THE GAMIFICATION OF WRITING SUPPORT IN NON-ANGLOPHONE CONTEXTS: A PRACTICE MODEL USING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF VIDEO GAME DESIGN

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Abstract: Writing support facilities are becoming commonplace at English-medium universities globally. However, writing support units located outside of English-speaking contexts are for the most part perceived by some international students as centres for English language remediation and exist to serve the needs of students who are academically challenged. It is therefore a writing support tutor's mission to encourage students to view writing support as support for *all* students, as would be the case in an English-speaking context where these facilities are considered an integral part of colleges and universities. This report encourages the use of video game design characteristics by writing support tutors to introduce students to the writing process and highlights issues that writing tutors in non-Anglophone contexts should be aware of when advertising the services of the writing support facility and in face-to-face discussions with individual students. The proposed practice model should be viable for use at similar institutions of higher education located within and outside of English-speaking contexts.

Keywords: *English-medium higher education, writing support, EAP, ESL, gamification.*

INTRODUCTION

University writing support researchers have come to the realization that the one-size-fits-all approach to the provision of writing support facilities as developed in the United States does not apply to a majority international, non-native English speaking (NNES) student population (Braüer, 2002; Cohen, Ferrell Justice, & Dempsey, 2014; Aljoe, 2015). Especially in non-Anglophone European countries, students see requesting help from someone other than peers or instructors as a sign of weakness and do not readily seek assistance as many would in American or Anglophone contexts (Braüer, 2004). Cultural mores are very much involved in asking for help. As early as 1975 this cultural difference was acknowledged by sociologists Donald Light, Jr. and Suzanne Keller (1985) who confirm, "Not all peoples have adopted the same basic values and

norms as traditional Western societies" (p. 66). This is essentially what prevents students from making frequent and regular use of facilities like university writing support units.

Increasingly, it has become apparent that the popularity of video gaming, especially among young adults, is ever growing. Video games are designed by their creators to be addictive though not in a clinical sense, but game designers are always looking for ways to make their games more interesting in an effort to increase the amount of time people will spend playing them… [Game designers] want you – once you log in or pick up a controller- to never want to stop playing. Writing support practitioners have much to learn from video game designers in this respect. Researchers have shown that getting students to engage with writing support tutors or facilities takes much more effort in non-Anglophonic contexts with students who are not familiar with the concept of writing support (Braüer, 2004; Cohen, Ferrell Justice, & Dempsey, 2014). Therefore, the question is whether the features of video game design can be applied to writing support provision in order to encourage students to make effective use of a writing support unit such as a writing lab or centre.

One of the most important issues currently facing writing support tutors is the students' reluctance to use the support services in such a way as to reflect that writing is a process. However, the primary job of any writing instructor or tutor is to get students to view writing as a process. It is common practice for some university students (including non-native speakers) to postpone completing assignments until the very last minute before they are due or, worse still, simply not to complete them at all. This is where the characteristics of video game 'addiction' can be used by writing instructors and tutors to assist students with written assignments.

While it seems true that non-native speaking students can be coaxed into seeking writing help or even required to do so, additional tools may be employed to more adequately address the need for students to see writing as a process. This paper presents a general practice model that writing support practitioners may use with international students who attend English-medium universities in non-Anglophone contexts that can help students to feel more confident about requesting help with their writing across the curriculum. It also has real world applications that go beyond the purely academic experience.

THE USE OF GAMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Naturally, in the 21st century, research on gaming in higher education is commonly linked to video game simulation or other digital device (Randel, Morris, Douglas Wetzel, et al., 1992; Garris, Ahlers, & Driskell, 2002; Mozelius, 2014). Katherine M. Thomas and Marlisa Austin (2005) have asserted that on writing courses in higher education, grammar can be supplemented using both non-electronic games and electronic activities. However, the research on purely non-electronic gaming in education generally seems plentiful and is commonly based on games developed before computers were invented. One example is a game called *20 Questions* which was invented in the United States in the 19th century and subsequently computerized into toy form by Robin Burgener in 1988 (20Q.net). In this game the teacher or a designated student writes down or thinks of a specific aspect of language learning such as vocabulary which fellow students must guess, through asking a series of 20 well-crafted questions.

