Redevelopment.	
G	Agency contracts should not be renewed and two salesman should be recruited for direct selling once the agency contract has expired.	
H	The delivery company has clearly been overcharging us.	
I	In brief, the report sets out to list present conditions on the factory floor.	
J	The data included in this report was gathered from the Bank's staff manual and from conversations with a wide range of staff at all levels.	
K	Criticism had been made of the fact that selection of staff was too dependent on the goodwill of department managers.	

Test Yourself 3



COMPLETE the following short report using the words/phrases in the box below it.

Subject: Proposed Replacement of "Coolair" Temperature Controllers

1 Introduction

_____ ¹ the above proposal, information concerning alternative models for the "Coolair" temperature controllers _____ ² from Thermocorp. This report _____ ³ this information and then recommends appropriate action.

2 Findings

a) Suitability

Only the "Atmosfair" model _____ ⁴ the full technical specifications, _____ ⁵ both the required temperature scale and temperature _____ ⁶.

b) Cost

This work _____ ⁷ at HK\$89,000. The majority of alternative models _____ ⁸ more than this amount. _____ ⁹ replacement _____ ¹⁰ "Atmosfair" temperature controllers would cost HK\$78,000.

3 Recommendation

_____ ¹¹ "Coolair" temperature controllers for the air-conditioning system _____ ¹² by "Atmosfair" models as soon as possible.

covering
however
would cost
range
by
has been received

all
with reference to
has been estimated
briefly reviews
should be replaced
meets



Taken from The Language Key

APPENDIX 5

Samples of short report

Sample 1

Comments

1. Layout

2. Content

3. Use of grammar and punctuation

Report on the increase in lateness of the office staff

Terms of reference

Report on increase in lateness of office staff

Procedures

I asked staff individually why they had suddenly started coming late to work.

Findings

There are road works on the two main roads coming into Causeway Bay and traffic jams are caused. Our car park is full as office staff come to work later than the workers. There are long delays because of the traffic meeting the road works. The company car park has not been made any bigger to take the extra cars. I think we should have a bigger car park to take the extra cars. These two reasons are causing the staff to be late for work.

Recommendations

Staff could leave for work earlier to get there on time. Why can't the car park be bigger? The company can afford to pay for it to be made bigger. It should be bigger.

COMMENTS

1. LAYOUT

The writer offers no conclusions and fails to sign and date the report.

2. CONTENT

This is poor for the following reasons:

- Part of the terms of reference has been omitted: it should be *some* office staff, not all, as is implied here. The writer also forgot to add *over the last two months*.
- The findings are not reported in logical sequence. The writer has mixed the comments on the road works and the car park. It is not at all clear what the writer wants to say.
- The recommendations should be practical suggestions; these are not. Stating that the company can afford to enlarge the car park is irrelevant to the report.

3. MECHANICAL ACCURACY

Poor grammar, paragraphing and punctuation.

Taken from The Language Key

Sample 2

Report on the Increase in Lateness of some Office Staff

Terms of Reference

Ms Joanne Lui, Office Manager, has asked me to write this report on the increase in lateness of some of the office workers over the last two months and to submit it to her by 31 January 2000.

Procedures

I questioned all the office staff individually, asking why there was this sudden increase in unpunctuality, and then checked their replies.

Findings

1. The latecomers are those who travel to work by private transport and public road transport. Those who travel by the MTR arrive on time.
2. The two main roads leading into Causeway Bay have had major road works done on them for the last eight weeks; this causes unavoidable traffic jams and long delays.
3. About two months ago, our company opened its new mail order section. Approximately sixty new employees were recruited. As this new section starts work forty-five minutes before the office staff each morning, the car park gets filled with vehicles belonging to workers in that section. The company has not enlarged the car park to accommodate the additional vehicles. Consequently, many office staff cannot find parking space and have to drive around surrounding roads looking for a parking area.
4. I gathered the above information from my individual interviews with staff, and confirmed that it was true by observing the two main roads and the company's car park early every morning for a week.

Conclusions

Obviously, nothing can be done about the road works. I understand that they will be finished by 28 February 2000.

As people will insist on travelling to work in their own transport, I think the solution is for the company either to enlarge the existing car park or to obtain another one near the office.

Recommendations

As the road works will be finished in February, I suggest that staff be asked to leave home for work a little earlier than usual until then to enable them to arrive on time. I recommend that the company enlarge the existing car part as it is surrounded by company land which at present is fenced off from the car park.

Robert Wong, 25 January 2000
Deputy Office Manager



Comments

1. Layout

2. Content

3. Use of grammar
and punctuation

Taken from The language Key

APPENDIX 6

Instructions for writing minutes

INTERMEDIATE ENGLISH II – Meeting and negotiation

The third International Student Conference is going to be held in Hong Kong from October 1st to 4th 2005.

WHO WILL ATTEND

The Conference is expected to attract college and university students from all over the world.

FEATURES OF THE CONFERENCE

Under the theme of 'The pursuit of knowledge', the aim of the conference is to let students get acquainted with their counterparts from all over the world and exchange their experiences on the search for knowledge. Workshops will be conducted during the conference to discuss the trends in college and university education and the changing roles of students.

You are the members (four to five in a group) of its organizing committee. A meeting has to be held to discuss a number of important issues relating to the opening ceremony.

- Create an agenda

You need to prepare an agenda for the meeting. There should be at least four items on the agenda for discussion.

- Conduct a meeting

The meeting should last for about 15 –20 minutes. You will be evaluated individually on the following areas:

Knowledge of the subject

Ways of giving opinions

Discussion skills

Negotiation skills

Each member has to perform a function in the committee, for example

Chairperson

Director of Finance

Publicity and Marketing Director

Government Educational Official

International Representative

Things to pay attention to:

- Brainstorm ideas for the discussion items of the meeting
- Work through the agenda of the meeting as a group, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to put forward their point of view and deciding the priorities of the discussion items
- Decide your role in the meeting
- Each member has to discuss your suggestions or comment on each of the discussion items
- Think about how you will present your ideas/arguments to the other members of the committee.
- Use the phrases or expressions you have learnt from the lessons in your discussion
- You have to reach an agreement on the arrangements for the opening ceremony by the end of the meeting
- Each member has to take notes during the meeting

Suggested meeting procedures:

Distribute a copy of the agenda

Before the meeting starts, the chairperson checks for any absence with or without apology

One member from the group could act as the secretary of the meeting

Go through items on the agenda. Assign responsibilities for each task.

The chairperson decides when it is time to move on to the next item

Discuss any other business not listed on the agenda

Decide the date for the next meeting

Adjourn the meeting

- *Write up the minutes (narrative type)*

Your writing should be:

word-processed; 1.5 line spacing; font size: 12; font: Times New Roman

all margins 1" to 1.5"; printed on A4 papers

APPENDIX 7

Guidelines for peer evaluation and time schedule for writing minutes

A. Guidelines for peer evaluation

Content

Did the writer

- Take an objective stand?
- Record only the important points of the discussion?
- Avoid recording irrelevant talk, jokes or stories?
- Avoid non-important details?
- Avoid recording bias or implication of bias?
- Avoid his/her own judgment or opinion?
- Vary the use of the reporting verbs?
- Focus on the major problems identified or solved?
- Provide specific information on key details?
- Mention any attachments central to understanding conclusions or recommendations?
- Use the appropriate language expressions?

Layout

Did the writer

- Use the narrative format?
- Write the minutes headings based on the agenda items?
- Include all the necessary sections?
- Include all the necessary information?

Are the sections in the right sequence?

Do the minutes appear neat and tidy?

Is the information easy to find?

Use of the grammar and punctuation

Did the writer

- Write the minutes using appropriate vocabulary?
- Write the minutes using clear, effective sentences?
- Write the minutes using clear, simple punctuation?
- Use the reported speech effectively?

B. Time schedule

First draft

Main points to members of the group: 21/3 (by 5p.m.)

Please send the main points you have made to the minutes to all the members of your group and cc a copy to me.

[Follow the following format in sending out your work: In the subject line: type in (gp no _your name _minsdraft1), e.g. gp.1 _kenis _minsdraft1]

Comments to the other group members: 24/3 (by 5p.m.)

Each one of you has to comment on the work of the other members (see if the content is correct or relevant)

[Follow the following format in sending out your work: In the subject line: type in (gp no _your name _comments for minsdraft1), e.g. gp.1 _kenis _comments for minsdraft1]

Second draft

Allocate duties for each member: 25/3

Decide the section each one should be responsible for in your group. Each one should take up the drafting work for at least one section (you should read all the work and comments relating to that section before drafting).

Completed drafts to members for comments: 29/3

Email your work to all members and cc a copy to me.

[Follow the following format in sending out your work: In the subject line: type in (gp no _your name _minsdraft2), e.g. gp.1 _kenis _minsdraft2]

Comments to the other group members: 31/3 (by 5p.m.)

Each one of you has to comment on the drafts of the other members (see if the content/format is correct or relevant)

[Follow the following format in sending out your comment: In the subject line: type in (gp no _your name _comments for minsdraft2), e.g. gp.1 _kenis _comments for minsdraft2]

Final version

Finalized drafts to the leader: 1/4

All members should send their finalized drafts to the leader.

[Follow the following format in sending out your work: In the subject line: type in (gp no _your name _finalised draft), e.g. gp.1 _kenis _finalised draft]

Finalized minutes to Jessie from the leader: 4/4

Each group should hand in only one copy.

[Follow the following format in sending out your work: In the subject line: type in (gp no _minutes _final), e.g. gp.1 _minutes _final]

APPENDIX 8

Handouts on writing minutes

A. Layout

WRITING SKILLS

Minutes Writing

MINUTES may be displayed in a variety of formats depending on the preference of your employer and organisation. The layout shown in the example is a popular method. This type of minutes is known as 'Minutes of Narration'. They are a concise summary of all the discussions which took place, reports received, actions taken and decisions made. As they are a record of what has taken place, minutes should be written in past tense using third person and reported speech. Read through the minutes carefully, noting in particular the language highlighted in blue.



Main heading includes meeting place, day, date and time

List those present in alphabetical order with Chairman first

This separate ACTION column is a popular way of displaying minutes

The minutes must be corrected if necessary before they can be signed

Break down items if appropriate into separate headings

Insert initials or full names in the ACTION column

ZENTEX HOLDINGS LTD

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SPORTS & SOCIAL CLUB HELD IN CONFERENCE ROOM 2 ON FRIDAY 14 MAY 2000 AT 1800

PRESENT	Chris Hui (Chairman)	Frank Leung
	Carol Chen	Aileen Ng
	Maxine Ho	Wendy Tam

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies were received.

2 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The Chairman asked members to correct an error in item 3.1 where the figure HK\$15,200 should read HK\$152,000. After this correction the minutes were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

3 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

4 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman pointed out that membership had fallen by 20% over the last 6 months. It was felt that this was due to lack of publicity during the year, and also because new staff were not sure how to join. Various decisions were reached:

4.1 CIRCULAR TO STAFF

A letter would be sent to all employees who were not members of the Club outlining its aims and activities. A tear-off slip would be included for interested employees to indicate their areas of interest.

4.2 SOCIAL EVENING

A social evening with refreshments would be organised specifically for non-members. Carol Chen agreed to make arrangements.

6 NEW KEEP FIT CLASSES

Carol Chen proposed that *Keep Fit* classes should be held. Sharon Wang from the Fun N Fitness Gym had agreed to conduct such classes on the Company's premises every Wednesday evening 1800-1900.

A discussion was held on a suitable room for the classes, and it was agreed that the Training Office would be suitable. Carol would circulate a notice to all staff announcing the first *Keep Fit* class on Wednesday 22 May.

7 PURCHASE OF TENNIS EQUIPMENT

Aileen Ng reported that the in-house tennis tournament would start on Monday 4 July. New nets and balls were needed and the tennis courts needed repairing. It was agreed that Aileen should make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible.

Taken from The Language Key

Include the page number at the top left

-2

8 ANNUAL DINNER AND DANCE

It was agreed that the Annual Dinner and Dance would be held on Saturday 14 September. Wendy Tam agreed to take charge of all the arrangements. She was asked to contact The Excelsior Hotel to make preliminary enquiries about their facilities and to report back to the next meeting. Members were asked to consider ideas for the programme for discussion at the next meeting.

WT

Members

9 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was agreed that the next meeting would be held in Conference Room 1 on Thursday 24 June 2000 at 1800.

Leave a space for the chairman to sign and date at the next meeting

_____ (Chairman)

_____ (Date)

CH/ST

16 May 2000

Taken from The Language Key

B. Reported speech

WRITING

Reported Speech in Minutes Writing

Reported Speech in Minutes Writing

THE MINUTES OF A MEETING are a record of what happened, what was decided, and what actions will be taken as a result of the meeting. They should be written for every meeting, and presented at the next meeting or beforehand.

The body of each topic should include the important points of the discussion and *what* action will be taken along with *who* will take the action and *when* it will be done.

It is not necessary to write down every spoken word of the meeting. The minutes are just a summary.

The table on the right reviews some of the grammatical changes that need to be made when you write minutes.

The table below gives examples of how reported speech is derived from the spoken word. Study the sentences carefully, noting in each case how the verb tense has been changed. The "reporting verbs" are highlighted in bold - these verbs are commonly used in minutes.

Verb Tenses Changes

When you report the spoken word, you must make sure that you use the appropriate tense in the sentence you report. This is not really very difficult. Basically, you must remember that:

■ Present simple	⇒ Past simple
■ Present continuous	⇒ Past continuous
■ Present perfect	⇒ Past perfect
■ Pres. perf. continuous	⇒ Past perf. continuous
■ Past simple	⇒ Past perfect
■ Past continuous	⇒ Past perfect continuous
■ will	⇒ would
■ can	⇒ could
■ shall	⇒ should or would
■ may	⇒ might
■ should/would/could	⇒ (no change)
■ verb infinitive	⇒ (no change)

Spoken Statements	Reported Speech
"The extension date for the PYO programme has not yet been finalised". (Point out/Jim)	Jim pointed out that the extension date for the PYO programme had not yet been finalised .
"We will discuss the matter again with CRM at the next meeting". (Say/Simon)	Simon said that he would discuss the matter again with CRM at the next meeting.
"We could include the new recruits in the Incentive Scheme". (Suggest/Paul)	Paul suggested that we included the new recruits in the incentive scheme.
"Ann, please could you pay more attention to ensure that staff are ready to start work on time". (Request/Mr Ho)	Mr Ho requested that Ann paid more attention to ensure that staff were ready to start work on time.
"OK, I think we're all in agreement here. We will begin production of the TX4 in February". (Decide/We)	We decided that we would begin production of the TX4 in February.
"From experience I think we should first conduct a comprehensive feasibility study before we commit ourselves to the project". (Recommend/Ms Wing)	Ms Wing recommended that we first conducted a comprehensive feasibility study before we committed ourselves to the project.
"MIS have written a programme to read the data from the feedback forms". (Report/Mrs Ng)	Mrs Ng reported that MIS had written a programme to read the data from the feedback forms.
"I have been investigating the matter but I cannot find a solution to the problem". (State/CK)	CK stated that he had been investigating the matter but that he could not solve the problem.
"I would like to remind you all that the forms have to be handed in to Joe Lui before the end of the month". (Remind/Timothy)	Timothy reminded everyone that the forms had to be handed in to Joe Lui before the end of May.
"I agree with what you are all saying. We need to interview the applicants more thoroughly if we are to maintain the quality of our personnel". (Agree/Amy)	Amy agreed that we needed to interview the applicants more thoroughly if we were to maintain the quality of our personnel.

