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**Mind Mapping:
Overcoming Problems of Writer Identity and Convention for
Academic Writing by Student Collaboration**

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Abstract

This essay will consider Mind Mapping as an eLearning tool for the enhancement of learning and assessment within the discipline of academic writing. It goes on to identify two key problems for student writers, highlighted by existing research: firstly, writer identity and the affective domain of writing and second, the conventions of academic writing. It then proposes an implementation plan for Mind Mapping for the Applied Writing module (AWRI-1002), which is currently delivered on the Mature Access Foundation Programme (DT522A), at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Ireland. The implementation plan for the use of Mind Mapping for academic writing will attempt to provide solutions for the two key problems experienced by student writers, in order to present the rationale and relevance behind its use. Recommendations for assessment strategies from existing research in this area will also be taken into account.

Keywords: Mind Mapping, student writers, writer identity, academic writing

* URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/261>

Introduction

This article will consider how to use Mind Mapping as an eLearning tool for the enhancement of learning within the discipline of academic writing. The Oxford Dictionary defines Mind Mapping as follows: a diagram in which information is represented visually, usually with a central idea placed in the middle and associated ideas arranged around it. Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary compares Mind Mapping to a “spidergram” for the organisation of information so that it is easier to use and remember. While true, what is missing from both of these definitions is the way in which Mind Mapping as an eLearning tool facilitates student collaboration. Collaboration can be defined as students working together towards a common goal (Haythornthwaite, 2006:7). While this author does not focus on eLearning per se, Mind Mapping is a useful example of an eLearning tool which provides students with a way to collaborate because it facilitates synchronous communication for faster feedback¹.

Building on research carried out by Al Naqbi (2011), and Putra (2012), which relates to the use of Mind Mapping by students of English as a foreign language (EFL), this article will reflect specifically on students taking a module in Applied Writing on a Mature Access Foundation Programme (MAFP), at Institution X. While these students are only making the transition to Higher Education, this article will draw on research which suggests that they share similar problems which inhibit the production of academic writing. For example, research by Nightingale (1988) and Wellington (2010) focuses on parallel problems associated with post-graduate doctoral students while research by Fernsten and Reda (2011) identifies parallel problems associated with undergraduate students. This article identifies collaboration as a way for students to overcome these problems and further recommends Mind Mapping as a means to facilitate that in small groups.

¹ See www.coggle.it for an example of freeware collaborative software as a Mind Mapping web application

This article begins with a brief review of the literature associated with the use of Mind Mapping in the area of EFL for the development of writing skills. It goes on to explore existing research in order to highlight two key problems student writers have in common: firstly, writer identity and the affective domain of writing and second, the conventions of academic writing. It then briefly introduces the Applied Writing module on a Mature Access Foundation Programme (MAFP), at Institution X, in order to reflect on these problems specifically in that context. Views range from the successful use of Mind Mapping for the development of writing skills, to the ways in which its use can better facilitate the exploration of writer identity, together with the affective domain of writing and its associated academic conventions. While this article does not focus on elearning *per se*, it will take into account recommendations for effective use from existing research in this area in anticipation of an eventual implementation plan.

Literature Review

It is useful to firstly consider research specifically within the area of EFL, because it is within this area that Mind Mapping has been successful as a pedagogical tool for the development of writing skills. Furthermore, writing skills within EFL can be understood as the foundation of academic writing, and as such, common elements emerge. Foreign student writers of English must, for example, master grammar and punctuation but also, conceptual and judgemental elements, such as, the association of ideas and the connections that may exist between them (Putra, 2012). Researchers highlight the visual aspect of Mind Mapping, claiming that students' writing skills benefited from seeing the overall structure of a given subject as well as the relative importance of individual parts of it (Buzan quoted in Putra, 2012). They further recommend Mind Mapping in groups for a more engaged, active learning experience for students. The problematic task of planning effectively for a well-balanced essay is well supported by Mind Mapping, as the student writer is encouraged to review, draft, and re-draft a piece of writing before submitting it (Al Naqbi, 2011). This article will build on the effective use of Mind Mapping for the development of writing skills within EFL, by broadening its scope to include academic writing because like their counterparts in EFL, all student writers must