Alejandro S. Bernardo (2010) who has worked extensively with college level research writing students has discovered that, especially for English as a Second Language (ESL) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students, at university level "many students feel inundated and beleaguered by the [writing] procedure, especially when they have to repeatedly revise their drafts" (p. 1). This is strong justification for adding a fun component to college level writing courses. Bernardo (2010) lists non-digital games

such as 20Q, *Preciseword Puzzle, Solve that Gobbledygook!*, Nosebleed and others which he believes are effective for teaching aspects of language to university-level ESL students. He argues that by adding a game oriented component to lesson plans, writing instructors might possibly motivate more students to view academic writing positively.

INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDENT PROFILE

At institutions of higher education in non-Anglophone locations where non-native English-speaking students form the majority student population, cultural factors can play a significant role in the success of a writing support unit. Sociologists confirm that cultural relativity is an important aspect for writing tutors to consider, especially when establishing writing support units outside of Anglophone or western contexts. Light Jr. and Keller (1985) remind us, "Behaviour that is deemed appropriate in one society may be deemed inappropriate and even immoral in another" (pp. 66-67). Requesting help with academic assignments is not included in any list of cultural universals. By simply attending an English-medium institution of higher learning in a non-Anglophone context students are engaging in what sociologists refer to as diffusion. In other words, upon entry, students are not only learning content and language in their course work, they are also adjusting to a different "culture" of learning.

The research on working with second-language (L2) student writers who, for the most part, seem reluctant to engage with writing support units in higher education for fear of being seen or treated as remedial or deficient in language ability is growing and reveals a significant trend (Braüer, 2004; Hayward, 2004; Cohen, Ferrell Justice, & Dempsey 2014). Students who attend English-medium universities can be forgiven for believing that having passed the required international English language test in order to gain entry to English-medium higher education, there is no necessity for further English language development outside of the contents of courses. This means the traditional model of a writing support facility such as a one-to-one structured writing lab or writing centre unit has to be rethought and promoted differently in a non-Anglophone context.

USING VIDEO GAME DESIGN

Many of today's students in higher education have varying degrees of familiarity with video games. Some are indeed addicted, others not so much. However, it is worth noting that according to a non-commercial gaming addiction information website, "video games are designed to be addictive. Not addictive in the clinical sense of the word, but game designers are always looking for ways to make their games more interesting and increase the amount of time people will spend playing them... once a person logs on or picks up the controller the designer never wants the player to stop playing" (*What Makes a Video Game Addictive?*, 2015).

The research being done on using video game design to teach educative content is wide-ranging. It has now become apparent that writing support facilities can make use of the design features of video games as one way to encourage EAP students at English-medium universities to seek help in a way that has two major benefits. The first benefit is that students will be encouraged to use the writing assistance facility on a more regular basis (not just the day before an assignment is due), whether it is a one-to-one writing lab session or a one-to-many workshop style forum. Secondly, students will have the additional benefit of gaining proficiency and mastering in English language usage, which will aid them in preparing for their future careers and enable them to function more effectively in any work environment where English language skills are requisite.

There are five characteristics of video game design which are present in the practice model presented here of which the high score is the first. The effort taken to attempt to beat the high score

can keep players occupied for hours. Secondly, beating the game is when players feel motivated to move through the levels to accomplish the next task. Thirdly, role-playing lets players create characters in the game and go on adventures while playing. Fourthly, the pleasure of discovering how to do something and how to do it well can be fascinating. And, lastly, video gaming allows players to build relationships with each other and keeps them interested in playing (*What Makes a Video Game Addictive?*, 2015).

THE PRACTICE MODEL

The practice model developed for use by writing support tutors for students attending English-medium universities in non-Anglophone locations includes 15 tasks which are listed on one side of an A4 sheet of paper. The model can be digitized and uploaded to a university server, making it more easily accessible for those who prefer that format. There are seven categories of language practice represented in chart form including: short essays, long essays, senior or final year project, professional career, speaking practice (specific), reading practice and another speaking practice (general). Students should complete at least 12 of the 15 tasks listed in one semester. If the writing support unit budget allows, small prizes or incentives may be given to students who complete the 12 challenges listed per term.

