

Getting Connected: Electronic Communication for the Workforce

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Electronic communication is becoming essential for many workplaces.

Those attempting to find employment and prepare for entry into the workforce may find the speed with which these changes are taking place overwhelming, as electronic communication throughout the workforce is surpassing other communications. The definition of workforce literacy is shifting to encompass much more than the traditional interaction with text, as the idea of text itself is continually transforming with the onslaught of new technologies; thus, there remains an essential focus on written communication within the boundaries of workforce literacy.

Writing in electronic contexts often has unique challenges. After examining copies of electronic written communication, three skills were identified as essential for effective communication: to communicate ideas effectively, a strategy for explaining or expressing a viewpoint is important; when requesting information, it is necessary to pose pertinent questions; and when writing a response to others, connections between the initial message sent and the response being written must be made.

In the instructional program we developed at the Annapolis Valley Work Centre (AVWC), electronic discussion groups (EDGs) created an electronic context for instruction designed to teach three strategies for participating in EDGs. The characteristics of writing in EDGs is similar to that utilized in chat groups, ICQ

discussions and e-mail.

Twenty-two participants (ages 18-48) enrolled in workforce literacy programs offered at the AVWC took part in this program. All participants were experiencing difficulty finding and/or maintaining employment, due to various obstacles whether they may be academic, emotional, or behavioural.

Nature of the Instruction

Prior to the instructional phase, participants received basic computer instruction using IBM Thinkpads, which were used throughout the program. It was important participants felt comfortable using the laptops before beginning instruction. The instructional phase involved eleven (40 minute) sessions based on a reciprocal model of instruction with the goal of teaching three writing strategies for making entries into electronic discussions: explaining / expressing a viewpoint, asking pertinent questions, and writing effective responses.

Reciprocal teaching provides an interactive link between the learner and instructor that may also involve instructor-led discussion, explanation, and modelling of strategy use. Reciprocal teaching involves instruction over several sessions beginning with the instructor modelling strategic approaches to the tasks. Gradually from session to session, the instructor shifts more responsibility to the learners for strategy use, enabling learners to ask questions, clarify the approach, and receive feedback before completing the task independently.

Additionally, situated learning also provided a strong foundation for instruction. Case studies were developed to reflect real-life situations and to provide context for the electronic writing. The cases were based on issues such as trust,

loyalty, fairness, work ethic, searching for employment, interview preparation, time management, setting priorities, and tolerance of differences among others relevant within workplace situations. Participants were encouraged to explore important issues that may arise in workplace settings, bring prior knowledge and experience to the discussion, and increase their awareness of various perspectives; this may therefore enhance their ability to transfer this new way of thinking to future places of work and other areas of life. Thus, the design of this program was relevant to participants and encouraged the use of already existing knowledge and experience throughout the program.

Participants were introduced to the overall purpose of the program through explicit comments: “Have you ever heard of e-mail and chat groups? Both of these involve putting your ideas into writing. In the work that we are going to do together the goal is to help you learn strategies that will help you in writing messages using the computer. In many workplaces employees might be asked to write to one another about something that may be happening in the workplace. In our work you will be given a pretend case that will be the focus.” This introduction helped the participants consider the broader context for the strategies’ importance.

Three tutorial sessions were designated to each of the three writing strategies. During the first session for each strategy, the instructor provided an overview of the strategy, a rationale for learning the strategy, and a thorough modeling of the strategy. After the introduction, the instructor led an in-depth discussion about the strategy. The instructor then read a case study aloud while the participants followed along on their laptop screens. Next, questions at the end of the case study were

posed to create a stimulus for the writing. Each step throughout the strategy was verbalized and discussed so the participants became increasingly aware of the various steps and procedures involved.

Strategy Instruction

In modelling the strategy of expressing/explaining a viewpoint a number of key procedures were identified: 1) the need to think about the question asked at the end of the case study, 2) the need to pose the question to oneself, “What do I think?”, 3) looking back over the case to think about one’s ideas and how they relate to the case, 4) re-reading sections of the case, 5) asking the question, “ What reasons do I have to support my ideas?” and/or “Is there evidence to support my position?” As the instructor talked through the steps, a worksheet was completed based on dialogue with participants.

After completing the worksheet, the teacher made an entry into the electronic discussion group with input from participants. Steps involved were verbalized, stressing the need to ask questions like 1) “Do I need to go back over the case to clarify anything?” , 2) “Do I need to reread anything?” , 3) “Will others understand what I am saying?” The second session consisted of reviewing the strategy before participants worked through a case study using the strategy with instructor guidance and support. Questions were encouraged throughout the instruction and practice for feedback and suggestions. The third session involved participant practice of the strategy, independent of the instructor; however, participants were able to ask the instructor for assistance at any time throughout the session. These three sessions provided participants with the ability to gradually gain independence in strategy use. This same three-session format briefly outlined was

also used with the strategies asking pertinent questions and writing effective responses.

After the participants completed the nine sessions (three per strategy), two final sessions involved the use of all three strategies in response to a case study. The first of these sessions included guidance and support from the instructor while the second session required participants to independently use all three strategies.

Participant Reaction

This program may suggest that a reciprocal model of instruction offers potential for teaching adults how to write in electronic contexts. Participants reported that case study content was important to the program; cases were relevant to participants and allowed the building onto already existing knowledge and experience. Furthermore, participants acknowledged the connection between writing strategies taught in the context of the case studies and their chances of successfully finding and maintaining employment; since finding and maintaining employment is a common goal between participants, this seemed to be a driving force of motivation.

In addition to an increased amount of writing, other noticeable changes in participants throughout instruction were evident. For example, one participant said on the first day that he “never liked writing, did not like writing, and never will like writing.” When asked why he felt that way, he put his head down and muttered, “‘cause I’m no good at it.” However, after instruction, this same participant was heard telling another student about the program: “I get to write lots using a cool computer so everyone else can read my stuff!” In addition to this obvious change in attitude toward writing, he showed a

particularly significant increase in the amount of writing he produced over the duration of the program.

In conclusion, all participants found the instruction to be useful and would be interested in participating in a similar program in the future. After instruction, participants' overall writing quality improved when compared with writing done prior to instruction. The case studies were also reviewed positively by participants; one individual stated, "You never know when something like that could happen to you." Further, many felt that participating in this program resulted in increased confidence in their abilities to problem-solve in their future workplaces. A scaffolded approach to reciprocal teaching was also regarded highly by participants, as the gradual transfer of responsibility was reported as effective; for example, one participant added, "I liked that you didn't just throw us in there and expect us to know what to do right away – it was really straightforward". This instructional program may provide an example of how electronic communication may be successfully integrated within the context of workforce literacy programs.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada. We are very grateful for the support of the students and staff at the Annapolis Valley Work Centre in Nova Scotia, Canada.