Taken from The Language Key

C. Writing skills exercise

WRITING SKILLS

Business Writing Skills Exercises

Business Writing Skills Exercises

Test Yourself 1



IN THE EXTRACT on the right from the minutes of a company fundraising committee, fill in the gaps with the most appropriate reporting verbs from the choices given in the box. Also, put the verbs in brackets into the correct tense, remembering that the suggestions, agreements, etc., are being 'reported'. The answers are in file: Writing skills exercises answer key 1

suggested finding
preferred holding
agreed to study
expressed the view that
was decided to explore

pointed out that
reported that
agreed to hold
said that
suggested setting

Test Yourself 2



FILL IN the gaps in the following extract from the minutes of a financial planning meeting using the words in the box. The answers are in file: Writing skills exercises answer key 1

- John _____¹ that the rate of inflation _____² be steady and that there would not be any _____³ in interest rates.
- John said that the equity markets were expected to perform _____⁴ than bonds and that a return of at least 11% would be _____⁵ this year.
- Peter said that he would _____⁶ on the Hong Kong and South East Asian _____⁷.
- John said that the weighting in the Hong Kong market would be _____⁸ if the Hang Sang Index _____⁹ the 10500 mark.
- Peter said that he would wait and see if the weighting in the Korean and Australian markets would be increased until after their presidential elections.
- John stated that if the Yen _____¹⁰ at JPY105-110/US\$ or became _____¹¹, the weighting in the _____¹² market would be increased.

- | | | |
|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| a) markets | e) stabilised | i) focus |
| b) increased | f) would | j) reached |
| c) achieved | g) predicted | k) increase |
| d) weaker | h) Japanese | l) better |

The Committee _____¹ another company fundraiser for the St Stephen's Hospital for the Deaf.

Carrie _____² last year's campaign, a sales of chocolates, _____³ (*disappoint*). She _____⁴ we _____⁵ (*raise*) only \$7,200 for the hospital on sales of \$10,500, and less than half of the employees _____⁶ (*participate*).

Regina and Loretta _____⁷ selling chocolates may be a poor choice at a time when people _____⁸ (*seem*) so diet-conscious. It _____⁹ new possibilities.

Some members _____¹⁰ a product that _____¹¹ (*have*) more sales appeal and _____¹² (*yield*) higher profits. Suggestions _____¹³ (*include*) stationery, coffee mugs, and T-shirts. Others _____¹⁴ a company fundraising event like a picnic or football match.

Loretta and Mary _____¹⁵ the alternatives and _____¹⁶ (*report*) back at the next meeting.

Joe _____¹⁷ he _____¹⁸ (*compile*) a new list of fundraising leaders in each department. He also _____¹⁹ a minimum fundraising goal of \$15,000 this year.

Test Yourself 3



REPORT the following speech using the verbs and names in brackets. Use passive structures where appropriate. Always try to use the simplest reporting structure possible, (e.g. verb + gerund, or verb + infinitive). File: Writing skills exercises answer key 1

- Exports increased during the first quarter. (*Report/Simon*)
- EduLink has successfully been running courses for us for the last three years. (*Say/Ann*)
- OK Jenny, you'll make arrangements for Mr Lam's visit. (*Instruct/Jenny*)
- These three companies all have good reputations. We'll choose the lowest quotation. (*Decide/Everyone*)
- John, I would like you to place an advertisement in Recruit magazine next week. (*Instruct/John*)
- As we're all in agreement, we'll hold the Christmas party at the Excelsior Hotel. (*Agree/Everyone*)
- The figures appear misleading because petty cash expenses have not been included. (*Explain/Joy*)
- We could delay our move until the economy improves. (*Suggest/Bill*)
- We should look for a new distributor as soon as possible. (*Recommend/Mr Ho*)

Taken from The Language Key

Writing Minutes of Meetings

Introduction

MEETING minutes serve three main purposes:

- To overview results for others not in attendance;
- To confirm to attendees the key conclusions and any follow-up actions; and
- To document for the files key decisions and opinions.

Meeting minutes should not be meeting transcriptions (a word-for-word record of what was said during the meeting).

Minutes Format

The format for meeting minutes closely follows the MADE format as shown in Figure 1 below.

The MADE Format for Minutes of Meetings

Message	Summarise key conclusions. In the case of multiple issues, summarise conclusions on each agenda item.
Action	State key recommendations or any follow-up actions agreed upon.
Detail	Provide specific information on key details (generally how and why). Summarise briefly important "for" and "against" discussion leading to a key conclusion or recommendation.
Evidence	Mention any attachments (such as reports or data provided by meeting attendees) central to understanding conclusions or recommendations.

(Figure 1) Make your minutes matter by focusing on conclusions and follow-up actions.

General Guidelines for Writing Minutes

These guidelines will help with other issues about layout and details:

- If you have a formal agenda, arrange topics to follow the agenda order.
- If you have no formal agenda, arrange topics in the most-to-least important format.
- Use headings to help readers find specific agenda items quickly at a glance (see Figure 2). On occasion, you may want to use your discussions topics as headings and then record your conclusions and decisions in tabular format as shown in Figure 3.
- Remember that space given to recording a topic discussion suggests its importance; don't include non-important details – focus only on the major problems identified or solved, the major questions raised or answered, and results and/or related follow-up action.

- Record your minutes carefully. Your minutes may be the only document standing between the meeting attendees and total confusion about conclusions reached and next steps of action.

Model: Meeting Minutes (Narrative Format)

MINUTES OF SAFETY MEETING

The third safety meeting, held on 4 July 2003, focused on establishing a new Accident Investigation Committee, company-wide publicity efforts and verbal accident reporting.

Accident Investigation Committees Formed

By 15 August 2003, management will appoint 12 employees from each site as an "accident investigation pool." When an accident occurs, the district manager will notify three people from this pool to investigate the report as follows:

- They will contact any injured employees, any witnesses to the accident, and the supervisor at the job site to gather information on causes, responsibility and prevention.
- They will make a written report of their findings to the district manager within three working days after the accident.
- The district manager will forward this report and any recommendations for disciplinary action or preventative action to the appropriate senior manager within ten working days.

Publicity Focus

We agreed that the primary focus of all publicity should be to make supervisors realise their responsibility for safety for all employees in their departments.

- Accident-free days will be posted on the intranet.
- Florence Chan suggested and will take responsibility to see that large safety banners are posted in all field sites.

New Requirements for Verbal Reporting of Accidents

Any employee involved in an accident, along with his or her team leader, will be required to meet with the safety division at its next scheduled session to present the circumstances of the accident, to report on lost time, and to recommend preventative measures.

Miscellaneous Items

- We agreed to change the safety-meeting format on occasion to allow for field-related topic presentation by team members.
- We discussed videotaping "staged" accidents as the basis for future safety training. No conclusion was reached.

Followup Assignments

Robert Chui : Notify managers by 15 July 2003 about

	their appointing a 12-member "accident investigation pool" at each site by 1 August 2003.
John Lam	: Draft the discussed procedures for distribution to the "accident investigation pools." Have draft ready for committee approval by 6 September 2003 meeting.
Amy Ping	: Investigate costs and design of safety banners and bring a recommendation for the next meeting on 6 September 2003.
Attending	
Robert Chui	Jacqui Tong
John Lam	Catherine Leung
Amy Ping	William So

(Figure 2)

Model: Meeting Minutes (Tabular Format)

AGENDA ITEM	FORMAT: PERSON REPORTING OR LEADING	CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS	FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS, PERSON RESPONSIBLE, DUE DATE
Do we need accident teams at each site?	Catherine Leung: Open discussion	By 15 August 2003, management will appoint 12 employees from each site as an "accident investigation pool." When an accident occurs, the district manager will notify three people from this pool to investigate the report: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> They will contact any injured employees, any witnesses to the accident, and the supervisor at the job site to gather information on causes, responsibility and prevention. They will make a written report of their findings to the district manager within three working days after the accident. The district manager will forward this report and any recommendations for disciplinary action or preventative action to the appropriate senior manager within ten working days. 	Robert Chui will notify managers by 15 July 2003 about their appointing a 12-member "accident investigation pool" at each site by 1 August 2003.
What should be the focus of our publicity around the safety issue?	Amy Ping: Report of past efforts, followed by discussion	The primary focus of all publicity should be to make supervisors realise their responsibility for safety for all employees in their departments.	John Lam will post accident-free days each month on the intranet. Amy Ping will make sure that safety banners are posted in all field sites by 1 August.
What are the new requirements for accident reporting?	Jacqui Tong: report	Any employee involved in an accident, along with his or her team leader, will be required to meet with the safety division at its next scheduled session to present the circumstances of the accident, to report on lost time, and to recommend preventative measures.	
Should we change safety meeting format?	Open	We agreed to change the safety-meeting format on occasion to allow for field-related topic presentation by team members.	
Videotaping for future safety training?	Open	We discussed videotaping "staged" accidents as the basis for future safety training. No conclusion was reached.	

In the narrative agenda format:

- Summarise key conclusions and recommendations;
- Record follow-up actions, including who is responsible for any deadlines; and
- Arrange the minutes in an easy-to-read format

NOTE: Choose this format when many of the agenda items are just reports or informative discussions rather than decision-making items.

(Figure 3) This agenda format can be completed during the meeting by attendees and easily emailed to non-attendees in the same agenda format they normally receive.

Taken from The Language Key

APPENDIX 9

Instructions for writing the long report

Intermediate ENGLISH II Group project 2004-05

Shaping the Future of Lantau – An investigation into the Concept Plan

Introduction

Being the biggest island in Hong Kong, Lantau has been a very famous local attraction for visitors. In fact the government has recognized its potential for more tremendous developments to help enhance the economic competitiveness of Hong Kong. The existing development projects in Lantau include the Tung Chung Cable Car and the HK Disneyland.

In the 2004 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced the intention of the government to strengthen Lantau's position to be a regional economic and tourist hub. As such, a Task Force was led by the Financial Secretary to draw up a Concept Plan for Lantau's economic and infrastructure development.

"The concept plan aims to provide a coherent planning framework to meet a diversity of land use needs. In formulating the plan, the task force has adopted a balanced and sustainable planning approach integrating both development and conservation needs," a spokesman for the task force said.

Task

The Concept Plan for Lantau has recently been released and you are a group of consultants appointed by the government to collect comments and suggestions from members of the public on the plan.

You need to carry out a questionnaire survey to collect public opinions on this issue. The questionnaire should include at least 10-15 questions that can cover the following major development themes proposed by the government in the concept plan:

- Economic infrastructure and tourism
- Theme attractions based on heritage, local character and natural landscape
- Maximizing the recreation potential of country parks
- Meeting nature conservation needs

You should be able to assess the following aspects based on the findings of the survey:

- General acceptance by the public of the development of Lantau
- General opinions about the concept plan proposed by the government
- The most preferred proposed development area {including reason(s)}
- The least preferred proposed development area {including reason(s)}
- The other development area(s) that the public would like to add to the plan
- The issue(s) of most concern regarding the developments proposed in the concept plan

The completed written report should include the following sections:

- A. Title Page: The name of your consultancy company; names of group members
- B. Figure of Contents: Detailed breakdown of the report sections
- C. Introduction: Aims of your report; the problems to be addressed; background information on the concept plan; sources of data
- D. Methodology: Description of the method and the procedure that you used in your survey
- E. Discussion of Findings: Description and interpretation of data collected using Figures and Figures as appropriate
- F. Conclusions & Recommendations: Summary of Findings and Recommendations
- G. Appendixes: List of questions; other relevant information

Guidelines for the project

Suggested page lengths (at 1.5 spacing) for the final written report are:

Title page:	1
Figure of contents:	1
Introduction:	2
Methodology:	2
Discussion of Findings:	4
Conclusions & Recommendations:	4-5
Appendixes:	varies

When writing the report, clearly designate the authors of each section at the end of your report (after *Conclusions & Recommendations*).


Allocate individual member's writing responsibilities so that the workload of each group member is roughly equal.

APPENDIX 10

Handouts on long-report writing

Concept Plan for Lantau

Help shape the future of Lantau



Lantau Development Task Force
The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
November 2004

Lantau Development Task Force

Pursuant to the 2004 Policy Address, the Lantau Development Task Force was set up to steer the economic and infrastructure development in Lantau. As a start, a Concept Plan for Lantau has been drawn up to ensure a balanced and co-ordinated planning approach for future development. We now sincerely invite you to give views on the Concept Plan to help plan Lantau.

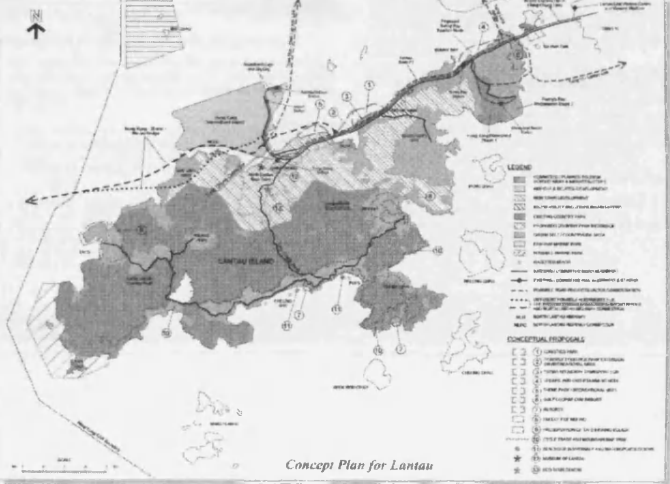
New Land Use Needs

With the Hong Kong International Airport, the proposed landing of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge (HZMB) at the north-west shore, and anchorage of a world-class theme park at Penny's Bay, Lantau is well placed to strengthen Hong Kong's economic pillars of tourism and logistics developments. It would continue to play an important role in sustaining Hong Kong's development.

Shaping Future Lantau - the Concept Plan

Our planning vision is to promote sustainable development in Lantau by balancing development and conservation needs.

We aim to focus major economic, infrastructure and urban development in North Lantau to optimize the use of the transport links and infrastructure, while protecting other parts of Lantau for nature conservation and environmentally sustainable recreation and visitor uses.