After each writing challenge there are five numbered circles, each representing a single visit to the writing support tutor. The tutor marks or signs a number for each student visit for the appropriate writing challenge. The student should attach hard copies of each draft to the sheet and number them for two important reasons. Firstly, to see the progress that they have made for each writing challenge, and, secondly, as evidence to support any prize giving or award activity at the end of the semester. (See Appendix).

The practice model integrates the characteristics of video game design that in order to complete the challenge and win any potential prize or award, students must evidence the completion of five visits to the writing support unit for at least 12 of the 15 writing challenges listed. As students work through the challenges, visiting the writing tutor with each draft, students will familiarize themselves with writing support, taking away the cultural misconception of an admission of weakness on the part of the student. Since some challenges refer to professional careers, students will be encouraged to think about their future aspirations and what happens after graduation. They can role-play professional interviews and give short presentations in the privacy of their writing support consultation with a tutor. Students are often encouraged by discovering how to do something well, and with the five visits required, students will be able to see their progression to mastery in varying degrees. Lastly, some students will likely "play" the challenge in pairs or groups, adding an element of competition amongst each other to ratchet up the "fun" aspect of the challenge. Progression can posted online so that students can compare their progress with others.

CONCLUSION

Writing support facilities at English-medium universities in non-Anglophone settings have additional considerations to make when tutoring students. Implementing gamification in writing support programs may attract students who would otherwise be reluctant to request writing assistance purely of their own volition. Researchers agree that courses in higher education institutions could benefit from incorporating a gaming aspect into class lectures (Garris, Ahlers, & Driskell, 2002; Thomas, & Austin, 2005; Bernardo, 2010; Mozelius, 2014). It should then follow that writing support units should also incorporate a gaming aspect into tutoring conferences so that students may become accustomed to western notions such as requesting assistance when needed. Also, adding a gaming component to higher education studies should attract more students to visit the writing support facility.

International students enrolled at English-medium universities in non-Anglophone contexts

have unique cultural considerations when engaging with the academy. Although some may have a familiarity with western academic practices, such as regularly visiting a writing support unit, there are others who may not have had this experience and will find it completely alien to regularly request help with writing at this level of study. In order to solve the issue of students not making adequate use of any writing support program, writing tutors can introduce the practice model proposed here.

The model presented can be modified to suit the purposes and practices of writing support units at different institutions of higher learning, whether they are technical schools, colleges or universities. Admittedly, the practice model offered here will likely not appeal to some students, but it will encourage others as the practice gained here can only be of benefit for students by helping them to improve their English language skills. It helps to provide writing practice that goes beyond the classroom and extends into the professional world and beyond. The model presented here can be an entertaining way to attract more higher education students to gain competency in both written and oral English proficiency overall, and such writing activities will serve to encourage students to seek necessary help with writing generally.

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APPENDIX

English Language Challenges for the Writing Lab and/or English Composition Tutoring

Directions: Complete five visits (points) for at least 12 of the 15 tasks.

Academic Career	Number of visits (points)
A.Short essay (s): 500-800 words	
Course:	1 2 3 4 5
Course:	1 2 3 4 5
Course:	1 2 3 4 5
B. Long essay (s): 800-2,000 words	
Course:	1 2 3 4 5
Course:	1 2 3 4 5
Course:	1 2 3 4 5
C. Senior Project: 2,000 + words	
Major:	1 2 3 4 5
Title:	1 2 3 4 5
D. Professional Career	
Curriculum Vitae:	1 2 3 4 5
Resume:	1 2 3 4 5
Cover Letter:	1 2 3 4 5
E. Speaking Practice	
Job Interview:	1 2 3 4 5
A speech:	1 2 3 4 5
A Presentation:	1 2 3 4 5
F. Reading Practice (5 – 10 minutes)	
Choice of text:	1 2 3 4 5
G. Speaking practice (5 – 10 minutes)	
Topic choice:	1 2 3 4 5

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