master grammar and punctuation, and also, conceptual and judgemental elements. However, while Mind Mapping in groups is recommended within EFL, the potential benefits for students, in terms of feedback and critiquing has not been well explored (Putra, 2012). In an important study of the affective domain of writing skills of doctoral students, Wellington highlights the possibility of encouraging students to examine, critique, and provide feedback for one and other, not only on content, but also on structure, such as the clarity of sentences and the cogency of arguments. In this way, doctoral students are enabled to support each other by sharing negative feelings around writing, such as isolation, and also anxiety about what is expected by academia in terms of the formal conventions of writing (2010). This article embraces Wellington's research for all student writers and explores how Mind Mapping in groups can be exploited to better facilitate collaboration as a form of student-support on a MAFP both in terms of the conventions, and the affective domain, of academic writing.

While Al Naqbi (2011) provides us with good evidence that Mind Mapping supports effective planning and drafting for writing within EFL, the actual process of writing itself, is not addressed. Wellington (2010) holds that doctoral students' writing skills remain undeveloped during the course of their doctoral studies. Similarly, Nightingale argues for the need to reconsider student writing in Higher Education as a complex process that cannot be mastered at an early stage and then left undeveloped (1988). She further draws attention to the importance of different contexts for writing, such as, a doctoral thesis or creative writing, the cultural and linguistic background of the student writer, the institutional setting, and its rules and regulations for writing.

Fernsten and Reda (2011) take the importance of contexts for "struggling student writers" one step further. The researchers focus specifically on negative writer identity for undergraduate students in relation to formal academic discourses. As such, Fernsten & Reda provide educators and students with a useful focus for approaching the complex process of writing which otherwise might be left undeveloped. They share writing activities that educators can use to help students meet the challenge of writer identity for academic writing. These writing activities are not dis-similar to those used in EFL where Mind Mapping has been successful for the development of writing skills. In a departure from research by Fernsten and Reda, this

article associates their writing activities with the use of Mind Mapping as an eLearning tool for collaboration in small groups as a way for students to engage with the process of writing.

However, Haythornthwaite emphasises the importance of clear goals for collaboration so that students understand why they are collaborating (2006: 8). Furthermore, in order to encourage students to engage with Mind Mapping as an eLearning tool, it is recommended that educators attach its use to a clear learning challenge (Salmon, 2008). Therefore, this author recommends two clear goals for collaboration. They involve overcoming firstly, the problem of writer identity and the affective domain of writing and second, its conventions, in order to meet the learning challenge of academic writing. In any eventual implementation plan, this author suggests including credit for collaboration with Mind Mapping in any final assessment grade in order to help it take place (Haythornthwaite, 2006: 19; Salmon, 2008).

The Applied Writing module on a Mature Access Foundation Programme

The main objective of the Applied Writing module is to assist students in becoming more skilful users of the discourses required in academic writing in their future studies. The main objective of a MAFP is to provide access to undergraduate programmes for mature students who have experienced socio-economic and education disadvantage. On completion of a MAFP, students may apply for a programme of their choice in any area of Higher Education in Ireland. In terms of age profile, students range from early twenties to late fifties. Some students have multicultural backgrounds, such as non-native English speakers from Eastern Europe who have lived many years in Ireland and now wish to pursue further study. Others are from Irish backgrounds, such as early school leavers who lack a basic education and have never considered further study. As a result, there is great variance in terms of previous academic experience, and in particular, in terms of writing skills. Similarly, there is much to be gained from collaboration and feedback because students on a MAFP are particularly keen to support each other in their attempts to access undergraduate programmes.

Reflection on the problem of writer identity and the affective domain of writing

Most students on a MAFP do not see, or understand, themselves as writers. When faced with the challenge of academic writing tasks, negative writer attitudes and identities emerge. Similarly, among undergraduate students, Fernsten and Reda have observed that many “struggling student writers”, simply see themselves as “bad writers”, who then become “stuck in these negative identities and fearful of failure in academic writing tasks”.

