

Title of Paper: The “New” net generation: Writing development of Creole-influenced adult learners within a virtual learning environment

Name & Affiliation: SCHONTAL MOORE, PhD, is a Lecturer in Language Education, as well as the Graduate Studies Option Coordinator for Language and Literacy Studies in the School of Education, at The University of the West Indies, Mona. Her research interests include blended and online education, instructional technology and English Language teaching within a Creole-influenced context, writing across the curriculum, and teacher training and development in higher education.

Abstract:

Historically, the term “net generation” refers to a younger group of individuals who grew up exposed to computer-based technology (Tapscott, 2008). Realistically, increasingly more adult/mature learners today are turning to the net, and growing up with it, in their pursuit of professional development (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Therefore, the digital space is no longer just for the young; adult learners are developing an ease and dexterity with it in their bid at educational advancement. However, given the hectic lifestyles of so many of today’s adults, those who wish to engage in further studies are finding it rather difficult or inconvenient to go to a physical brick and mortar location for classes. As such, easier access to higher education via virtual learning environments (VLEs) is becoming more attractive, especially to adult learners within the Anglophone Caribbean. The downside, however, is that English, the language of academic currency, poses a challenge to a majority of adult learners, who are themselves predominantly Creole speakers (Moore & Lewis-Fokum, 2016). Furthermore, upon acceptance to a higher educational institution these adult learners struggle with academic writing, which prevents them from actualizing their potential. Given this context, in this paper I use a case study approach to examine the writing development of selected graduate students from the School of Education, UWI, Mona, who engaged with a VLE to improve their writing and to meet the writing expectations of the institution’s academic discourse community. By tracing the learners’ stories – from interviews and archived documents – findings suggested that they experienced degrees of transformation as writers within a VLE. These findings, upon analysis, indicated relevance for policy, practice and theory for higher educational institutions within the Anglophone Caribbean. Further, this paper adds to an underexplored area, writing transformations of online graduate students operating within Creole-influenced contexts and VLEs.

Key Words: virtual learning environment, academic writing, Creole-influenced, adult/mature learners, higher education, discourse community

Paper:

Historically, the term “net generation” refers to a younger group of individuals who have grown up being exposed to computer-based technology (Tapscott, 2008). Realistically though, increasingly more adult/mature learners today are turning to the net, and growing up with it, in their pursuit of professional development (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Given the hectic lifestyles of so many of today’s adults, those who wish to engage in further studies are finding it easier to access education via a virtual learning environment (VLE). Therefore, the digital space is no longer just for the young. Mature learners are forced to develop an ease and dexterity with it in their bid at educational advancement, including those within the Anglophone Caribbean. The downside, however, is that English, the language of academic currency, poses a challenge to a majority of these adult/mature learners, who are predominantly Creole speakers from Creole-influenced backgrounds (Moore & Lewis-Fokum, 2016). Furthermore, upon being accepted into a higher educational institution, they struggle with academic writing, which prevents them from actualizing their potential as graduate students. Given this context, this paper utilises the lenses of case study research to examine the writing development of adult/mature learners from the M. Ed. Summer and Online programme offered by the School of Education (SOE) at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona. These adult/mature learners all engaged with a virtual learning research support site (VLRSS), designed specifically for them by this researcher, to help improve their writing to meet the writing expectations of the institution’s academic discourse community (ADC).

Research question:

How, by engaging with the VLRSS, did the writing of Creole-influenced adult/mature learners in a higher educational institution transform over one academic year to meet the writing expectations of the SOE’s ADC?

