

## Podcasting of Workplace Writing Among Transitional Writers in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Studies observe that workplace writing is unlike writing experiences of undergraduates at the university (Sidy, 1999). Workplace writing is influenced by professional documents. University writing classes often fail to prepare students for the workplace writing. The term of transitional writers in this context refers to undergraduates in their final semesters of diploma and degree courses that have undergone academic writing classes. It is imperative for transitional writers to be immersed in authentic workplace contexts which allow them to experience workplace writing genres with the guidance of communities of practice. Transitional writers learn to write to the expectations of their future employers which increase their proficiency in workplace writing. This authentic professional context is constructed using podcasting as a learning object to assist successful transfer of effective workplace written literacy as transitional writers need to have sufficient workplace written proficiency to cater to the workplace written literacy demands. This paper discusses the feasibility of using podcasts in promoting workplace writing among transitional writers.

**Key words:** College writers; Podcasts; Feasibility; Workplace writing; Academic writing; Challenges; College writing; Transitional writers

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### INTRODUCTION

There will be a decline of traditional communications among employees due to the popularity of handheld devices and collaborative technologies as business and communication tools. Social media networks or Web 2.0 such as instant messaging, internet calling, blogs, wikis, podcasting, videocasting and RSS feeds have revolutionized workplace communications as employees hold brainstorming sessions, manage projects, share best practices and disseminate information without face to face encounters. The popularity of social media networks is due to their conversational tone as knowledge is effectively shared through a process of discussing, storytelling and collaborative editing.

An effective collaborative technology is podcast which is a new audio genre named after the iPod portable. Podcasting is a system for posting a file with audio content onto the Internet and an automatic online notification to the computer of a subscriber to download the file. Once downloaded to MP3 player, it can be played as often as chosen by the subscribers. Podcast is popular among digital natives as it is informal peer-to-peer exchange which stimulates the minds and invokes a sense of belonging. The popularity of portable audio players, broadband internet and software tools contribute to the success of podcast.

DeVoe (2006) suggests the majority of podcasts users are university students. Today's university students are digital natives as they grow up with blogs, iPods, instant messaging, social networking technologies, and portable electronic devices. Podcasting enables the revisiting of materials which is valuable to university students as it allows them to save time. They receive information while multitasking and revise the contents so they learn at their own pace. Podcasts appeal to university students for their

portability, affordability and user-friendly.

Due to stiff competition in securing employment, undergraduates need to improve their employability skills. Writing is one of the communication skills seek by the employers as employees are expected to write business letters, memo, reports, proposals and others. Graduates often feel frustrated when their academic writing experiences fail them in workplace settings. This failure is due to writing is a situational activity as workplace writing requires workplace writers to accommodate to different contexts and purposes.

The term of transitional writers in this context refers to undergraduates in their final semesters of diploma and degree courses that have undergone academic writing classes. Transitional writers need rich experiences of practitioners in their fields to guide and expose them to authentic workplace writing in order to prepare them for written literacy demands. Siti Hamin Stapa, Tg Nor Rizan Tg Maasum, Rosniah Mustaffa, & Saadiyah Darus (2008) find there is a mismatch between job applicants' written proficiency and workplace written literacy demands. The applicants faced difficulties to cope with the workplace written literacy demands as their written texts were found to be ineffective in terms of ideas, accuracy and presentation. In Siti Hamin et al. (2008), academic writing is recommended to be reconciling with workplace written literacy with professional writing courses for undergraduates to increase their workplace writing proficiency.

Every organization has its own communities of practice which members share a domain of interest, regular interactions to revise their domain of interest and its own language which consists the terms of the practice, the models and the grammar. Even though each context is overlapping but it does not have identical demands. Proficient workplace writers adapt their writing to appropriate workplace contexts. The practitioners contribute experiences, ideas for new creations and knowledge about workplace writing and knowledge which cater to the needs of transitional writers in form of podcasts. Workplace writing proficiency is imperative to undergraduates despite of their hectic study schedules, employment demands and social pressures.

Workplace writing is influenced by professional documents. Thus, it is necessary to investigate workplace writing in situ. Studies observe that workplace writing is unlike writing experiences of undergraduates at the university. University writing classes often fail to prepare students for the workplace writing. Sidy (1999) finds that the workers in his research failed to apply their college writing experiences with workplace writing.