Fernsten and Reda particularly draw our attention to those students from multicultural and disadvantaged backgrounds who particularly risk seeing themselves “as ineffectual and inept writers” (2011: 171-2). Likewise, in his study of the affective writing problems of doctoral students, Wellington has observed negative feelings and attitudes towards writing, among them, “stress, fear, isolation and anxiety” (2010: 146). While we may be of the belief that problems with writing may exist on a foundation programme, such as MAFP, we may wrongly assume that these same problems have gone away by the time a student enters post-graduate studies. However, Nightingale argues that writing “cannot be mastered at an early stage of education and then left to look after itself” (1988: 279).

Indeed, to build on Nightingale’s argument in the context of the Applied Writing module on a MAFP, writing cannot be mastered at this early stage of transition to academic writing by narrowly focusing on the conventions of this kind of writing without consideration for the problem of writer identity and the affective domain of writing. Therefore, this author recommends providing students with opportunities to explore other forms of writer identity by employing the reflective “low-stakes” writing practices recommended by Fernsten and Reda (173-5). These reflective writing practices involve themes that challenge students’ writer identity by asking them to consider their experiences and influences as writers, such as, “memories and history”, “seeing yourself writing” and “truth and lies”. In this way, students are required “to identify themselves as writers, critical thinkers, and important sources of information about the practices of writing” (p. 176).

This author further recommends using Mind Mapping as a tool for collaboration in small groups before students engage individually in these writing tasks. In this way, students would be further supported in associating ideas, thinking creatively and making connections that

they might not otherwise make because mind maps do not simply show facts, or fragments of ideas and sentences, they also “show the overall structure of a subject and the relative importance of individual parts of it” (Buzan quoted in Putra, 2012: 60). Therefore, while the writing tasks themselves are executed by individual students, the Mind Mapping for these same tasks could potentially become an enjoyable, lively and discursive group activity (Putra, 2012: 60). Student collaboration can therefore become an integral part of learning how to overcome the problem of writer identity in order to meet the challenge of academic writing.

Moreover, Wellington not only recommends the reflective practice of writing as an alternative to academic writing, he also argues that feedback and discussion can have a positive impact on writer identity and negative feelings towards writing. By “sharing feelings, providing feedback on each other”, students may see “writing in a different way as a result of sharing their feelings and the subsequent discussion and reflection in small groups” (2010: 146). As such, the combination of reflective writing practices around writer identity, and Mind Mapping, as a group activity for discussion and feedback, is a powerful one: students are not only encouraged to identify themselves as writers within a group; they may also bear witness to the overall structure of the subject of writing and its many associated ideas by collaborating with each other in an enjoyable way.

Reflection on the problem of the conventions of academic writing

Students embracing the challenge of academic writing must also overcome the problem of the conventions of academic writing. These conventions include the coherent structuring of ideas into paragraphs that follow from an introduction to the theme under discussion, right through to its conclusion, and incorporating in-text citation which references other academic sources. Nightingale draws our attention to the importance of different contexts in relation to writing. This may be the difference between academic writing and creative writing, or the cultural and linguistic background of the student. It may be the rhetoric, vocabularies and conventions of the academic discipline or the institutional setting and its rules and regulations for writing (1988:272-4). Unfortunately, a one-year Applied Writing module on a MAFP is limited for time and scope in terms of distinguishing these different contexts. As a result, most students

struggle to understand what is expected and doubt their ability to acquire the writing skills necessary for the conventions of academic writing. Similarly, Wellington highlights the negative feeling that students are not “familiar with the game” or with what is “expected” of them in a university context (Bourdieu quoted in Wellington, 2010: 137). He goes on to recommend that students be encouraged to examine and critique aspects of each other’s writing other than content, such as, “the structure, the signposting, the introducing and concluding, the clarity of sentences the exegesis of the literature, the criticality, the cogency of arguments (148). Fernsten and Reda help us understand just how problematic “the unquestioned authority of formal academic discourse” is for struggling students writers, as it becomes “the only way to write correctly in the academy”(2011: 173). In order for the Applied Writing module to help students acquire the necessary writing skills, there is a need for practical assistance with sentence structure, paragraph building and the overall structure of an academic essay.