Concept Plan for Lantau

Development Themes & Proposals

Economic Infrastructure and Tourism

Additional economic infrastructure proposals are identified to enhance Hong Kong's economic competitiveness. Using Hong Kong Disneyland as an anchor for further tourism development in Lantau, a greater variety of attractions are proposed. These proposals would help strengthen Hong Kong's function as a regional logistics and tourism hub. They include:



- Cross Boundary Transport Hub for the HZMB at the western end of the Suu Ho Wan MTR depot site which would include a public transport interchange, park-and-ride facilities and a MTR station
- Lantau Logistics Park at Suu Ho Wan to enhance Hong Kong's capability to provide one-stop integrated logistics services, taking advantage of easy access to the airport, container port at Kwai Chung and HZMB
- Leisure and Entertainment Node at Sunset Bay to complement the tourism area in its vicinity. It may include entertainment, dining, fashionable stores, performance venues and leisure and sports facilities
- Possible Theme Park or Major Recreational Uses at Tung Chung East to achieve synergy with other tourism developments in Lantau
- Golf Course and Resort at Tung Chau Tsai East to meet the strong demand for golf sports from business visitors
- Resort Facilities at South Lantau to take advantage of its natural beaches, tranquil rural setting and different recreational amenities

Theme Attractions Based on Heritage, Local Character and Natural Landscape

These are proposed to harness the local attraction and recreation potential of rural Lantau, while preserving the ecological, landscape and cultural heritage values. They are proposed also to help boost the local economy. They include:

- Museum of Lantau and Eco-Tour Centre at Tung Chung to introduce Lantau's heritage, ecological resources and eco-tour spots
- Facelift of Mau Wo to improve this traditional visitor gateway to South Lantau by rearranging existing land uses and upgrading facilities around Mau Wo ferry pier
- Preservation of Tai O Fishing Village to protect the cultural heritage and natural attributes of the old fishing village and to enhance its visitor appeal
- Cycle Track and Mountain Bike Trail Network, Waterports Centres and Boardwalks in South Lantau to enhance its recreation, sports and tourism potential



Maximising the Recreation Potential of Country Parks

The Country Parks share most of the areas of natural beauty in Lantau. Sustainable educational and recreation uses in harmony with the natural landscape are suitable in selected areas in and around the Country Parks. They include:

- Comprehensive Network of Heritage Trails and Eco-trails to improve access to various points of cultural heritage and ecological interest in the countryside
- High-quality Camping Sites with some basic shared facilities to enhance the attractiveness of the Country Parks to different age groups and provide visitors with a more diverse experience of Hong Kong's attractions



Meeting Nature Conservation Needs

The protection of uplands in Central Lantau and waters in Southwest Lantau as important conservation areas is an important basis for the overall planning.



- The implementation of the Lantau North (Extension) Country Park and the Marine Park in South West Lantau would be a significant step to further enhance nature conservation in Lantau. The Government is considering the timing for implementing the proposals, taking into account the planned developments and resource availability
- Other Nature Conservation Proposals include enhancing the protection of ecologically sensitive sites outside Country Parks including Tai Ho Stream, Tai Ho Valley, Tung Chung Stream and the significant wetlands in rural Lantau

The Concept Plan aims to provide an overall planning framework to meet different development needs. The proposals are conceptual, requiring detailed studies to confirm their feasibility, including the funding and implementation aspects.

Towards Sustainable Development

A preliminary sustainability assessment for the Concept Plan shows that the proposals should contribute positively to economic development of Hong Kong, more employment, investment and local business opportunities, more leisure and recreation outlets, and the protection of the natural habitats. It also identifies potential sustainability issues like environmental impacts, capacity of transport infrastructure, proposed reclamations, possible development pressure in South Lantau, social impacts on local community, as well as the overall cumulative impacts of all development projects under planning in Lantau. Further sustainability assessments will be conducted when the Government draws up the concrete details of the Concept Plan and undertakes further feasibility studies on the development projects selected for implementation, taking into account comments received in the public consultation.

We Look Forward to Receiving Your Views

A separate Consultation Digest elaborating on the Concept Plan and the planning vision, planning principles, development themes and proposals is also available from the Planning Department, Public Enquiry Services Centres of District Offices and the Planning Department website <http://www.info.gov.hk/planning/lantau/index.html>.

We welcome your views and suggestions. Please forward them before 28 February 2005 by:

- writing to the Lantau Development Task Force c/o Lantau and Islands District Planning Office, Planning Department, 15/F, She Tin Government Offices, 1 Shing Wo Che Road, She Tin, New Territories. Fax No.: 2890 5184. E-mail: ldpo@pland.gov.hk;
- visiting the above website; or
- taking part in the public forums (details in the above website).

Taken from the HKSAR government's website

Business Writing Skills Exercises

Test Yourself 1

THE FOLLOWING 3-paragraph abstract, from a company report studying the feasibility of staggering working hours, has lost its order. Referring to the model abstracts on page 12, combine the phrases in column A with those in Column B to make complete sentences. Combine the sentences into paragraphs and then put the paragraphs into a logical order. You'll find the reordered abstract on the back page.

Column A

The committee has recommended a 6-month trial

The feasibility of staggering starting and finishing hours to relieve the situation

Traffic congestion has created problems

Staggered hours were found

Employees, traffic control officials, public transportation officials, and other area businesses

Column B

to be feasible and a possible relief for congestion.

with starting hours staggered to 7.30, 8.00, 8.30, and 9.00 a.m.

was studied by the committee.

for the company and workers.

were contacted through surveys and interviews.

Test Yourself 2

FILL IN the gaps in the following short abstract using the words and phrases in the box below. You'll find the answers on the back page.

rest room
concludes
in brief

attention
conditions
should

emphasis
employees
average

_____, the report sets out to list present _____ on the factory floor.

It draws _____ to such features as lighting, dirt, ventilation, washing and sanitary conditions. Particular _____ is placed on the lack of rest facilities for _____.

It _____ that, although working conditions are generally above _____, the company _____ consider building a separate _____ for employees.

ADDITIONAL BUSINESS WRITING SKILLS TOPICS!!!

www.languagekey.com

Taken from The Language Key

Test Yourself 3

FOR EACH OF the sentences below, indicate which 'emphasis technique' is being used. Check your answers on page 24.

- A Use of emphatic words
- B Change to the normal sentence structure
- C Arrangement of clauses and position of words
- D Repetition of key words
- E Sentence position

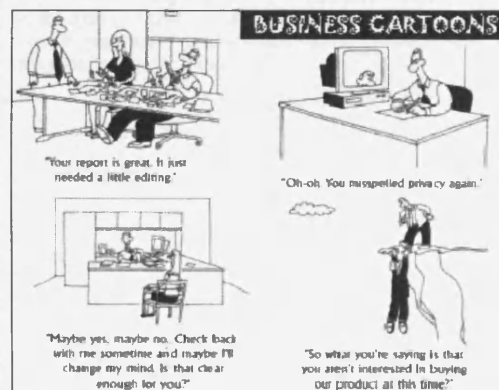
- 1 My plan will lead to higher productivity, higher sales, higher margins, higher profits, and higher employee morale.
- 2 Only a small amount of the material is in stock at the moment.
- 3 That we don't have the funds to do this doesn't concern me.
- 4 Although you have been with us a short time, I would like to promote you to Sales Manager.
- 5 Because of the staff shortage, all staff must be willing to do overtime work.
- 6 In particular, I liked the presentation given by Andrew Tung.
- 7 The effect of the computer upon the business world has been great.
- 8 The booming popularity of gyms in Hong Kong indicates the growing belief that strenuous, prolonged exercise is good for one's health. But is it?
- 9 Being an employee of this company, I am unable to comment.
- 10 Expansion into China is the only way to go forward.

Test Yourself 4

MAKE the following weak sentences more emphatic. Answers p24.

- 1 It may be necessary for us to investigate this matter.
- 2 There are plenty of choices if you don't like this one.
- 3 It is with great pleasure that I accept your invitation.
- 4 It is with regret that I have to make this decision.
- 5 There is no way that we can lower our rates any further.
- 6 It is essential that productivity improves quickly.
- 7 There is no better person to do the job.

BUSINESS CARTOONS



August 2001

Writing Introductions to Business Reports

WRITING INTRODUCTIONS to reports can cause many problems to you as a writer. As a writer, you should always bear in mind what the function of an introduction is.

THE introduction to a report serves to put the reader in the picture. It should make quite clear why the report is being written, what it is about and, in a longer report, how the topic will be covered.

SINCE readers generally tend to focus on the introduction and conclusion of a report, it is very important for you to learn to introduce and conclude your central message effectively. In this issue, we present three methods and conventions used in report writing which will help you to write introductions to reports (1 to 5 pages long). We shall focus on structured, short to medium length reports.

Sub-heading: Background or Introduction

WHEN using the above headings, you should aim to describe the background situation to the report. In doing so, you should answer all the main wh-questions (when? who? what? where? why?). These headings are normally used in short reports, such as memo reports, where the report is quite general in nature.

Now study the following five examples:

Subject: Evaluation of Business English Training Course

Background

The course, entitled 'Business Writing Skills for Officers', was conducted by Edulink Services Ltd. The Training Department was responsible for the administration of the course and the course tutor was Mr Gerard Davies. Mr Davies, however, who had conducted previous language training courses for us, became ill mid-course and was replaced by Ms. Jane Seymour. With a total of 24 hours tuition time, the course ran weekly from October to December 2001. It was conducted during office hours and attendance was compulsory for all participants.

Subject: Explosion in Container Store

Background

On 7 January 2002, while three workers were removing oil containers from the container store for cleaning and refilling, an explosion occurred. After an internal investigation, it was found that two containers, neither of which was protected by safety rubber, accidentally hit each other causing a spark. It was the spark which caused the explosion. Two workers were slightly injured during the accident and taken to hospital. Both have since made a full recovery.

Subject: Staff Opinions on Formation of Staff Club

Background

Several members of the department have recently expressed an interest in forming a social club. As a result, a questionnaire was designed and sent to all departmental staff to determine their opinions. The findings of the survey are detailed below and recommendations are given.

Subject: Comparison of Laptop Computers

Introduction

The purpose of this comparison is to help prospective laptop purchasers in their decision. In today's mobile climate, the average person can make good use of a reliable portable computer; this report is designed to help in that search. Of the many perspective computers, only several brands were selected for this comparison. Those that were selected were Pentium computers that used MMX technology. MMX technology lends itself to portable computers because of the added internal processor cache, graphics acceleration, and lower power usage. The first two features add to the speed of the machine and the last to the travelling lifetime.

This report compares laptop computers based on the following: (1) features, (2) performance in hardware tests, and (3) price.

Subject: Accident in the Loading Bay

Introduction

On 14 November 2001, an accident occurred in the loading bay causing serious damage to machinery and disrupting production for several days. During our investigation, the actions of the staff present were examined to consider whether a criminal offence had been committed. In addition, existing policy and procedures were reviewed to establish whether there was a need to change working practices. The purpose of this report is to establish the cause of the accident. The report covers the circumstances that led up to the accident, the reasons the accident occurred and the subsequent actions taken to minimise the loss.

Verb Tenses

In each of the above introductory paragraphs, check that all or most of the wh-questions have been answered. Also, check the verb tenses (underlined).

- If you are describing a completed event, the verb used will be either in the past tense (where the timing of the event is stated) or in the present perfect tense (where the timing of the event is not stated - *recently, already, still* etc.).
- Use the verb infinitive to describe the aim of the report, e.g. *to review, to investigate*, etc. Use the present tense to describe what you will cover in the report and recommendations, e.g. *this report covers...*, *It is recommended that...*, etc.

Subject Headings

All reports require a clear, brief subject heading which tells the reader what the report is about.

- It is good practice to begin your subject heading either with a noun, e.g. *Proposal to ...*, *Evaluation of ...*, *Recommendations on ...*, *Review of ...* etc., or a noun phrase, e.g. *Staff Opinion ...*, *New Storage System*, etc. Do not begin with a verb or the infinitive of a verb, e.g. *To Evaluate ...*, *To Propose*, etc.
- Also, try to remember to use CAPITAL LETTERS on all the main words in your subject heading.

Taken from The Language Key

Report Writing – Conclusions and Recommendations

THE CONCLUDING SECTION of a report may be anything from a paragraph or a page or so in length, and should refer back to the original objective or 'aim'. Read through the original objective before you decide exactly what to say in your concluding section, to keep your mind well focused on it.

The Use of Sub-Headings

LOOK at the concluding sections from four short reports (Texts 1 - 4). In each case the writer does not use sub-headings. However, sub-headings would give all the reports clearer presentations. Which of the four sub-headings below would you use for each of these concluding sections? Consider the function of each section.

SUB-HEADING	TEXT NO.
Conclusion	
Conclusion and Recommendations	
Recommendations	
Discussion / Recommendations (separate sub-headings)	

Text 1

In conclusion, the accident occurred as a result of the use of old and faulty equipment and not by any negligence on the part of the operator. We therefore, recommend that Mr Kenneth Mak should be reinstated and that the possibility of purchasing new and more modern equipment should be looked into.

Text 2

Thus, the complaints regarding the quality and quantity of food provided in the staff cafeteria would seem to be valid, and we have already taken action to make sure that the situation improves.

Text 3

From the findings above, it would appear that the use of chemical dispersants is the only one of the three methods considered which is:

- fully effective;
- within a satisfactory price range; and
- not dangerous to sea life.

Of all the types of chemical dispersants presently on the market, CX1100T is the least poisonous and best meets our needs.

It is therefore recommended that chemical dispersants should be adopted as the company's standard method of handling oil spills at sea and that an order for 6 months supplies of CX1100T should be placed with the manufacturers immediately.

Text 4

Mr Wong's work has always been of a high standard. He is a reliable and hard-working employee, and is highly respected by both his superiors and his subordinates. He would have no difficulty in carrying out the duties of a more demanding position.

In view of the above:

- Mr Wong should be upgraded to grade 4D.
- He should be given the post of Senior Clerk as soon as a vacancy arises.

Discussion

The concluding section of a report will probably contain the following two elements:

- A discussion and interpretation of the facts given in the findings section.
- A demand for action or statement of a decision.

A common mistake is to repeat the most important findings rather than conclude. Remember that a conclusion is reached based on the findings and is an interpretation of the findings.

In short reports, the above two elements will usually be contained in the same paragraph or section. In longer reports they will each have their own section with separate sub-headings.

1. Discussion or Conclusion

In this section the writer will interpret the fact given in the findings section. For instance, if the findings section contains the facts:

*Company A would charge \$10,000
Company B would charge \$8,700*

then we can arrive at the obvious conclusion that

Company B is cheaper.

2. Recommendations

The most common demand for action in a longer report is in the form of recommendations, and this is often given its own section heading. The action recommended should follow logically from the conclusion or discussion. If we have decided that

Company B is cheaper.

then the logical demand for action is

It is recommended that Company B should be awarded the contract.

Here's another example

Finding:
Training Courses conducted by XYZ company have consistently received low evaluation grades.

Conclusion:
The standard of training that XYZ offers is below our company's expected standard.

Recommendation:
We should employ another training consultancy.

Taken from The Language Key

Language Considerations

THE CONCLUDING SECTION of a report is often regarded as the most important section. More often than not, the introductory and concluding sections are the only sections of reports which are read. Busy readers quickly want to know the background of the report, as well as the conclusions and recommendations/suggestions. The findings section is often either not read or just quickly scanned over.

It is important that you try to use the right kind of language in the concluding section. You need to sound businesslike and professional.

We have identified a few key words, expressions and grammatical structures that will help you achieve a more business-like style of writing.

Using Connectives

Look at the examples of the concluding sections of the reports on page 12. Notice the connectives that are used and consider the function of each one.