It is imperative for transitional writers to be immersed in authentic workplace contexts. Hence by providing authentic professional contexts allow transitional writers to experience workplace writing genres with the guidance of communities of practice. Transitional writers learn

to write to the expectations of their future employers which increases their proficiency in workplace writing. This authentic professional context is constructed using podcasting as a learning object to assist successful transfer of effective workplace written literacy as transitional writers need to have sufficient workplace written proficiency to cater to the workplace written literacy demands.

The research is important for several reasons. It is crucial for transitional writers to possess requisite workplace written literacy. The findings of the research will suggest appropriate learning materials and training for transitional writers and ESL writing instructors to facilitate effective transfer from academic writing to workplace writing. To facilitate the transitional writers, expert writers are recruited as authentic readers and mentors for transitional writers' writing tasks.

Podcast appeals to students who are visually challenged and those who have variety learning styles. This is beneficial to ESL learners as these transitional writers are exposed to written English or spoken English by listening to experienced speakers of English as it enables them to practice their English as they record and revise their podcasts. Thus, these transitional writers become proficient workplace writers as they are more experienced in various workplace writing genres.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

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Writing proficiency develops over time. It begins as an association of ideas, growing knowledge of stylistic conventions and the use of processes for planning, evaluating and revising. Writing becomes more unified as writers write for an audience and transform experiences into knowledge (Bereiter, 1980). As writers become more proficient writers, "knowledge-telling" is transformed into "knowledge-transformation" to develop knowledge, ideas and personal awareness (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Ede and Lunsford (2001) emphasize of the need of collaborative writing to be connected between academic and corporate communities as existing writing practices be opened to classroom contexts. According to Driskill (1989), collaborative writing depends on contextual factors such as writing situation, organization's procedures and document's readers.

Students have a wealth of genre knowledge as they write at school, home and workplace. Transferability skill of writing skills learned in academic writing enable students to efficiently negotiating in workplace writing contexts. Smit (2004) identifies transferability of writing skills is influenced by the contents of the lesson, writing genres and contexts. Perkins and Salomon (1988) distinguish knowledge transfer into "low road" and "high road" transfer. Workplace writing proficiency is classified as "high road" transfer as the writing proficiency of transitional writers is transferred to workplace writing

proficiency by relying on meta-cognitive processes to connect between transitional writers' prior knowledge and workplace writing contexts.

The community of practice complements and substitutes formal learning mechanism as learning take place within social participation within community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest a community practice consists of social interactions, identities, knowledge, understanding, language and language use of that community of practice. Learning in communities of practice is in form of situated learning as a result of participation. There is a gradual acquisition of knowledge and skills as novices learn from the context of everyday activities from the communities of practice.

In a study of a community of writers at an urban nonprofit organization, Beaufort (2000) explores the roles the writers played and the roles new writers played as they were integrated into the community following an apprenticeship model. Fifteen roles were observed ranging from observer, reader/researcher, clerical assistant, author, inventor, and coach. New or less experienced writers learned the process through taking on roles reserved for novice writer such as the clerical assistant which allowed for extended observation of the expert writers at work. New employees gained both experience and responsibility through this model, which exhibited Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. The results suggest writing skills are acquired through a social process and analysis of expert performance is needed to help transitional writers to become expert writers. Experienced writers act as mentors to illuminate the tacit components of the writing process to transitional writers.

Thus, Dias, Freedman & Pare (1999) advocate the possibilities of creating productive transitional spaces influenced by rhetorical genre studies and the community of practice as the environment for the zone of proximal development. In this transitional space, novice writers and expert writers interact with one another as members of communities of practice. The idea of transitional space is supported by Wenger (2004), as workplace writing proficiency involves the development of workplace writer's range of rhetorical innovation through the in situ experience through complex social contexts. Transitional writing program enable transitional writers to recognize workplace writing genres and develop repertoire of rhetorical strategies to shape their writing to specific organizational cultures.

In order to improve writing skills of transitional writers, deliberate practice is advocated by Ericsson et al (1993). This method involves of skill development stages such as diligence practice, self-motivation, appropriate writing tasks, constructive feedback and frequent repetition. Deliberate practices in professional relevant contexts improve and motivate college students' writing. Johnstone, Ashbaugh, and Warfield (2002) find that accounting students who took 3 year of intensive writing

for professional audience as accounting professionals improved significantly in their writing skills when compared to the writing performance of a group of students who did not take the writing intensive course in their respective field.