Many of the students on a MAFP lack basic writing skills because of socio-economic and education disadvantage. As such, their level may be compared to the advanced level of EFL where students develop complex writing skills in English as a foreign language. Existing research on the use of Mind Mapping for EFL students has demonstrated that complex writing skills can be developed and improved, including grammar and rhetorical device, and also, conceptual and judgmental elements (Putra, 2012: 60). The research in EFL suggests it would be relevant to similarly encourage students on a MAFP to engage with Mind Mapping for a practical way to develop grammar and rhetorical device which would facilitate greater balance and structure in their writing overall.

Furthermore, the use of Mind Mapping for effective planning, reviewing and re-drafting has proven beneficial for the development of balanced writing in an essay so as to avoid too much middle, and not enough introduction and conclusion (Payne quoted in Naqbi, 2011: 121). The visual aspect of Mind Mapping not only facilitates reviewing and redrafting ideas, it also facilitates “seeing” which ideas go where in the overall structure of an essay and the relevance of individual parts of it (Tony Buzan quoted in Putra, 2012: 60). Moreover, Wellington encourages us to view writing as part of the thinking process. He claims that writing is not only

“knowledge telling” but also, “knowledge developing” (2010: 148). As the student engages in writing, new thoughts and ideas emerge which were not foreseen at the outset. In the author’s opinion, this is particularly relevant to students who are writing academic essays for the first time. As a result, these newer ideas are often omitted from the introduction, or appear for the first time, in the conclusion, both of which contravene the conventions of academic writing. Yet, the one-year time frame for an Applied Writing module limits the amount of practice students can expect to have. Usually, there is just one end-of-term formal academic essay. This intensifies the pressure on these students to quickly master “the only way to write correctly in the academy”. However, a distinguishing feature of students on a MAFP is precisely their willingness to collaborate with each other. In this author’s opinion, it would be also be useful to broaden the specific learning challenge of academic writing to include effective planning with Mind Mapping (Salmon, 2008). In this way, the student creates and follows their own Mind Map for their writing, tracks new ideas as they emerge in the writing, and incorporates them in the Mind Map, as they continue writing². As such, reviewing and redrafting an essay can be facilitated by referring to the Mind Map. Furthermore, students are encouraged to give each other on-going feedback on the development of their writing, especially in terms of clarity, coherence, and the cogency of arguments (Wellington, 2010: 148) but also, in comparison with the student’s Mind Map (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Finally, in an eventual implantation plan for Mind Mapping, it would be prudent to credit the Mind Map in the final grade in order to encourage students to collaborate with it and give feedback to each other (Haythornthwaite, 2006: 19).

Conclusion

Students struggling to develop the academic writing skills required by Higher Education have experienced problems which impede their progress. This article has used existing research to identify two key problems for student writers. It goes on to reflect on these problems specifically in the context of students taking a module in Applied Writing on a Mature Access

2 See attached Mind Map for Academic Writing as a sample of planning for this article using Coggle

Foundation Programme (MAFP), at Institution X. This article concludes that the potential for student collaboration to overcome these problems could be better exploited. It further recommends approaching these problems as clear goals for student collaboration with Mind Mapping as an eLearning tool in order to meet the learning challenge of academic writing. The two key problems are firstly, the problem of writer identity and the affective domain of writing and second, the problem of the conventions of academic writing. Mind Mapping is particularly effective in small groups because it facilitates collaboration and feedback. As such, it provides useful support for the exploration of writer identities and also, for the emerging negative feelings and attitudes towards writing. In addition, the use of Mind Mapping enhances effective planning for the essay format. This allows students to become writing strategists who can master the conventions of academic writing and continue to develop their writing skills across the curriculum.

However, it is recommended that educators identify clear goals and learning challenges for the use of Mind Mapping in order to encourage students to engage with it as an eLearning tool. Furthermore, by providing credit in the final grade for the use of Mind Mapping, students are particularly motivated to collaborate with it and provide feedback for each other. It is important to note that the development of writing skills is critical for the educated student and citizen. As such, every effort should be made to help them overcome the problems which impede their progress. After all, students attempting to meet the challenges of academic writing tasks can be seen as learners in the process of acquiring skills which may be used both in Higher Education, and beyond.