In conclusion
To conclude
Therefore
Thus
In view of the above

All these connectives are common in the concluding sections of reports. The first two

In conclusion, and
To conclude

serve to indicate to the reader that the findings section has finished and the report has now reached its own conclusion. They are, therefore, often unnecessary if a section heading is used. The other three

Therefore
Thus
In view of the above

show that the writer's conclusion or recommendation is a **logical result** of what has gone before.

Tentative Conclusions

Often, writers may not wish to express a conclusion with complete certainty. Rather, they may want to emphasise that the conclusion has been reached on the basis of their findings only.

Therefore, it is often a good idea to use language which is tentative and expresses some degree of doubt. Look at the following examples of tentative conclusions. The phrases in bold allow the reader to express a degree of uncertainty.

Conclusion: **The survey findings indicate** that TV Station A is more popular than TV Station B.

Notice how the highlighted part of each sentence modifies the complete certainty of the rest of the sentence.

There are other ways of modifying the certainty of a conclusive statement. For example:

Conclusion: **It appears/seems that** TV Station A is more popular than TV Station B.
OR
It may be concluded that TV station A is more popular than TV Station B.
OR
We can conclude that TV Station A is more popular than TV Station B.

Sometimes the report writer may wish to draw attention to the doubts he has about the conclusions he makes, for example:

Conclusion: **The findings suggest that** the accident was caused by the carelessness of the driver rather than by brake failure.
OR
The evidence seems/appears to indicate that the accident was caused by the carelessness of the driver rather than by brake failure.
OR
The accident was (most) **probably** caused by the carelessness of the driver rather than by brake failure.

Recommending and Suggesting

Recommendations use the modal verb *should*. They are often signaled by an introductory phrase as in:

I (would) / (would like to) recommend that → we introduce a new mailing system.
I (would) / (would like to) recommend → introducing a new mailing system.
The company **should** introduce a new mailing system.
A new mailing system **should** be introduced.

Suggestions use the modal verb *could*. They are not as strong as recommendations. Alternative ways of expressing a suggestion are:

In future, it is felt that mail **could** also be collected on Fridays.
It is suggested that → mail is/ be also collected on Fridays.
I suggest that → we also collect mail on Fridays.
I (would) / (would like to) suggest that →



Taken from *The Language Key*

APPENDIX 11

Time schedule for long-report writing

March 31, 2005

Design the questionnaire

Allocate duties:

- Abstract (leader's task)
- Introduction/Terms of reference
- Methodology
- Findings (including graphs)
- Conclusion
- Recommendation
- Appendixes (the task of the person whose section includes appendixes)
- Formatting – including “contents page”(leader's task)

April 1, 2005 - April 10, 2005

Carry out interviews (in groups)

Collate data (in groups)

April 11 – April 15, 2005 (deadline)

Analysis of data (preliminary findings) to all group members for comment [in point form]

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _findings 1]

***April 14 (in class)—Every member to send their drafts on introduction and methodology to the responsible persons (CC copies to other group members and Jessie)

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _introduction]

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _methodology]

****Optional: Comments on members' drafts can be sent to the responsible person

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _comments for methodology]

April 16- April 20, 2005 (deadline)

Comments to group members on their preliminary findings

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _comments for findings 1]

***April 23(by 5p.m.)---Every member to send their drafts on findings, conclusion and recommendation to the responsible persons (CC copies to other group members and Jessie)

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _findings 2]

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _conclusion]

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _recommendation]

****Optional: Comments on members' drafts can be sent to the responsible person

[Format of subject line: gp no _your name _comments for conclusion]

April 24 – April 26, 2005 (deadline)

Group members to make the final drafts for their responsible sections or tasks

April 27, 2005

Deadline for submitting final drafts to the leader

April 28 – May 2, 2005 (deadline)

Leader to compile the report and work on “abstract”

***The other members can work on the design of the cover (in class)

May 2, 2005

Leader to submit the draft version of the report to members for comments

May 2, 2005 – May 5, 2005 (deadline)

Group members to comment and proof read the drafts

May 5 – May 8, 2005

Finalize the report

May 9, 2005

Deadline for submitting the project work (online submission)

APPENDIX 12

Post-course questionnaire

Questionnaire for Students Attending the Online English Writing Classes

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect your information and opinions after attending the online English writing classes. Your input on this questionnaire is important because your responses will be helping the academic community to develop its understanding of online collaborative writing and how to teach it more effectively.

Please answer all the questions by putting a tick (✓) in the boxes that can represent your level of agreement with the given statements in Part A or writing your answer where requested in Part B. Your answers will be kept confidential.

Thank you for your help with this questionnaire.

PART A

	Strongly Agree 5	4	3	2	Strongly Disagree 1
<u>I. General issues</u>					
1. I was given a good introduction on the writing process before starting the tasks.					
2. I understood clearly the requirements of the tasks before starting the task.					
3. I was able to use the email system (provided by the WebCT platform) effectively for completing the tasks.					
4. The support provided by the instructor with this online course was sufficient.					

	Strongly Agree 5	4	3	2	Strongly Disagree 1
<u>II. Course design and features</u>					
5. The design of Task 1 (short report) familiarized me with the operation of the online writing process.					
6. The design of Task 2 (minutes) familiarized me with the concept of online collaboration.					
7. The design of Task 3 (long report) consolidated my skills in the use of online collaboration in English writing.					
8. The design of the course content was useful to my learning.					
9. The use of the email system was helpful to my interaction with my classmates.					
10. Clear timelines and due dates were given.					
11. It was good that we could choose our groupings.					
<u>III. Tasks</u>					
The tasks were suitable to our level.					
12. Task 1 (Short report)					
13. Task 2 (Minutes)					
14. Task 3 (Long report)					

	Strongly Agree 5	4	3	2	Strongly Disagree 1
I had sufficient time to finish the tasks.					
15. Task 1 (Short report)					
16. Task 2 (Minutes)					
17. Task 3 (Long report)					
18. Having the online features made completing the tasks easier.					
<u>IV. Online collaboration and peer help</u>					
19. Peer-to peer learning was highly encouraged by the online learning mode.					
20. I worked well with my group mates.					
21. Collaboration was built in through the tasks.					
22. Collaboration was built in through the use of email.					
23. Online collaboration could help me be more aware of the sense of audience in the writing process.					
24. Online collaboration could help me be more aware of the importance of revision in the writing process.					
25. Online collaboration motivates my interest in writing.					
26. Online collaboration could reduce my stress of writing.					
27. Peer responses were useful for correcting my work.					
28. Feedback from peers on my work was useful to the improvement of my writing skills.					

	Strongly Agree 5	4	3	2	Strongly Disagree 1
29. I felt comfortable discussing the task with my group mates.					
30. I found my interaction with my peers is valuable.					
31. I could give useful comments to other members on their work.					
32. I found the comments of other members useful.					
<u>V. General opinions</u>					
33. I like doing the English writing tasks online.					
34. I enjoyed working with peers in the writing process					
35. I felt comfortable taking part in the group writing tasks.					
36. It was easy to learn how to participate in the group writing tasks.					
37. I enjoy the online writing lessons more than the traditional writing ones.					
38. I believe my writing skills have improved using this online course.					
39. My confidence in using computers has increased.					
40. It was easier to discuss the tasks online than face-to-face.					
41. I have learned how to be a more effective writer in this course.					
42. Overall, I am satisfied with the course.					

PART B

1. What did you like best about the online writing course?

2. Would you prefer to take online writing course again? Why or why not?

3. How would you compare classroom with online writing course?

4. How might this online writing course be improved?

Optional

5. Which of the writing assignments and activities was most useful? Why?

6. What aspects of the online writing course did you find valuable?

~~ End ~~

APPENDIX 13

Guidelines for writing reflective summaries

I. Purpose

This assignment is to assist you in gaining insight into the use of online collaboration in the English writing lessons.

II. Procedures

You have to reflect on the usefulness of electronic peer responses to your writing tasks. This will be done after each of the writing tasks. This type of reflection allows you to express your feelings towards the online English lessons and assess the effectiveness of online collaboration.

III. Requirements

Your submission should be given to Jessie after finishing each writing task. The work must be in English. Entries must be written according to the following guidelines:

IV. Guidelines

Your reflective essay will evaluate what you have learned and how you feel about the online English lessons. Your essay should discuss specific skills and changes in thinking related to your own writing and writing process, you may also describe learning related to online collaborative work and electronic peer responses. Successful essays will contain the following elements:

- Brief description of your writing task
- Discussion of what you have learned as a result of your work in the online writing course. In your discussion, you should also refer to your drafts and peer responses
- Discussion of what you would like to learn more about
- Other feelings

Your work should be about 200-300 words and proceed in a logically organized manner.

APPENDIX 14

Questions for the focus group interview

The purpose of the focus group is to understand more about your experience in the online English writing course.

Some of the guided questions:

1. (warm up) Has this online course been different from any of your face-to-face English writing classes before? <answer, yes> How has it been different?
2. What do you think were the specific challenges you encountered in participating online?
3. What was the most useful aspect of the online English writing courses?
4. Has writing online improved your writing or communication skills? <answer, yes> In what ways?
5. What do you think about the comments made by your group members?
6. How did you treat the comments made by the group members about your work?
7. What were the advantages and disadvantages of doing group writing tasks online?
8. Do you think online collaboration can help improve your writing skills? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
9. Have you any other comments about how to improve the delivery of this course?
10. Are there any other comments you would like to share?

APPENDIX 15

Questionnaire for peer observer

Course: _____

Name of Instructor: _____

Name of Observer: _____

Date: _____

Please give your evaluation (i.e. comments and/or recommendations) of the online English writing course in the space provided.

	Comments
Course Design	
Aims and objectives of the course	
Number of activities	
Selection of content and activities	
Engagement of students in the learning process	
Suitability of the web-based environment	
Teaching and learning pedagogy	
Course implementation	
Instructions and directions to students	
Technical support for students	
Writing support for students	
Choice of teaching/learning approach	
Use of web-based environment	
Timelines and due dates	
Interaction	
Level of participation of students	
Interaction between students	
Interaction between students and course materials	
General learning atmosphere	

	Comments
Sense of collaboration	
Level of interest in doing collaborative tasks	
Level of collaboration in groups	
Number of members in a group	
Usefulness of peers' feedback in improving students' writing	
Usefulness of online collaboration (e.g. in motivating students in learning; increasing their sense of audience; teaching them the importance of revision)	
Limitations of the study	
Areas that require improvement	
Things that can be done to promote online collaboration in this study	
General comments	
Things that went really well	
Things that require improvement	
(Additional comments)	

~~End~~

Report on Survey of effective learning facilities and environments1. Abstract

In conducting the effective learning in HKU Space Community College survey, 11 students were randomly selected. Having examined the results of the survey, more than half of the interviewees thought that learning facilities and environments in HKU Space are effective and important to their studies. The majority of the students thought computers are the most effective learning facilities and the classrooms are the most effective learning environments. It is recommended that the Community College can add more computers for students to use. It ensures that each student can have own computer to use. Besides, the College can enlarge the classrooms and purchase bigger desks.

2. Introduction

The HKU SPACE is the first major continuing and professional education provider in Hong Kong. The College offers full-time programmes leading to the Associate Degree and Higher Diploma. It was established in response to the Education Commission's proposal for more flexible and diversified higher education programmes.

In a memo dated 31 January 2005, Ms Jane Lee, Programme Manager requested me to make a questionnaire of effective learning among the higher diploma students.

The objectives of this questionnaire are to:

- Assess the effectiveness of learning facilities;
- Assess the effectiveness of learning environments;
- The importance of effective learning facilities and environments;
- Recommendation of further improvements

3. Methodology

11 higher diploma students were selected as questionnaire targets by randomly selected and received by email and asked directly on the lectures.

4. Findings

4.1 Most effective learning facilities

9 out of 11 students thought computer rooms are the most effective learning facilities. It is because computer rooms can give the students more interactive and can convenient to learn. As the students mostly use the computers to search the information from the Internet. Also, the computers in the College have some special programmes that students may not have in their home.

4.2 Most effective learning environments

Half of the interviewed students thought the classrooms are the most effective learning environments because the classrooms are clean and comfortable. Furthermore, the computer systems in classrooms are good and thus make the lectures more interesting.

Others thought that common rooms are also effective learning environments. It is because students can have self-study and discussion in there. Also, they can have a rest in these comfortable, big and clean common rooms.

4.3 Importance of the effective learning environments

The finding was noted that the learning environments were considered as very important to the students' studies.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the finding, it can be seen that most of the students satisfied the learning facilities and environments in the College. They thought the computer rooms and the classrooms are the most effective learning facilities and environments respectively. However, they thought the computer rooms do not have enough computers and classrooms are too crowded.

In view of this, it is recommended that the College can provide more computers and enlarge the classrooms. In the classrooms, larger desks should be purchased so that there has more space for progress activities for the students.

Report on Survey of effective learning facilities and environments

1. Abstract

In conducting the effective learning in HKU Space Community College survey, 11 students were randomly selected. Having examined the results of the survey, more than half of the interviewees thought that learning facilities and environments in HKU Space are effective and important to their studies. The majority of the students thought computers are the most effective learning facilities and the classrooms are the most effective learning environments. It is recommended that the Community College can add more computers for students to use. It ensures that each student can have own computer to use. Besides, the College can enlarge the classrooms and purchase bigger desks.

2. Introduction

The HKU SPACE is the first major continuing and professional education provider in Hong Kong. The College offers full-time programmes leading to the Associate Degree and Higher Diploma.

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The objectives of this questionnaire are to:

- Assess the effectiveness of learning facilities;
- Assess the effectiveness of learning environments;
- The importance of effective learning facilities and environments;
- Recommendation of further improvements

3. Methodology

11 higher diploma students were selected as questionnaire targets by randomly selected and received by email and asked directly during a break of the lectures.

4. Findings

4.1 Most effective learning facilities

About 80% of students thought computer rooms are the most effective learning facilities. It is because computer rooms can give the lessons more interactive and more convenient to learn. As the students mostly use the computers to search the information from the Internet. Also, the computers in the College have some special software that students may not have in their home. The other 20% of students thought common rooms are the most effective learning facilities.

4.2 Most effective learning environments

50% of the students thought the classrooms are the most effective learning environments because the classrooms are clean and comfortable. Furthermore, the computer systems in classrooms are good and thus make the lectures more interesting.

Others thought that common rooms are also effective learning environments. It is because students can have self-study and discussion in there. Also, they can have a rest in these comfortable, big and clean common rooms.

4.3 Importance of the effective learning environments

The finding was noted that the learning environments were considered as very important to the students' studies. It is because the learning environment will affect their emotion on studies.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the finding, it can be seen that most of the students satisfied the learning facilities and environments in the College. They thought the computer rooms and the classrooms are the most effective learning facilities and environments respectively. However, they thought the computer rooms do not have enough computers and classrooms are too crowded.

In view of this, it is recommended that the College can provide more computers in the computer rooms and enlarge the classrooms. In the classrooms, larger desks should be purchased so that there has more space for progress activities for the students.