Context of the VLRSS

The M. Ed. Summer and Online learners, once registered for their research projects, had automatic access to the VLRSS which was conceptualized, designed and managed by the main researcher as a participatory action research intervention for the said learners. The VLRSS contained educational e-resources and accompanying activities to engage and counter OGLs' writing challenges. In its inaugural semester, the VLRSS was a space that the OGLs visited mostly for basic content information on writing a research paper, not so much for the *practice* of refining their writing and researching skills. At that time, it was not designed for interactivity, nor were opportunities built in for OGLs to get feedback on their written drafts. The site simply fulfilled an urgent need, then, to provide the first cohort of OGLs with information on the methods of researching. By the end of that first semester, however, the VLRSS began to change, and continued to do so incrementally to address other urgent needs in the OGLs' writing. Several e-resources on the site were provided by the OGLs themselves, and by their ASs the main researcher. The range of e-resources expanded to include the support services of WTs, an asynchronous link to an e-librarian, more voluminous reading and grammar folders, hyperlinks to relevant academic-related Internet sources, a dedicated discussion space for peer sharing and socializing, models of past students' "A" grade research projects, and scheduled synchronous chat sessions for collaborative supervision. This ongoing support by the many stakeholders helped to shape the design and perpetual re-design of the VLRSS for improved alignment and relevance to theories of best practice (Anson, 2008; Bates, 1995). The outcome was that the VLRSS metamorphosed over the years to assist all levels of OGLs, regardless of their challenges or competency level with regard to writing and/or researching.

Literature review:

Within the Anglophone Caribbean there is insufficient literature that explores the writing of adult/mature OGLs in a VLE. Their experiences so far have been grossly undocumented. Students who come to the M. Ed. Summer and Online programme within the SOE at UWI, Mona, tend to be adult/mature. They have several years of teaching experience and the requisite undergraduate pre-qualifying certification. Their decision to return to the classroom, especially one utilizing a virtual modality that many might not have fully mastered, signals that there are motivating factors propelling these adult/mature learner back to formal studies. Some of these motivational factors may be personal or intrinsic, or for the purposes of self-actualization; others might be linked to career advancement and/or job requirements. Irrespective of the motivation, increasingly more adult/mature learners are returning to the classroom (Merriam, 2001). A key factor often paving the way in this 21st century for adult/mature learners to return to the classroom is the abundance of new educational technologies (Pincas, 2007). With the proliferation of web-based communication technologies, adult/mature learners need not disrupt their personal and work schedules for continuing education and professional development. Instead of face-to-face instruction, these learners can opt for virtual learning and receive the same quality education. To ensure equity and inclusion of adult/mature learners, those responsible for coordinating and delivering online education must constantly be engaged with these questions posed by Pincas (2007), "How do adult/mature learners learn?" and "How [do we] teach them to best support and enhance their learning experiences?" (p. 28).

In contemplating these questions, Lewis (2009) makes the point that adult/mature online learners "require and even expect guidance, validation and critical engagement with the educator", but that many may find the online learning experience to be outside of their comfort level, "too autonomous for them" if they do not have "the help of an online tutor to guide them through resources and activities as well as engage them in the course content" (p. 27). While the adult/mature online learner values the e-learning mode for its flexibility, it also serves as a double-edged sword since success in this virtual modality depends a great deal on the effective coalescing of prior learning experiences, coupled with self-discipline, effective time management skills, self-efficacy with information technology, and the learner taking responsibility for his/her learning (Lewis, 2009).

Extending this point, York, Yamagata-Lynch, and Smaldino (2016), drawing on the works of Conrad and Donaldson (2004), and Simonson, Smaldino, and Zvacek (2015), have noted that adult/mature learners, especially those in an online environment, are likely to have several urgent needs. Firstly, challenges will set in as they transition to the modality of online learning for the first time if their learning experiences have primarily been the traditional face-to-face (Zembylas, 2008). Secondly, if their traditional face-to-face classrooms have been mostly teacher-centered, then, with online learning being mostly self-directed, the adult/mature learner who is unaware of these expectations will need to make major adjustments in assuming greater responsibility for his/her personal learning within the VLE (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). These fundamental shifts, because they can be disconcerting for the adult/mature learner, underscore the need for extended support and guidance, particularly with regard to the types of instructional strategies, e-resources and e-tivities incorporated within VLE to ensure learner success.