According to Kellogg & Raulerson (2007), professional writers learn to compose for several hours daily consistently. Schunk & Zimmerman (1997) suggest that deliberate practice and cognitive apprenticeship can be integrated in a four step writing regime. It begins with observation of expert writers' actions, imitation of the behavior of the expert writers and the actual practice of the art of writing. A recent meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescents supports the principles of cognitive apprenticeship (Graham & Perin, 2007). Peer assistance and mentor assigned goals for the writing project are two forms of effective scaffolding. This model of learning emphasizes that learning is embedded in the interactions of practitioners as learning is participating in knowledge held by the community. Learning in the communities of practice is replicated within the confines of the university's learning environment by situated learning.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center (2008) tackles issues of writing issues using a series of podcast features interviews with their outstanding researchers to improve their writing proficiency. Borja (2005) finds that students learn workplace practice such as communication, time management and problem solving while constructing podcast. Nathan and Chan (2007) investigate on the use of podcasting in fostering good practice in teaching and learning find that students are willing to use podcasting technologies in learning.

Roberts (2008) in a pilot study on students of sport development investigates on the initial findings on perceived effectiveness of podcasting feedback. The findings suggest feedback from podcast were received more favorably than traditional feedback approaches in oral and practical assessments than written assignments. In written assignments, students prefer both audio feedback and feedback on their written assignments.

Through podcasting, learners are provided with another channel for material review and enable instructors to review training or lectures. Furthermore, podcasting assist non-native speakers not only for listening to speech and pronunciation but also provide feedback to learners. Podcasting is versatile as it is able to replace full classroom or online sessions during content delivery sessions, provide supplementary content or be part of a blended solution.

In ESP context, the term "needs" comprises workplace writing which consists of needs of employers' needs and the industry's needs. In identifying target needs of the employers, the terms of 'necessities', 'lacks' and 'wants' are applied (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). To identify workplace writing demands, the study of 'necessities'

is determined by the writing demands of the present workers. It is essential to identify the existing workplace writing proficiency of transitional writers. By doing so, the transitional writers will be able to bridge the gap between what is expected of the employers against their existing workplace writing proficiency (Hutchinson & Waters (1987).

The constructivist approach emphasizes on learning as a socially active and creative interactive process learners construct new ideas based upon their prior knowledge (Bruner, 1990). Knowledge develops through dialogic negotiations of meanings in the target language with its various socio-cultural expressions. Language is learnt through exposure and interaction with language in authentic contexts by performing tasks and solving problems to ensure high level of participation. This is supported by Lave (1988) as most learning occurs naturally through authentic contexts and “apprentice-like” situations.

In order to encourage workplace writing proficiency which is regarded as situational writing, process genre approach is applied. According to Hyland (2004), process genre approach allows learners to comprehend the processes and purposes of text creation in authentic contexts. By using process genre model of writing, transitional writers adopt a process approach in product-oriented framework to serve the purpose of a writing task and its intended audience (Badger & White, 2000). In process genre approach, experts’ constructive feedback scaffold learners in learning the task.

## METHODOLOGY

There were twenty six female students and seven male students. They were semester six (final semester) in their diploma program. All of them were from Diploma of Science program and the course they took was English for Occupational Purposes. The course aims to equip students to be able to use English in job-related situations. These thirty three students were given questionnaires on three areas ;access to technology, general experiences of using technologies and listening to podcasts in order to determine the feasibility of using podcast in promoting workplace writing among transitional writers. These subjects represent the population of university students at the university.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Access to Technology

#### Internet Access

67 % of students had unlimited dial-up internet access. 18 % of students had unlimited high-speed internet access. 15 % of students had pay as use high-speed internet. All of the students complained that they faced difficulties in

downloading streaming media as the campus imposes restrictions on downloading streaming media.

#### Types of Computers

6 % of students used desktops meanwhile 79 % of students had laptops. However, 6 % of students neither had desktops nor laptops. 9 % of students had both desktops and laptops. All the laptops and desktops were wireless-enabled.

#### MP3 Players

24 % of students owned and used MP3 Players such as Sony Walker. 37 % of students used MP3 features in their hand phones. 39 % of students used MP3 features on their laptops and desktops.

#### Conclusion

The participants had adequate access to the technology as most of them possess their own technological tools such as laptops, desktops, MP3 players, hand phones and access to the internet. However, most of them only had unlimited dial-up internet access which hinders their access to downloading podcasts. In addition, the restrictions on downloading streaming media practiced by the campus discourage students from downloading podcasts.

### General Experiences of Using Technologies

#### Online Experiences

##### Academic Purposes

73 % of Twenty four students used the internet to write academic tasks, access reading materials and Wikis. 15 % of students used the internet to listen to useful podcasts. 12 % of students used the internet to do quizzes or fill in multiple choice questions.