XYZ
Executive Officer

*Second draft (Amendments based on e-feedback are underlined)
(Note: The e-feedback is attached for reference in Appendix 18)*

APPENDIX 17

Samples of written work of selected groups for Tasks 2 and 3

Task 2

I. First draft (main points)

Student R

- Have the inquiring centre
 - > Let people join and sign the application form in there(Suggested by Uranus. Ella agree)
- Equipment
 - > Projectors
 - > School computing experts(Suggested by Judy)

6. Refreshment

- Sponsorship
 - > Saint Honore
 - 20% off for larger amount order
 - > Taipan
 - send the price list on next meeting (by Candy)
- (Suggested by Candy)

7. A.O.B

- Helpers
 - > invite some experiencing students
 - it can meet the objective
- (Suggested by Judy)

-souvenir

- > send the sample after the meeting
- (Suggested by Uranus)

8. Date of next meeting

- 1404, 14/F, Fortress Tower, 250 King's Road, North Point
- 24/3
- 3:45p.m. - 4:15 p.m.

Main points of the minute for Judy's group

Present:

Judy Chi, Chairperson

Uranus Wong, Director of Finance

Candy Tong, Government Educational Official

Ella Lau, Publicity and Marketing Director

Esther Wan, International Representative

1. Location, time, date of the opening ceremony

- Location

Ella:

- ✓ Option 1: Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre
- ✓ Rent: \$20 000
- ✓ Option 2: Hong Kong Cultural Centre
- ✓ Rent: \$50 000

Uranus:

- ✓ Seats are limited in Hong Kong Cultural Centre, there may not be enough space for the ceremony

Candy:

- ✓ Budget is limited, therefore better choose venue with cheaper rent

Judy:

- ✓ Decided to rent Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre for the ceremony

- Date and time

Ella:

- ✓ 1st October, 9 – 11 am

2. Rundown of the opening ceremony

Uranus:

- ✓ Welcoming guests
- ✓ Inviting guest of honour to deliver a welcoming speech
- ✓ Inviting participants of last year's activities to share experience (can attract people to join this year's activities)
- ✓ Tea party (visitors can see the exhibition at the same time)

3. Decoration of the venue

Candy:

Minutes

Present:

Judy (Chairperson)
Uranus (Director of Finance)
Esther (International Representative)
Candy (Government Educational Official)
Ella (Publicity and Marketing Director)

1. Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

2. Location, time, date of the opening ceremony

- Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre
 - 0900-1100
 - 1/10/2005
- (Suggested by Ella)

3. Rundown of the opening ceremony

- Welcome guests; invite them to have welcoming speech
 - Students share their experience
 - > What they have learned
 - > attract more people to join
 - Tea-party
 - Let's people to watch the exhibition
- (Suggested by Uranus)

4. Decoration of the venue

- Make it simply (suggested by Candy)
 - Have the fingerboards to let people can find the places more easily
- (Suggested by Uranus, Judy agree)

5. Exhibition of the International Student Conference

- Display the previous activities photos
 - > Show how enjoyable of people who join the activities
 - Distribution the booklets to all guests
 - > Let them get more information
- (Suggested by Esther)
- add some participators sharing video of last year activities

- Have the inquiring centre

--> Let people join and sign the application form in there
(Suggested by Uranus. Ella agree)

- Equipment

--> Projectors
--> School computing experts
(Suggested by Judy)

6. Refreshment

- Sponsorship
 - > Saint Honore
 - 20% off for larger amount order
 - > Taipan
 - send the price list on next meeting (by Candy)
- (Suggested by Candy)

7. A.O.B

- Helpers
 - > invite some experiencing students
 - it can meet the objective
- (Suggested by Judy)
- souvenir
 - > send the sample after the meeting
- (Suggested by Uranus)

8. Date of next meeting

- 1404, 14/F, Fortress Tower, 250 King's Road, North Point
- 24/3
- 3:45p.m. - 4:15 p.m.

II. Second draft (*the students wrote on their responsible sections after getting e-feedback on their first drafts The e-feedback is attached for reference in Appendix 18*)

Student R

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CONFERENCE
Minutes of the 1st meeting of the Organizing Committee
Held in Room 1404, Fortress Tower at 3:45 P.M.
On Thursday 17th March 2005

Present:

Judy Chi, Chairperson

Uranus Wong, Director of Finance

Candy Tong, Government Educational Official

Ella Lau, Publicity and Marketing Director

Esther Wan, International Representative

1. Location, time, date of the opening ceremony

Ms. Lau suggested two options for the venue of the opening ceremony. The first one was Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, with the rent of \$20 000. Another option was Hong Kong Cultural Centre, with the rent of \$50 000.

Ms. Wong pointed out that seats were very limited in Hong Kong Cultural Centre, there might not be enough space for the ceremony. Ms. Tong said that budget was limited, therefore it would be better to choose venue with lower rent. It was finally agreed that Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre should be rented as the venue for the opening ceremony.

It was suggested and agreed that the opening ceremony would be held on 1st October, from 9 am to 11 am.

Student S

2. Rundown of the opening ceremony

Miss Wong suggested that the opening ceremony rundown can invite guest of honour to deliver a welcoming speech. Then, the past year students share their experience and talk about what they have learned. She explained that this part can attract more people join our organization. After the speech, it should be the tea-party; visitors can watch the exhibition during the tea time. She also suggested that sent the souvenirs to the guests by student representative at the end of opening ceremony.

3. Decoration of the venue

Miss Tong proposed that the decoration of the venue should make it simply and the theme relate to the conference.

Miss Wong suggested that the fingerboards should be placed around the venue to help visitors easier to find places they want to go, such as signals show the way to get toilet. Miss Chi agree with Miss Wong's idea as it will be easier for visitors to find places they want to go.

Introduction

Background

Hong Kong government has recognised the potential of Lantau Island for more tremendous development to help the economic competitive in Hong Kong. As such, in the 2004 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced that Lantau Island is going to strengthen as a regional economic and tourist hub and a concept plan has been asked to draw up for Lantau's economic and infrastructure development.

The concept plan has been proposed by the government which covered the following four major development themes:

1. Infrastructure and Economic Tourism
2. Theme Attractions Based on Heritage, Local Character and Natural Landscape
3. Maximizing the Recreation Potential of Country Parks
4. Meeting Nature Conservation Needs

They are all adopted a balanced and sustainable planning approach integrating both development and conservation work

Purpose

The government appointed our group, Law Chi Tung Consultant Group to correct comments and suggestions from member of the public on the concept plan for Lantau. Besides, we are required to carry out questionnaire survey, which covers the major development themes proposed by the government in the concept plan, in order to collect public opinions on this issue.

Scope

We are going to assess the findings of the survey base on the following aspects:

1. General acceptance by the public of the development of Lantau
2. General opinions about the concept plan proposed by the government
3. The most preferred and the least preferred proposed development area

4. The other development area(s) that the public would like to add to the plan
5. The issue(s) of the most concern regarding the development proposed in the concept plan

The assessment will be finished by the end of June, 2005.

Finding analysis

2. From the result, we can see that Disneyland is the best place that people like in both tourist and local people. This can show that Disneyland is a good visiting place in Lantau Island. It can attract more people to go there. Rather than this, the finding shows that Buddha and airport are the second developments that people like respective to local people and tourist.

3. Theme park and resort facilities are the developments that people most like. The mainly reasons for the theme park are relaxation and suitable for families. For the tourist, they think that golf course cum resort cannot attract them because it is too far. They can enjoy golf at other place such as some golf centre in Hong Kong Island.

4. From the result, we can see that eco-tour center is the most people like development among other developments. People think that ecology is important now, from there, it can educate people more about the ecology knowledge. So, this can reveal that people have interest in ecology.

5. In this finding, there is totally different in both Comprehensive Network of Heritage Trails and High-quality Camping Sites. Local people most like the first one but tourist like second one respectively 68% and 72%. The reasons for the local people are Comprehensive Network of Heritage Trails more important than High-quality Camping Sites. Also, Camping sites are enough at other places. But for tourist, they think that High-quality Camping Sites can enhance people to protect our environment and they are not enough in HK.

6. For local people, Implementation of the Lantau North Country Park and Marine Parks is more important, there is 64%. For tourist, there is 73%. This is because it is the significant step to further enhance nature conversation in Lantau. And also, it can improve people's knowledge of environment conversation.

7. Food Street 63%, Ethnic Village 72% and Large Scale Shopping Mall 88% are the developments places that people want to join the plan. People choose Food Street because they can enjoy all different countries food at a same place. For the ethnic village, people can know all different countries' culture. It can enhance their knowledge about countries' culture. In the large scale shopping mall, people need it

because there is no large scale shopping mall, it is more convenient to the local people and tourist.

Conclusions

Opinions of Current Development

As we know, Hong Kong Disneyland will be opened in September. From February to September, Disneyland has started to employ a thousand of people. It declines the unemployment of Hong Kong.

Also, it will attract hundred of thousands people come to Hong Kong and attract local people to stay in Hong Kong because it provide a place for different age groups to relax. And the second reason is Hong Kong Disneyland is the lowest costs in Asia. Opening of the Disneyland will make the benefits for those related industries (e.g. hotels, airlines and restaurants). It ca boost the HK economy.

We can see that local people is proud of the Buddha Statue. They enjoy the environment around the Buddha Statue. They are interested of the Buddha States because t is not easy to find similar large-sized Buddha statue in other countries.

And the tourists are appreciative of the Hong Kong International Airport because of its effectiveness and efficiency. However, local people feel that it makes the sound pollution.

In conclusion, they both support the current development.

Opinions of the Concept Plan proposed by the government

Economic Infrastructure and Tourism

In these three developments, they both preferred the Theme Park and the Resort Facilities.

The Theme Park is a new place for them to having a exciting or educational holiday without going to Ocean-Park. And it can increase the competitiveness between the Theme Parks. It can encourage them to provide some new and suitable service to customers. However, few of them might think that there are too many theme parks in the world.

Both of the interviewee least prefer the Golf course cum resort. It didn't have the attractiveness and those in Thailand are higher quality than Hong Kong. They would prefer to come to Thailand. Hong Kong Golf course cum resort already satisfy the demand. It is necessary to develop a new Golf course cum resort in Lantau.

The Theme attraction Based on Heritage, Local Character and Nature Landscape

Local people preferred to have the Facelift of Mui Wo to improve the traditional visits gate to South Lantau by rearranging existing land users and upgrading facilities around Mui Wo ferry pier. It can improve Lantau economy and the transportation.

Tourist would like to development the Preservation of Tai O Fishing Village. It is because it is not easy for them to visit the fishing village. It can protect the culture heritage and the natural attributes of the old fishing village and to enhance the knowledge of Lantau and Hong Kong history. It provides a new scenic spot for visitors.

There is more than half interviewees support the "Museum of Lantau and Eco-Tour Centre at Tung Chung". It can introduce Lantau's heritage, ecological resources and eco-tour spots.

The Cycle Track and Mountain Bike Trail Network, Water sports Centre and Boardwalks didn't have the support from the interviewees because they think that it is not profitable due to huge investment. Also, it didn't have the attractiveness. They think protect the culture heritage is more important than the development of the entertainment.

The Maximizing the Recreation Potential of Country Parks

In this part, we can see that Local and Tourists have different point of view about the development. Tourists would like to have more places to visit. However, Locals would like to protect their environment and build up a healthy environment.

Locals more preferred the Comprehensive Network of Heritage Trails and Eco-trails. They can provide a place for them to having more exercises and become healthier and increase their ecological interest. They think camping sites is enough in Hong Kong.

However, Tourists didn't agree it. They preferred to have a High-quality Camping Sites for them to visit. They think it can enhance the attractiveness of country parks.

Meeting Nature Conservation Needs

Most of them preferred the implementations of the Lantau North (Extensive) Country Park and Marine Park in South West Lantau. It is the significant step of further enhances nature conversation. Also, it can improve people's knowledge of environment conversation. Marine Park should be protected without further delay. Nowadays, the world is highly recommending the sustainable development which keeps the quality of life today without damaging the property of our next generation.

Suggestions of adding the plan

Highly percent of the interviewees would like to add the Food Street, Ethnic Village and Large Scale Shopping Mall. It is because Hong Kong lack of those development. And they also suggest to adding more hotel in Lantau and a Tower for sight seeing with 360 degree rotating restaurant.

Message no. 137

Date: Wednesday, February 23, 2005 2:28am

Dear X ,

Here are some comments of your report.

layout

--> The layout is quite good and clear

--> no writer name and date included

content

-->No recommendation or suggestion included in abstract, you may included the

summary of report in the abstract part

--> the introduction part is better to included the requirment of the questionnaire, such as

the questionnaires only do by Higher Diploma students.

--> the contradiction of the data: the number of students fill the form is 10 or 11?

--> some of the words do not have clear define, such as the 'learning room' on 'Unsatisfactory performance' is the classroom, computer room, or common room?,

also the 'library' is the public library, HKU's library?

--> the recommendation part did not mentioned how to solve the problem of 'library is too far'.

use of grammar and punctuation

--> fair

--> try to use the other words instead of only use percentage to describe the findings.

it would be better to included more suggestions or recommendations in the Conclusions

and Recommendation and you may be better separate the conclusion and recommendation to two paragraph.

Date: Friday, February 25, 2005 1:38am

It is good of your work that you have pointed out the objectives of this questionnaire ,

so that readers can get the message more easily. Is it suitable for you to asked students

to fill in the questionnaire during the lectures? Besides, I suggest you to add more figures

to support your finding. And also, you forgot to add your name and position at the end of

the report.

message no. 369

Content

Generally, Katy did take a detail draft for the conference, she did not mention anything which is irrelevant.

For example, she wrote down the name of the members with what they said and the reasons for why choosing the location or decoration etc.

Layout

In her draft, she included much information based on the agenda items and she presented them in a systematic way. Moreover, her wording is appropriate and the vocabulary is easily to understand.

Message no. 431

It is good to define the minutes as which groups. The title is very clear! Besides, you have done a good work taht you had piont out the ideas were suggested by each people. If you can point out what is their final decision may be better.

Message no. 409

Content

- > good for include the reason of the suggestions
- > very detail of the decoration of the venue
- > all information are relevant
- > it is very clear to divide different part of information

Layout

- > clear layout of using point form
- > very clear and easy to fine the information
- > included the necessary information

Comments to Student S

Message no. 382

I have read through your draft, I find it clear and well-organized. However, there is one point you have missed. For the agenda item regarding location of the ceremony, you should mention the option of Hong Kong Cultural Centre, although it was not chosen as the venue for the ceremony. Other points are very detailed and are relevant to the content of the meeting.

Message no. 372

Content

The content is quite good because it includes most of the points in the conference, and it does not include any irrelevant information. Also, you have written down who suggested the recommendations.

Layout

The minutes has been reported based on the agenda, which is very clear for people to read. The language used in the minutes is appropriate and less grammatic mistakes.

Message no. 430

You have done well of your work as your minutes is detailed and clear.

I suggest that you no need to write down "Apologies for Absence" because it is not so

important of the minutes. Besides, you have better to write down all of the points

discussed in the meeting.

Task 3

Sample comments for 'Introduction'

Message no. 551

Agnes' introduction is clearly written. It was divided into 3 parts, background, purpose and scope. It makes the introduction more orderly. From BACKGROUND, we can get some background information about why the report is written and what the report is going to talk about. From PURPOSE, we know that why the report was requested, what is our role. Finally from SCOPE, we know the report objective/aims and the deadline for the report to be submitted.