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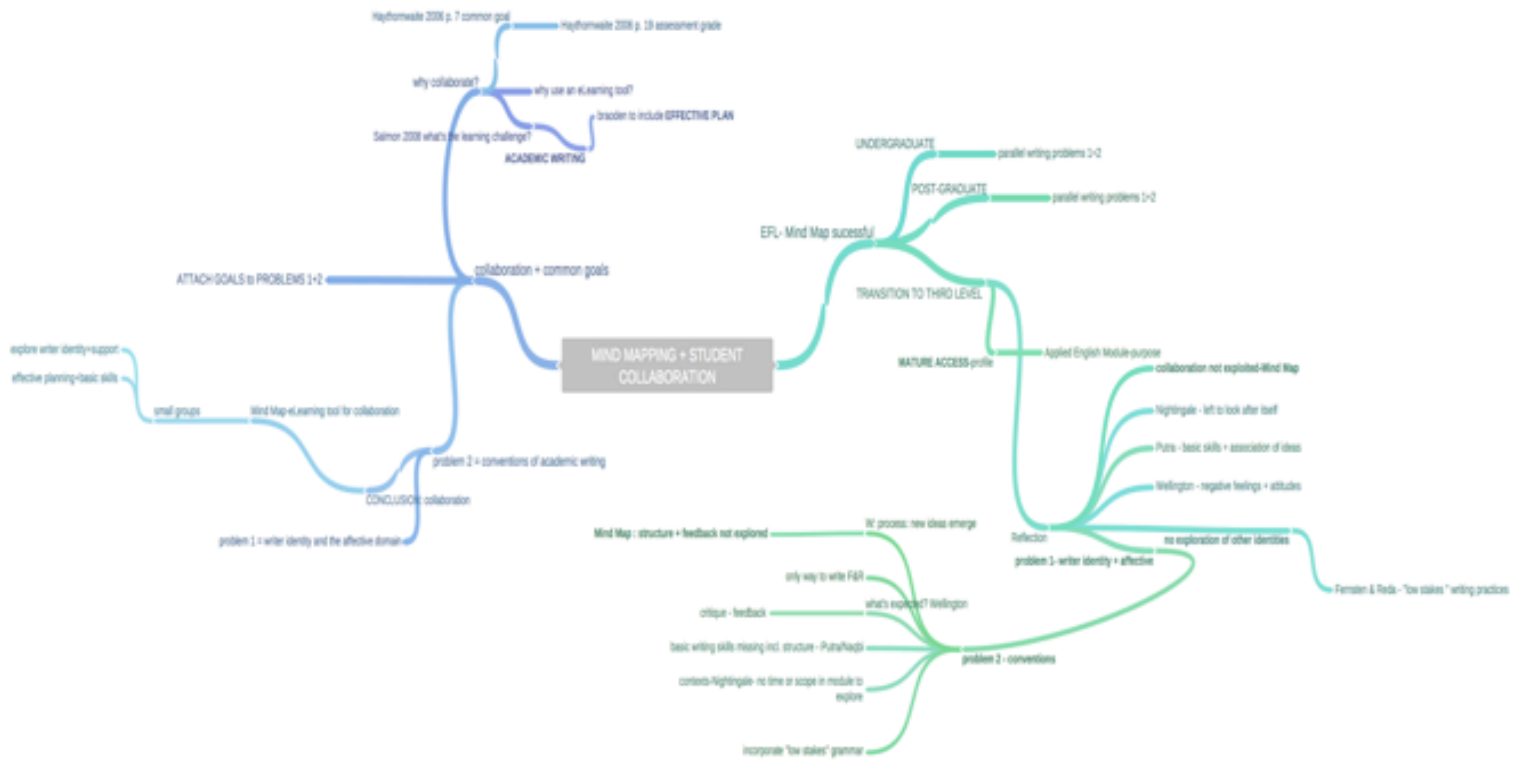
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