##### Entertainment Purposes

15 % played online games and 3% participated in online shopping. 5 % use internet telephony (Skype) and 30% used chat rooms such as Yahoo Messenger and Window Live Messenger. 10% participated in blogging. 30% shared photos using Flickr or Facebook and 7% shared and broadcast videos used Youtube.

##### The Usage of MP3 Among Students

54 % of students used MP3 features to listen to music. 46 % of students used MP3 features to listen to music, news and educational materials.

#### Conclusion

Students had a lot of experiences in using technologies. They are experienced online users as they participate in various online activities such as gaming, social networking sites such as Facebook and chat rooms. These students shared pictures and videos online. However students rarely used podcasts to take part in on-line discussions related to their studies.

#### Listening to Podcasts

##### The Number of Podcasts

33 % of students listened to two podcasts. 28 % of

students listened to three podcasts. 21 % of students listen to four podcasts. 15 % of students listen to five podcasts. Only 3 % of students listened to more than 10 podcasts.

#### **Difficulties in Accessing the Podcasts**

79 % of students confessed that they had difficulties in accessing the podcasts due to technology glitches and the university rules of restricting downloading of streaming media. 21% of students said their packed class schedules deter them from accessing to more podcasts.

#### **Locations**

22% of students usually accessed podcasts away from the university campus. 24 % of students accessed podcasts from the university campus from campus computers. 39 % of students accessed podcasts from the university campus from their laptops. 15 % of students accessed podcasts between campus computers and laptops from wireless locations.

#### **Time**

21 % of students saved podcasts to MP3 player and listen later. 61 of students saved podcasts to their laptops and listened to the podcasts later. 12 % of students listened to the podcasts on their laptops without saving and 6 % of students listened to the podcasts on the campus computer without saving. These students felt that there was no need to listen to podcasts more than once.

#### **Patterns**

49% of students did not have specific patterns in when they listen to podcasts. These students listened to the podcasts whenever they want to. 30 % of students listened to podcasts on the same day or the day after they were made available. 18% of students listened to the podcast within seven days after they were made available. However, 3 % of students listened to the podcasts every day.

#### **Multi-tasking Ability**

70 % of students did other academic assignments such as project paper or homework while listening to the podcasts. 6 % of students did other activities like cooking and reading newspapers while listening to podcasts. Only 6 % of students took notes while listening to the podcasts and 18% of students did not participate in any activities as they listened to the podcasts as they wanted to concentrate on listening to the podcasts.

#### **The Benefits of Podcasts**

46 % of students felt that podcasts helped them to make good use of their time. 6 % of students think podcast helped them to stay focused on the course as the podcasts organized or structured her weekly learning activities. 30 % of students feel that podcasts helped to stimulate them in learning subjects. 9 % of students felt podcasts were useful in preparation to assess tests and assignments. 9 % of students felt podcasts were motivational.

Difficulties in accessing podcasts 18 % of students did not have any technical problem in using computers

and internet. 42% of students had some difficulties some technical problems but were able to resolve the problems by themselves. 40% of students had some technical problems but they always had someone who was able to solve the problem quickly. All of the students felt that they had difficulties in accessing podcasts as the campus imposed restrictions in downloading streaming media and the lack of guidance to access podcasts.

#### **Conclusion**

The students did not listen to a lot of podcasts as they had difficulties in accessing the podcasts and the process of downloading the podcasts in the campus was time consuming. Moreover they did not have time because of their hectic schedules. Most students preferred to download the podcasts in the campus and listened to the podcasts at their own preferred time. The students did need guidance in determining the guidelines

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### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

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It can be concluded that from the profiles of the students, the students have the access to the technology and they are experienced with the technologies. This is because these transitional writers are exposed to podcasting and podcasts. They do not need to undergo training on how to use the podcasts. Podcasts enable them to do multi-tasking which enables them to listen and do other tasks at the same time but they face difficulties in accessing podcasts they need in their studies and uploading podcasts. The campus needs to lessen restrictions on downloading and uploading streaming media. In addition, the students have access to the technology and experiences with the technology but unable to manipulate these access and experiences due to internet connection restriction by the campus. Thus the university has to improve its connectivity before podcasting can be used in promoting workplace writing. By improving this limitation, the university is able to utilize the use of podcasting in improving workplace writing among transitional writers as these transitional writers are ready to explore this avenue.

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