The introduction lets the reader have a perception for what they will have and the outline of the report. It can cause many problems if the introduction was written in a wrong way.

By the way, sometimes Agnes' sentence was too long. For examples,

"As such, in the 2004 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced that Lantau Island is going to strengthen as a regional economic and tourist hub and a concept plan has been asked to draw up for Lantau's economic and infrastructure development. "

Sample comments for "Findings"

Message no. 565

Date: Wednesday, April 20, 2005 2:52am

1. It is clear and details to explain the results.
2. It can point out the main point of the survey.
3. It didnt talk about what we can find in Question 8.

Message no. 600

Date: Thursday, April 21, 2005 11:10am

Law's findings are good with evaluation. It would be better if a short description is added to introduce the finding analyzes. Also increasing sentences format can make it more attractive.

Sample comments for "Conclusion"

Message no. 671

Date: Monday, April 25, 2005 11:18am

2nd para. line 4 - should be "lowest entering fee" rather than "lowst cost" due to totally different meaning.^^

p2 last para. - "Tourist would like to development", "to development" can be cancelled.

In sum, the conclusion is okay. It is supported by reasonings.

However, jody should avoid to use short form(e.g. didn't) in english handwriting.

APPENDIX 19

Summary of responses to the post-course questionnaire survey

Total responses: 34 (2 students were absent on the day of evaluation)

A. Results in percentages

	Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
General Issues					
1. I was given a good introduction on the writing process before starting tasks.	0.0	6.3	18.8	59.4	15.6
2. I understood clearly the requirements of the tasks before starting the task.	0.0	0.0	34.4	40.6	25.0
3. I was able to use the email system (provided by the WebCT platform) effectively for completing the tasks.	3.1	0.0	15.6	34.4	46.9
4. The support with this online course was sufficient.	0.0	0.0	40.6	50.0	9.4
5. The design of Task 1 (short report) familiarized me with the operation of the online writing process.	0.0	3.1	25.0	56.3	15.6
6. The design of Task 2 (minutes) familiarized me with the concept of online collaboration.	0.0	0.0	40.6	53.1	6.3
7. The design of Task 3 (long report) consolidated my skills in the use of online collaboration in English writing.	0.0	6.3	34.4	50.0	9.4
8. The design of the course content was useful to my learning.	0.0	3.1	34.4	43.8	18.8
9. The use of the email system was helpful to my interaction with my classmates.	0.0	6.3	21.9	50.0	21.9
10. Clear timelines and due dates were given.	0.0	3.1	28.1	25.0	43.8
11. It was good that we could choose our groupings.	0.0	6.3	28.1	37.5	28.1
Tasks					
12. Task 1 was suitable to our level.	0.0	0.0	18.8	46.9	34.4
13. Task 2 was suitable to our level.	0.0	3.1	15.6	46.9	34.4
14. Task 3 was suitable to our level.	0.0	3.1	34.4	37.5	25.0
15. I had sufficient time to finish task 1.	0.0	3.1	28.1	50.0	18.8
16. I had sufficient time to finish task 2.	0.0	3.1	28.1	50.0	18.8

Percentage %	Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
17. I had sufficient time to finish task 3.	0.0	21.9	46.9	21.9	9.4
18. Having the online features made completing the tasks easier.	0.0	6.3	40.6	28.1	25.0
Online collaboration and peer help					
19. Peer-to peer learning was highly encouraged by the online learning mode.	0.0	0.0	34.4	65.6	0.0
20. I worked well with my group mates.	0.0	0.0	40.6	40.6	18.8
21. Collaboration was built in through the tasks	0.0	0.0	31.3	56.3	12.5
22. Collaboration was built in through the use of email.	0.0	0.0	34.4	65.6	0.0
23. Online collaboration could help me be more aware the sense of audience in the writing process.	0.0	0.0	46.9	50.0	3.1
24. Online collaboration could help me be more aware of the importance of revision in the writing process.	0.0	3.1	31.3	59.4	6.3
25. Online collaboration motivates my interest in writing.	0.0	9.4	43.8	40.6	6.3
26. Online collaboration could reduce my stress of writing.	0.0	9.4	21.9	59.4	9.4
27. Peer responses were useful for correcting my work.	0.0	3.1	25.0	56.3	15.6
28. Feedback from peers on my work was useful to the improvement of my writing skills.	0.0	3.1	25.0	37.5	34.4
29. I felt comfortable discussing the task with my group mates.	0.0	6.3	34.4	43.8	15.6
30. I found my interaction with my peers is valuable.	0.0	3.1	37.5	40.6	18.8
31. I could give useful comments to other members on their work.	3.1	9.4	34.4	37.5	15.6
32. I found the comments of other members useful.	0.0	9.4	40.6	34.4	15.6
General opinions					
33. I like doing the English writing tasks online.	0.0	12.5	28.1	53.1	6.3
34. I enjoyed working with peers in the writing tasks.	3.1	6.3	43.8	34.4	12.5
35. I felt comfortable taking part in the group writing tasks.	0.0	0.0	53.1	34.4	12.5
36. It was easy to learn how to participate in the group writing tasks.	0.0	0.0	28.1	62.5	9.4
37. I enjoy the online writing lessons more than the traditional writing ones.	0.0	9.4	25.0	43.8	21.9

Percentage %	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
38. I believe my writing skills have improved using this online course.	3.1	3.1	50.0	37.5	6.3
39. My confidence in using computers has increased.	3.1	6.3	37.5	34.4	18.8
40. It was easier to discuss the tasks online than face-to-face.	6.3	31.3	37.5	18.8	6.3
41. I have learned how to be a more effective writer in this course.	0.0	12.5	37.5	46.9	3.1
42. Overall, I am satisfied with the course.	0.0	0.0	34.4	56.3	9.4

B. Results in mean score and standard deviation (SD)

	Mean score	Standard Deviation (SD)
General Issues		
1. I was given a good introduction on the writing process before starting tasks.	3.84	0.75
2. I understood clearly the requirements of the tasks before starting the task.	3.91	0.76
3. I was able to use the email system (provided by the WebCT platform) effectively for completing the tasks.	4.22	0.93
4. The support with this online course was sufficient.	3.69	0.63
5. The design of Task 1 (short report) familiarized me with the operation of the online writing process.	3.84	0.71
6. The design of Task 2 (minutes) familiarized me with the concept of online collaboration.	3.66	0.59
7. The design of Task 3 (long report) consolidated my skills in the use of online collaboration in English writing.	3.63	0.74
8. The design of the course content was useful to my learning.	3.78	0.78
9. The use of the email system was helpful to my interaction with my classmates.	3.88	0.82
10. Clear timelines and due dates were given.	4.09	0.91

11. It was good that we could choose our groupings.	3.88	0.89
Tasks		
	Mean score	Standard Deviation (SD)
12. Task 1 was suitable to our level.	4.16	0.71
13. Task 2 was suitable to our level.	4.13	0.78
14. Task 3 was suitable to our level.	3.84	0.83
15. I had sufficient time to finish task 1.	3.84	0.75
16. I had sufficient time to finish task 2.	3.84	0.75
17. I had sufficient time to finish task 3.	3.19	0.88
18. Having the online features made completing the tasks easier.	3.72	0.91
Online collaboration and peer help		
19. Peer-to peer learning was highly encouraged by the online learning mode.	3.66	0.47
20. I worked well with my group mates.	3.78	0.74
21. Collaboration was built in through the tasks	3.81	0.63
22. Collaboration was built in through the use of email.	3.66	0.47
23. Online collaboration could help me be more aware the sense of audience in the writing process.	3.56	0.56
24. Online collaboration could help me be more aware of the importance of revision in the writing process.	3.69	0.63
25. Online collaboration motivates my interest in writing.	3.44	0.75
26. Online collaboration could reduce my stress of writing.	3.69	0.77
27. Peer responses were useful for correcting my work.	3.84	0.71
28. Feedback from peers on my work was useful to the improvement of my writing skills.	4.03	0.85
29. I felt comfortable discussing the task with my group mates.	3.69	0.81
30. I found my interaction with my peers is valuable.	3.75	0.79
31. I could give useful comments to other members on their work.	3.53	0.97
32. I found the comments of other members useful.	3.56	0.86
General opinions		
33. I like doing the English writing tasks online.	3.53	0.79
34. I enjoyed working with peers in the writing tasks.	3.47	0.90

35. I felt comfortable taking part in the group writing tasks.	3.59	0.70
B. Mean scores and standard deviation (SD)	Mean score	Standard Deviation (SD)
36. It was easy to learn how to participate in the group writing tasks.	3.81	0.58
37. I enjoy the online writing lessons more than the traditional writing ones.	3.78	0.89
38. I believe my writing skills have improved using this online course.	3.41	0.78
39. My confidence in using computers has increased.	3.59	0.96
40. It was easier to discuss the tasks online than face-to-face.	2.88	0.99
41. I have learned how to be a more effective writer in this course.	3.41	0.74
42. Overall, I am satisfied with the course.	3.75	0.61

C. Answers to open-ended questions (*unedited*)

Q1 What did you like best about the online writing course?

Can work with classmates.

I like the best would be the quiz, since it gives me detail result after the quiz, in order to let me know what and why I did wrong in the quiz.

The time can be used effectively.

Email communication

I can hand out the work more easily and efficiently.

Flexible time.

(Can't see the words, please check the original copy)

More convenient for me to handle in my works to members.

It can be convenient for me to hand in the job.

The work can be shared with my group mates.

It can correct my wrong spelling very quickly.

Convenience.

The minutes because we made the agenda ourselves and then wrote the minutes.

Everything is well-scheduled. I can repeatedly read peers' work. I can easily check the group progress.

Giving comments to others and receiving comments form others.

It is convenient. I can do it anywhere that providing computers.

I can share my work with others.

We can give comments for others.

Communication

I can spend my time I to do the job at anytime I like

More efficiency

More confidence.

It is good that I can get immediate feedback from others.

The discussion area

I can learn co-operation with my group mates from these course.

We can do the task when we have time (especially at the mid-night).

It is convenient and easy to comment and read others work.

Tasks

Sending works through email is convenience.

Report

The email to send out the project work. It's effective to do so.

E-mail function in WebCT.

Q2 Would you prefer to take online writing course again? Why or why not?

Yes, more convenient compare with the traditional writing

I think yes because it is quite interesting.

Yes. It is good for us to use and we can move easier to schedule.

Yes, online writing is quite interesting and papers saving.

Yes, I think I can gather information of my group members more easily.

Yes. Because it is more convenience.

No. when I am doing the long report writing, there are a lot of think to do, using computer is not very helpful.

Yes, because it's another way to learn and improve my English.

No, because it is very little interaction between others.

No, it is quite troublesome to send, receive and then give comments to others' works.

No, typing to computer is very trouble.

Yes, because it save the time.

Yes. It's because it can lower the workload of students.

Yes because I can get feedback and correct my mistakes easily. I'll like the online course more if the marker includes the teacher, because I can't make sure whether peers' correction are right.

Yes, because it is more interesting when learning the writing skills. It is more real.

Yes.

Yes, it is convenience.

Yes, it is so convenient for us to finish it.

Yes, convenience - email

Yes, it is very convenience and free.

Yes, we can improve the writing skill, why not?!

yes, because it is interesting than the traditional lesson.

Yes, since it makes learning more effective.

Yes, convenient.

Prefer take online writing course, because we can continue our course at home.

Yes, it gives us more time to do the work.

Yes, if available.

Yes, Microsoft word can check the grammar.

Yes, it is convenience.

Yes, I think can learn more.

Yes, since there is a trend to do it now.

Yes, because it is easy for me to send my works & also comment to my group mates.

Q3 How would you compare learning writing in the classroom with online writing course?

More flexibility when use a computer online.

Online writing course is not efficient enough.

Classroom: more communication. Online: effective and efficient, but less communication between human.

Classroom is boring and online writing course

In classroom, the learning attitude will be attracted by using computer.

Online writing course is more interesting.

I would like to stay at classroom because the computer always broken.

We can interact with all classmates and discuss move directly, but the interaction on the writing course isn't enough.

We can have more interaction with classmates in classroom but not in online writing course.

Face-to-face interaction is more effective than online interaction.

The time of online is free than classroom.

Classroom has fun because it can interactive with others. Online course is convenience.

Online writing course can be more interactive but the classroom is the place that only let the lecturer speak.

Classroom: ideas bounded to minds. Online writing course: ideas from minds, interact, others' work.

They are both supplementary to each other. When they come together, it will be very effective.

Online writing course is more flexible.

It is more interesting with online writing course.

We can chat face-to-face in the classroom. Online writing can let us save time.

Classroom not as free as online writing course but can explain something clearer than online.

Classroom is lack of freedom.

Classroom can be easy for peer to peer discussion.

Classroom can be easy for peer to peer discussion.

Online writing course makes learning time more flexible.

Classroom course is more interactive. Since if you have any problem, you can ask immediately.

Interactive and communication.

The classroom is too large. It is too far from teachers.

Attention decrease in online writing course.

So far so good.

Less interactive is online writing course.

I think the classroom is better than online, but online can save the time.

Classroom will be more traditional one but online writing course is more modern.

People will more pay attention on the class in classroom. Because on-line course, students will play computers.

Q4 How might this online writing course be improved?

Don't know

Having a real time response by the lecturers.

The email system should be improve.

Nothing

It can take more time on how to use the common English in business.

More time can be added to the long report.

Teachers should be more interactive with students

The speed of the course can be faster.

The teachers give comments to our works.

It is very trouble that file exchange.

provide skills online.

The students may be grouped by the lecturers and this makes students work with different students, not only their friends.

Teacher will check & correct the work.

Online writing course should spend more time in the lab, so the teacher could assist the students.

No need to improve it is perfect.

Can send to many people in one time easily.

Can allow more time for us to do.

The server should be more stable.

Lecturer can give comment before finalize the whole report.

If it can include something interesting topic. It can be improved.

The computer should be improved.

More information (e.g., activities, news, etc.) given.

No.

Give comments and improvement before sending the final version.

I think the online writing course should give the guideline and suggestion.

The selection of the sender.

Miss can give comment to us before I send the final draft.

Q5 Which of the writing assignments and activities was most useful? Why?

Short report. Get more commends

No comment

Long report. Because we can learn team work cooperation and communication skills.

Report. Report is very useful when we working.

Minutes. It is because it is necessary for me when I work.

Long report. Is more useful as we can interview more people and then do report to comment the government's work.

Minutes, because I can learn how to run a meeting better, and some writing skills of minutes.

Minutes, because this may use in the future.

Minutes. I haven't done English minutes before.

Minutes because it can use in the life.

Minutes. It is because recording is important for future work.

The long report. Because it trained us with interviewing skills, developing the questionnaire, writing report skills etc.

The long report. It can make me know how to make the question.

Report writing.

Long report, cause many things to do.

minutes, listen to the other.

Minutes, because it is useful for the

Report, practical.

Long-report, we can use the skills in future working.

All of them. It is useful for our further work.

The report. It is commonly use in reality.

Long report, it is a good opportunity to do analysis via findings.

I can learn short report & minutes formal.

Short report. We can know the report style formally.

Q6 Which aspects of the online writing course did you find valuable?

Proposal, more useful.

No comment

No ideas.

I think the course that teach writing format that useful in office.

Quizzes.

The quizzes.

The quizzes.

The quizzes.

Convenience, anytime can send.

Sharing the works with others.

Learning from the peers. The comments which left to us are very useful as
at the same time there are a few people giving us comments instead of one.

I can get all comment from my group mate so that I can improve my work.

Communication skills.

Can share groupmates work.

All of them too.

Quizzes.

Yes, can do more homeworks.

Convenient to use.

APPENDIX 20

Interview transcript

1. Has this online course been different from any of your face-to-face English writing classes before? If yes, how has it been different?

(Student #2): It can save time because we can do it at different time periods and at home.

(Student #1): We can do it at home and teachers can teach other things in lessons, but the shortcoming is that we can't get help immediately from the teacher if we need although we can email her, but this is not as quick as asking the teacher face-to-face in the traditional writing lessons.

(Student #3): Online writing is better as in the traditional lessons we have to finish the task within a short time. We are constrained by time and the quality of writing will be affected.

(Student #4): Online writing can help us to learn more as we can have the grammar check after writing by using the computer.

{Follow-up question: Do you all have a computer at home for use?}

Students #2 and #4: Yes, but we have to share it with our family members (agreed by all the other interviewees).

Student #5: I prefer online writing as we can have more time for doing the task and I can use some of the software to finish my work, such as Microsoft Word. Some software can also help to correct my spelling or grammar, such as Doctor I (an e-dictionary) which can help to check the use of vocabulary and give the translation of words from Chinese to English.

2. What do you think were the specific challenges you encountered in participating online?

Student #4: It's difficult to get to the website sometimes (when checking with other interviewees, it was found that only Student #4 had this problem. Other interviewees

pointed out that this might be due to the network she used or the district she lived in).

Student #1: The difficulty is that I have to send messages to my members separately as I can't do it at one time (when checking with others on this issue, it was found that only Student #1 had this problem. In fact she didn't know she could attach more than one name in the sent list each time).

Student #5: It was troublesome to select the names of group members out from the long list given (which comprises the names of five of Jessie's English classes). {The interviewer explained that one of the shortcomings of the email system provided by the WebCT platform is that the users can't create a group distribution list which they can use for their future dispatch}.

Student #3: Some of the members did not follow the deadlines and this affects the work progress (but Student #3 mentioned this situation was not very serious in her group).

Student #2: The sending or receiving time shown in the messages is not about the local time, it is about the US time.

Student #6: Unlike the traditional writing lessons, I can't have the immediate answers from the teacher if I have problems in my writing process (Student #1 added that most of them didn't want to spend time writing to the teacher for enquiry.)

3. What was the most useful aspect of the online English writing courses?

Student #5: The most useful aspect to me is the email system because it is efficient, which is much better than the Yahoo. It is quick to upload the documents.

Student #3: The useful aspect is that it can allow other group members to comment on our writing which helps to improve the quality of our work.

Student #1: We can learn from others – since we make comments, we need to read others' work. It's a good way of sharing as we can learn how to evaluate others' work.

Student #4: We can comment on other's work. By helping them to find the problems in their work, we can be more aware to avoid making the same mistakes. This can help improve ourselves.

Student #2: We can read others' writing.

Student #6: We couldn't get comments from others in traditional writing lessons, but we can do it now in the online lessons.

{Follow-up question: Did you read others' work in the English writing lessons of secondary schools?}

All: Seldom. Teachers did not allow us to read others' work.

Student #4: It's difficult to comment on someone's work face-to-face.

Student #5: Because it is embarrassing.

Interviewer: Do you have this reservation in the online environment?

Student #3: No, I still point out their mistakes because I think this can help them to improve their work.

Student #1: No, it just depends on the wordings and tone you use. If you do it in a polite way, there should be no problems.

Student #2: I will be happy if someone points out my mistakes.

4. Has writing online improved your writing or communication skills? If yes, in what ways?

Student #5: I think the online writing course has helped me to improve my spelling and the use of sentence structure.

Student #4: It helps me to be more careful. I checked my work for more times before I sent it out as I knew members would comment on it.

{Follow-up question: Did you think about the interest and the need of the audience (that were your group mates) when you were drafting your work?}

Student #1: Not really, as we know that the final audience will still be the teacher who will give grades or marks.

{Follow-up question: Will it be good to ask members to give grades to your work?}

Student #1: No, it's not good to have the group mates to grade our work as they are not qualified to do it. As some of my group mates pointed out, even they themselves were not sure about the reliability of their comments when they sent them out to me.

Student #3: For the minutes and reports, I think the online writing process has helped me to understand their structure more.

Student #2: I think the frequency of doing the task is important to me.

{Follow-up question: Did you find that you had to write more this semester?}

All: Yes, we had to produce drafts and comments on others' work.

Student #2: I hope we can try more other types of writing tasks and I would like to do them individually, not as a group.

Student #1: I don't agree with Student #2 as this can increase our workload if we have to do everything individually.

5. What do you think about the comments made by your group members?

Student #3: I usually got positive comments –the good ones- not really the helpful ones

Student #1: Whether the comments are helpful or not, it all depends on the standard of the group mates. I prefer forming the groups according to students' abilities. I am not encouraging labelling but in real cases, some of the classmates were unable to give helpful comments. I suggest putting the students of high ability in one group and the poor ones can be mixed with the average ones. The reason for this suggestion is that the good students can find something useful from their group and the poor ones can feel better in this arrangement.

Student #4: Some of the comments are very general, like 'good', 'fair' – not very helpful for improving the work, but some of them give very comments, for instance,

they give examples on how to improve my work or correct my grammar errors.

Student #6: The comments I received are useful since my group mates are of high standard on average. They help me to improve my work, for example, I forgot to include an abstract in my short report and then my group mates reminded me to put it in. I don't think it's possible to divide the students according to the ability groups in the real situation.

Student #1: It depends on what you want to achieve.

{Students #2 and #4 would like the teacher to select the members of each group randomly.}

Student #5: We can't choose our team members to work with us in the company, so we need to learn how to deal with the situation like that. This can also help us improve our communication skills.

Student #2: I like the way we did the 'Short Report' since I didn't need to co-operate with others to finish my work and I could get their comments after I finished my work. I don't like the way we did the 'Minutes' and the 'Long Report' as one member failed to submit the work on time, the whole group would be affected.

Student #3: I don't agree as it's good to share workload among members although I know it is difficult to ask the lazy ones to submit their work on time.

6. How did you treat the comments made by the group members about your work?

Student #1: I would read the comments first and decide whether I needed to make any changes based on them.

Student #6: Read the comments and look at my work again to see if I have to make changes.

Student #5: Normally I just read their comments and seldom made changes since I didn't want to take time to amend my work.

Student #2: I read their comments and make changes based on the useful ones.

7. What were the advantages and disadvantages of doing group writing tasks online?

<u>Advantages</u>	<u>Disadvantages</u>
Good to share workload (Student #3)	Some of the members did not meet the deadline, work progress was affected (Student #3)
Can help to correct our work (Student #6)	Sometimes we had conflicts over some views (leader ultimately made the final decision) (Student #6)
Convenient and time-saving as we didn't need to come out to discuss our work –we could do it online (Student #1)	Like the other group tasks, we needed to spend a lot of time working on the allocation of duties (Student #5)
All the members could read the comments at the same time. No need to repeat them and no papers needed (Student #4)	
Can have immediate comments (Student #4)	
The whole procedure became quicker (Student #4)	
I could learn more skills on planning, time-management and communication with others (more aware of the use of tone) (Student #2)	
Good to improve our English by reading other's work (Student #3)	

8. Do you think online collaboration can help improve your writing skills? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Student #6: We got more chances to revise our work as we need to finish many drafts and make changes according to others' comments.

Student #3: By reading others' comments, I can know what audience think about my work and then I can revise it according to the useful comments.

Student #1: Not very useful in helping us to improve the writing skills. It would be more useful if we could work with someone who was of higher standard. But generally it is a good practice.

Student #2: I prefer the traditional one as we can get the teacher's comment which I think is more trustful.

Student #4: Yes, on the content

Student #5: Don't know as it is difficult to say.....

9. Have you any other comments about how to improve the delivery of this course?

Student #6: I would like to have more individual tasks.

Student #5: Yes, the teacher can make them optional (The teacher doesn't need to give marks on them), so we can have more practices then.

Student #3: No one will hand in their work if the teacher makes the tasks optional.

Student #1: The teacher can work more on teaching students the useful sentence structure. I think this can help improve their writings skills in a short period of time. It's no use to have more practices if you keep on making the mistakes.

10. Are there any other comments you would like to share?

Student #1: It's generally a good experience.

Student #3: I have learnt something - regardless of the standard of the group mates, we can learn more on time management and communication skills (though more on the verbal aspect).

Student #1: Yes, social skills as well since we needed to bargain a lot on the duties.

APPENDIX 21

Report of peer observer

Course: Intermediate English 2 (HKU SPACE Community College Higher Diploma Programmes)

Name of Instructor: Jessie Choi

Name of Observer: Cecilia Leung

Date: May 19th 2005

Please give your evaluation (i.e. comments and/or recommendations) of the online English writing course in the space provided.

	Comments
<u>Course Design</u>	
Aims and objectives of the course	The course is a Business English course designed for second year Higher Diploma students of various specialisms. The aims and objectives of the course are clearly delineated in the Course Outline at the beginning of the semester.
Number of activities	There are altogether THREE activities in this online writing course: Short Report, Minutes, and Long Report.
Selection of content and activities	The choice of content and activities are varied and sufficiently challenging for students.
Engagement of students in the learning process	Students are given ample guidance and opportunity to explore this new concept of collaborative learning. In the writing process of all three activities, students have to contribute not just in aspects of writing up drafts, but also commenting on others' work and receiving comments from fellow students.

	Comments
Suitability of the web-based environment	The WEBCT has proved to be an adequate tool for the course, especially the EMAIL function, as cited by a number of students in the End-of-Course survey and Focus Group Interview.
Teaching and learning pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Through the process of collaborative evaluation and writing, students can become more aware of a sense of audience. ➤ As opposed to a purely online course, the opportunity to have face-to-face classroom interaction with students on weekly basis allows the tutor to compensate for any shortcomings an online course might have.
<u>Course implementation</u>	
Instructions and directions to students	Very clear guidelines on procedures and deadlines are given to students before the commencement of each activity.
Technical support for students	The tutor and the staff manning the computer lab of the College are the main source of technical support for students.
Writing support for students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students are taught how to write a short report, a set of minutes, and a long report during face-to-face lectures before each of the three activities. ➤ In the process of completing each writing task online, students obtain writing support chiefly through comments from their own group members.
Choice of teaching/learning approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The use of reflective journals at the end of each task is instrumental in helping

	Comments
	<p>students to reflect upon their own learning experience.</p> <p>➤ Tutor gives comments and grades students' writing product at the final stage. This approach can train students to think independently and be more critical when evaluating peer comments. However, the overall quality of interaction in the course might be compromised. Perhaps the tutor can consider commenting on the comments posted by students before the final submission stage.</p>
Use of web-based environment	A web-based environment has the advantage of providing evidence as to who has done the work and when it was completed.
Timelines and due dates	While the timelines and due dates have already been given to students earlier on in the course, there were instances when deadlines were not met (e.g. 10 students out of 32 handed in their finalized version of minutes late).
<u>Interaction</u>	
Level of participation of students	The level of participation of students varies, with evidence of more able students (groups) participating more actively in general.
Interaction between students	<p>➤ In terms of quantity, there is not enough interaction among students. When comments to other group members were not compulsory (e.g. for some of the comments for Task 3 Long reports), little comments were given by students to other members.</p>

	Comments
	<p>Even when comments were compulsory, there was little evidence of discussion (as reflected by the number of threads).</p> <p>➤ In terms of quality, the comments exchanged tend to be brief and too general.</p>
Interaction between students and course materials	Some groups did make use of the “Guidelines for checking the work of your members” given by the tutor when commenting on others’ work.
General learning atmosphere	<p>➤ The general learning atmosphere is positive, as can be seen from comments made by students in the End-of-course survey.</p> <p>➤ Overall, there seems to be a lack of multi-directional exchanges among students. The reluctance among students to express their opinion on others’ work, especially negative comments, may be explained by a combination of socio-cultural factors at work and limited English vocabulary.</p>
<u>Sense of collaboration</u>	
Level of interest in doing collaborative tasks	Given that students’ involvement in doing collaborative tasks (e.g. giving comments to peers) has a direct bearing on their grades for the course, students showed interest in doing the various tasks as specified. Again the more able/ diligent students demonstrated a higher level of interest over and above the average students.

	Comments
Level of collaboration in groups	All group members have met the minimum requirement of submitting comments by the due dates, but the quality of collaboration is relatively shallow. For instance, there is little evidence of students seeking clarification on comments made by other group members.
Number of members in a group	The number of members in each group (4 –6) is appropriate for the purpose of the tasks.
Usefulness of peers’ feedback in improving students’ writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In cases where the English proficiency level of group members is relatively high, peers’ feedback is useful in improving students’ writing. ➤ Judging from students’ End-of-Course survey and focus group interview, students sometimes experience difficulty deciding on the validity or relevance of peer comments.
Usefulness of online collaboration (e.g. in motivating students in learning; increasing their sense of audience; teaching them the importance of revision)	Besides increasing their sense of audience, online collaboration has enabled students to be more responsible writers. As the tutor and other group members have a record of when drafts are submitted, students learn to be more accountable for their work.
<u>Limitations of the study</u>	
Areas that require improvement	The tutor can consider providing feedback to students at an earlier stage before their final submission (e.g. commenting on students’ comments). Students can then learn what to look for when reviewing others’ drafts and how they can make their comments more concrete.

	Comments
Things that can be done to promote online collaboration in this study	A possible incentive for students to collaborate more online is to allow inter-group interactions and comments.
<u>General comments</u>	
Things that went really well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students have been made more aware of a sense of audience in their writing process, not just the writing product. ➤ Students appreciate the opportunity of learning writing through the WEBCT, which is something they have not experienced before.
Things that require improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Given the students' mixed abilities in terms of English level, one area for further investigation is how to foster meaningful exchanges among groups of mixed English abilities. Specifically, the question to be addressed is "In what ways can <i>better</i> students be motivated to help <i>weaker</i> students in an online environment?" ➤ In relation to the problem of students not adhering to deadlines, a penalty can be imposed on those who submitted their work late.
<u>Additional comments</u>	

APPENDIX 22

Samples of students' reflective summaries

Task 1

Reflections on "Short Report"

I think it is useful for my groupmates to give comments on my draft of the short report, since this can help me to make improvement. As the audiences are my classmates, which are at the same level as mine. Therefore comments given by them will be also useful in helping me to improve my writing skills.

Submitting works online is very convenient, and I can get responses from groupmates immediately. Therefore I think this format of learning is very efficient and can save time. This makes the learning process more flexible as I can submit works regardless of location and time.

As I need to give out my first and second draft for comments, this gives me a chance to make amendments on my work before giving out the final draft. Therefore I prefer this learning format to the traditional one.

Task 2

Comments for minutes writing.

① Step 1 Holding the meeting.

It is quite interesting, the involvement is much higher. It is a good practice for oral.

② Step 2 Jotting the main pts.

It is a very good way to practise listening. It offers a chance to learn from people mistakes.

③ Step 3 Minutes writing.

It is an interesting task as it is conducted online. It is very convenient.

And the workload is not heavy as it is split into several tasks.

④ Overall opinion.

I think it would be better to do the minutes of our own meeting as we have prepared for the meeting, the understanding of our own meeting is much deeper than the other group. Or, maybe we could get the others' group minutes in advance, so that it will be much easier for us to follow.

Task 3

Reflection on Long Report

As a member, I think this method ~~will~~ ^{can} make sure ^{that} every members have involved in the project work.

In the mean time, this method may increase the leader workload, because she need organize that all members works, however, not all of members submit their work on time, ~~they~~ ^{Actually}. If they ^{can} co-operate with leader, it may ^{have} ~~be~~ good result of work and to be ~~effect~~ ^{effectively}. If they can not co-operate it will increase leader workload.

Overall, the method is good if members can co-operate with leader.

APPENDIX 23

Reflective summaries of the instructor

A. Reflective summary on “Short Report”

The task of writing a short report was the first planned task in my online writing course. The aim of this task was to familiarize my students with the online writing process that would occur in the coming two group tasks and let them try out the process of giving and receiving comments, thereby revising their own work based on the useful comments. It was my intention to prepare the students for the coming tasks through this task.

Prior to the start of the task, I had made the schedule and topic for the writing task; however, in reality, I found that many changes had to be made after the implementation of the task. Firstly, I discovered that the information I planned for the task was insufficient as this was an online task, students would take the task home and finish it without my direct supervision. They would not be able to ask me questions (unless they emailed me); therefore I found that it would be more helpful if they got a clearer assignment outline, which they could take home for reference even after my explanation of the task in class.

Secondly, I found that the schedule I made at first was not detailed enough, so I had to revise it and work out one that could clearly list out the dates they had to submit the work to members for comments and the deadlines they had to post their comments and revise their work.

Moreover, I had to send emails to students instructing them to put in their information in the subject line of their messages so as to allow me to easily identify them. The reason for doing so was that it was really difficult for me to identify the students, their groups or the kind of work they sent to me (I was not able to tell whether the student was sending me the drafts or the comments), so I had to work out a standard format of the subject line for them to follow. I had to say that this was an aspect I had never thought of before the start of the writing process. It was an essential change as there were about 36 students in the class. In order to handle all the messages in an efficient and systemic way, it is vital that I could distinguish them and their types of work in the subject line of the messages.

Besides the above changes, I was much concerned about the operation of the writing process. In general, the task was completed as scheduled in a smooth manner. A majority of the students submitted their work according to the schedule I set and in the way I required; however, like the traditional writing lessons, there were still some who submitted their work late or totally ignored the deadlines. I had to remind them of the submissions in my taught lessons.

Talking about the effectiveness of the peer comments, I checked about it when I marked students' work. I discovered that students were not good at giving comments even though I had given the guidelines for evaluating others' work and worked with them in class on commenting a sample writing together. I found that this is partly due to their English standard (as some of them made wrong suggestions on the use of the grammar) and unfamiliarity with the use of peer comment. Also, it was interesting to find that some of them tended not to give too many comments or they just tried to give positive than negative ones. This could reflect the humble characteristics of the Chinese. Anyhow I consider that it was a good start for the coming group tasks as they knew better the writing process after this task.

March 30, 2005

B. Reflective summary on 'Minutes'

The second online writing task that I assigned my students to do was minutes-writing. If the first writing task (writing a short-report) was to familiarize them with the online writing process, the second one (the recent one) was to let them collaborate with one another in completing a group writing task.

I was quite pleased when I looked at their drafts and online comments to their group members though some of them still committed careless mistakes (e.g. misuse of tenses) in their work. Generally, I was satisfied that each member of the group made their contribution to the task and did read the other work before compiling their own section in the end.

When I compared the performance of this class with my other classes of the same level doing the same task, I found that there was more interaction between members when they tried completing the task in the traditional face-to-face teaching mode. For the other classes, though I had asked them to work in groups and compare their notes, I was not so sure how many of them really did what I requested. As usual, some

members of a group would finish the whole task themselves while the others would just put their names on the final work. I hate seeing this as this was not really a group product and not every one contributed to it.

By using the online method, each student had to take notes during the meeting and then submitted what they got to the others. They compared their points and criticized one another. Later, each one of them was then responsible for drafting a section of the minutes. Comments were also given on the draft paragraphs from their members. Finally the leader of each group compiled the final product – minutes-by group the drafts submitted by individual members.

I found that the task was quite authentic and useful. Firstly, students attended a meeting conducted by their classmates and could try out the process of taking minutes. They could make use of the phrases and format we had talked about in lessons for minutes-writing. It was quite good experience as they could know how to conduct their meetings and at the same time worked together to produce the minutes.

To conclude, it is a good exercise to get them to collaborate and work out something together. In addition, it is a chance for them to give and receive other comments on their work. They could help one another to improve their work (though some of them sometimes gave useless or wrong comments due to their limited experience on this kind of task or low English standard), they would still feel the importance of the sense of audience which is a crucial factor that they have to take into consideration in all kinds of communication.

April 20, 2005

C. Reflective summary on 'Long Report'

The last online writing task that I assigned my students to do was about report writing. Unlike the first task on 'Short Report', this one was a group project required for all level 2 students of the College in this semester and was a long and formal report. As the second writing task (writing a short-report) was to let students practise the ways of collaborating with one another in completing a group writing task, this one was used to consolidate their skills in online collaboration in a group writing task.

There were certain difficulties when planning for the implementation of the task. Since this was a long report, it required students to include different sections (e.g.

Title Page, Content Page, Appendixes) with more detailed coverage. In addition, as the topic was about an investigation into a Concept Plan proposed by the Hong Kong Government on the Lantau Island, besides writing the report, the students had to work on a questionnaire and then go out to conduct their interviews with their targets.

I decided to follow the original design of my online writing course by introducing the requirements of the task and my planned procedures for carrying out the task. I gave the students a project outline which detailed the background information of the Concept Plan and the requirements and explained them in the lesson face-to-face. Since we had done the short report before, it seemed that students had little difficulty in understanding the format and the style of the reports that they were going to submit.

I then devoted two lessons in teaching them the design of a questionnaire. Samples of questionnaire were given to them as references. Students were asked to develop their questionnaire for the survey on the Concept Plan with their group members in class. The reason for not doing this online was that I foresaw that there would be a lot of problems in the developing process of the questionnaire and students might need more of my guidance and advice as 1. it was not easy to develop a good questionnaire and 2. my students were lacking the skills of creating questionnaires (For majority of them, this was the first time they tried creating their own questionnaires). As expected, I had to talk to each group individually after their first draft and then they had to revise them in class in groups. The final draft was sent to me for comments via email and then feedback was given for them to revise their questionnaire. The whole process took a lot of time but I thought it was worthy as I had to make sure that students could have a good questionnaire for doing their surveys; otherwise they might not be able to achieve the things required for the report.

In addition, I had to guide them in class to finish the preliminary analysis of data that they collected from their interviews. As expected, many of them did not know how to analyse their data after collection. I required each group to work out a preliminary analysis of data before they started writing their report.

It took a long time for me to guide them in completing both the questionnaire and the preliminary analysis of data, but I think these were the necessary stages for preparing them for the online group writing process.

Talking about their performance in online collaboration, I found that students had become more familiarized with the process I designed for them to work together online for their report, for example, after making a draft of something, they had to

send it out for the comments of their group members and then revise their work based on the useful comments.

One problem I faced was that every student had to complete a draft for each body section of the report, such as Introduction and Findings, this created a heavy workload for them as they also needed to read and send out comments for every section. For me, I do feel that the different sections required by the tasks made the whole process time-consuming and a bit boring as the students had to repeat the similar process for a number of times; however, I find that there is one merit of this process, which is every group member has to contribute to the task and they have the chances of giving comments to others' work. Compared to the other classes I had which were also asked to do the reports, this group of students showed more involvement in the task and I could ensure that everyone did contribute to their work as they had to send copies to me while sending their work to their members.

Similar to the other two tasks, I still got some students who never observed the deadlines I had set. This created problems as they were doing a group task. If one of the group members did not observe the deadline, the progress of the whole team would be affected.

Regarding the comments students made on others' work, I still find that the majority of them could not give useful feedback. As I mentioned before, this is partly due to their English standard and their character of Chinese who tend to give only positive comments.

Generally, I really appreciate the efforts of the students put in this task as it was quite demanding and this was the first time for majority of them to write a long report in this way. The overall performance of the students can be considered as satisfactory.

May 18, 2005

APPENDIX 24

Information on the online English writing course

Introduction

In this online writing course, I intend to give you the experience of online and collaborative learning. The aims and rationale of this course are:

- To develop good learning practice

The importance of education is not limited to the passing of knowledge from teachers to students, but also the development of students' knowledge and positive attitude towards self-learning and discovery during the process of learning

- To promote collaborative learning

It is my belief that students can benefit more if they can collaborate and communicate with one another in their learning process. Hence it is important for the teacher to take up the role of a facilitator and help create an environment that can promote mutual learning

Your participation

The focus of this course is therefore to offer an opportunity for you to work collaboratively in your writing tasks in the WebCT platform provided by the regular English course "Business Communication". I attempt to provide a communicative experience for you in your writing process by giving out both individual and collaborative tasks. You are required to give one another feedback after reading your peers' written work. I would urge you, therefore, to play as full a part in the online activities as you can.

Objectives

By the end of the course, I hope that you will be able to tell

- if online collaboration can help improve your writing. If so, how? Does it help
 - motivate you in learning?
 - increase your sense of audience?
 - teach you the importance of revision?
 - the limitations of the use of online collaboration in the proposed context

- how the ESL online writing lessons can be structured to promote online collaboration

Course details

The course is divided into three parts, and each will have its own writing task. At the start of each part, the instructor will have a formal face-to-face lecture on the issues concerning the written work and explain the work. She will:

- introduce the details on the type of writing required
- explain the task
- divide you into groups
- give the requirements (such as the criteria for commenting on others' work, the deadline for posting the work or giving feedback, etc)

The three parts of the course include:

- One individual task (Writing a short report)
 - Week 1: Introduction of report writing and explanation of the task
 - Week 2: Drafting and writing
 - Week 3: Drafting and writing (Feb 18-deadline for posting)
 - Week 4: Giving feedback (mainly focusing on the format, content and organization of ideas) to at least three members of your group on their work
 - Week 5: Re-drafting and submission of your work to the instructor (Mar 4 - deadline for submission)
- Two group tasks
 - Group task 1 (Writing minutes of a meeting)
 - Week 2: Introduction to "Meeting and Negotiation" and explanation of the task
 - Weeks 3 and 4: Introduction to agenda and minutes writing (Prepare the agenda for the assigned task)
 - Weeks 5 and 6: Preparing the meeting that has to take place in Week 7
 - Week 7: Meeting (Each group will have 20 minutes)
 - Week 8: Posting the minutes for comment (The instructor will assign two groups to work together and the members of each group has to comment on the other group's work)
 - (Mar 25-deadline for posting comments)
 - Week 9: Individual group to revise the minutes and submit their final work to the instructor
 - Group task 2 (Writing a report for a survey)

Week 5: Introduction to report writing that gives findings, conclusions and recommendations of a survey and explanation of the task

Week 6: Introduction to the use of survey (including the formation of questionnaire and graphs) and the Concept Plan of Lantau and making the questionnaire for the task

Week 8: Finalizing the questionnaire and preparing for the survey

Week 9: Carrying out the survey

Weeks 10 and 11: Drafting and writing the report

Week 12: Posting the draft work and commenting on the other groups' work

Week 13: Submission of the final work to the instructor (Apr 29-deadline for submission)

Please expect a somewhat different learning and teaching mode in this course. I firmly believe that you will benefit from the experiences you will gain in the online learning process.

Jessie CHOI

Course designer and instructor

February 2005

APPENDIX 25

Letter of request for college approval

Dear Dr Lee,

As you know, the English Team has adopted two course books with WebCT functions this year for our students of intermediate and advanced levels, namely “Essentials to Business Communication” by Mary Ellen Guffy (2002) and “Business Communication” by A. C. Krizen, Patricia Merrier and Carol Larson Jones (2005). In order to better understand the use of the online mode in teaching and learning, I intend to undertake a study to explore the use of online collaboration in English writing lessons. Particularly, I seek to examine a group of MMG (level 2) students to check if online collaboration can help improve their writing. The results of the study are intended to gain insights into our understanding of online collaborative writing and into teaching writing more effectively. Some methods used in carrying out the study are interviewing and/or observing the participants of the study, and/or asking them to fill in questionnaires and submit reflective journals.

For this study, I have chosen to investigate what selected participants perceive as happening to their writing process when they are working collaboratively in their English writing lessons, in order to understand if online collaboration helps improve students’ writing skills.

As part of my study, I plan to ask all participants to fill in questionnaires at the start and end of the study, to give their general feedback on the use of online collaboration in the English writing lessons. Further, I would like to conduct in-depth interviews

with some of them. The interviews will be tape-recorded and later transcribed by me into a written format.

I would like to assure you of the following concerning the study:

- Students' names will not be used in the study; rather, a code or pseudonym will be used
- Students will have the opportunity to review the written transcript of their interviews and to delete any portion they feel does not reflect the veracity of the interview process.
- The tapes will be kept in a secure place and will not be shared with anyone.
- There will not be any unusual risks to the participants given the nature of the study.

The benefit to the institution is that with the results, we will be able to assess the effectiveness of the relatively new way of teaching writing and improve teaching and learning.

I would like to thank you for your consideration of my request. If you allow me to undergo the above-mentioned study with my MMG students (level 2), please sign the following form and return it to me.

Sincerely,

Jessie CHOI

College lecturer

Higher Diploma Programs

HKU SPACE Community College

I have read the description of the study above and hereby give permission to Jessie Choi to carry out the study with her MMG (level 2) students.

NAME: Dr. Eddy Lee

SIGNATURE: _____

POST: College Associate Vice Principal (Academic)

DATE: _____

Appendix 26

Letter of consent for students

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a study on the use of online collaboration in English writing lessons. This study is an attempt to examine if online collaboration can help improve students' writing. I will collect examples of student work that illustrate how online collaboration works in English writing lessons. It is of great benefit to have as many samples as possible to draw on.

If you decide to be part of this study, you will allow me to take notes and keep copies of the work you have done in the online English writing lessons for use in the study. Please be assured that any information that is obtained in connection with the study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

I would be extremely grateful if you could sign this consent form as you will be helping the academic community to develop its understanding of online collaborative writing and how to teach [and ways of teaching] it more effectively.

Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. Thank you.

Jessie CHOI

I understand the project described above and give Jessie Choi permission to have copies of my work I have done in the online English writing lessons and use them for the purpose of the study.

Full name of the participant: _____

Signature of the participant: _____

Date: _____