Based on this understanding, VLEs need to be designed to encourage adult/mature learners to critically engage and to be more involved in managing their own learning experiences. A key reason is that while adult/mature

learners often have experiential knowledge that is highly valued (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), what is sometimes lacking, especially if they have been away from the classroom for an extended period of time, is the knowledge of the cultural norms, disciplinary specificity, expectations underpinning academic discourse, and the concept of academic discourse as always being in flux and evolving (Bizzell, 1992; Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; & Stern, 1992). This knowledge is often not immediately acquired by learners or made explicit overnight by the gatekeepers of the ADC. Xing, Wang, and Spencer (2008) caution that academic writing is already a complex endeavour that involves far more than grammatical awareness. Sommers and Saltz (2004) contend that “academic writing is never a student’s mother tongue” (p. 145). So while academic writing can be perceived as universal in one sense because it adheres to generally accepted writing conventions appropriate for academia, in another sense it is far more discriminating and discipline specific, as Canagarajah (2010) argues. Bizzell (1992) sees it as “a linguistic benchmark to which students as novices must always aspire in the hopes of obtaining membership to the academic club” (p. 140). Faculty members, therefore, are those who are considered to be the gatekeepers of this academic club, carefully scrutinizing the discourse conventions employed or not employed by their students to decide if their students warrant entry to the discourse community (Nero, 2010). Bizzell (1992) defines this discourse community as “a group of people who share certain language-using practices” (p. 222). So in this regard, disciplinary differences and accompanying expectations are mostly determined and upheld by faculty members within the respective academic discourse communities, since every academic discourse community (ADC) has distinct ways of “knowing, doing and writing in specific contexts to achieve specific purposes in specific audiences”, contends Milson-Whyte (2008, p. 323). Each ADC, according to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), also has cultural modes of practice with regard to writing conventions that must be learnt and effectively negotiated in order for learners, whether new or seasoned, to gain entry to the respective community or communities. Spack (1988), Schneider and Fujishima (1995), and later Nero (2010), extend the point noting that without an understanding of the inner workings of academic writing in and for a respective discourse community or communities, learners – and in the context of this paper, adult/mature OGLs – will remain on the periphery or are excluded if they are not gradually initiated into the discipline.

Taken further, for the second language learner – and coupled with their status as adult/mature learners – a familiarity with the writing conventions of university culture and disciplinary subcultures is crucial to being accepted and surviving in academia (Schneider & Fujishima, 1995). Similarly, adult/mature learners whose linguistic competence resides only or mostly in their first language (Creole in this context), are at a disadvantage. Grabe and Kaplan (1989) surmise that such students have “not realized or accepted the registers and purposes of discourse in the academic community” (pp. 267). Adult/mature learners, however, can be initiated into the ADC through the responsible action of faculty members who accept that students’ writing development ought to be a shared effort (Milson-Whyte, 2015); not the sole responsibility of writing specialists. Without deliberate ways of making visible and transferable the writing codes and conventions of the ADC, adult/mature learners are likely to experience missteps and disjuncture, and will remain on the periphery with regard to the writing expectations of the ADC.

Additionally, adult/mature OGLs – whether they are just returning to academia or are seasoned – might have a different assessment of their own writing strengths and weaknesses than what the ADC perceives them to be. This point is apparent in Jordon’s (1997) research on the writing difficulties of overseas postgraduate students at a university in the U.K. The students in Jordon’s (1997) study were asked to comment on their own writing problems using a six-point scale, ranging from *no difficulties* to *a lot of difficulties*. Conversely, instructors were asked to rate students’ problems as well. The problem areas selected by students and their instructors showed that both had predominantly opposite views with regard to rating the severity of the problems evident in students’ writing. Faculty also tended to singularly focus on grammar and mechanical elements, to the exclusion of discourse level writing problems. This seemingly obsessive focus on the control of grammatical elements to determine students’ writing abilities does not help with the holistic development of students’ writing, claims Milson-Whyte (2008). Instead, she posits that “the concern should not be merely to eliminate [grammatical] problems”, but that “writing specialists and other faculty throughout the University need to develop a shared vocabulary for talking about writing – a vocabulary that goes beyond basic/minor skills to the discussion of writing abilities and disciplinary ways of knowing, doing and writing” (Milson-Whyte, 2008, p.332). So while the importance of grammatical and mechanical elements in academic writing should not be overlooked, the ADC needs to address the other equally essential areas, of analysis, effective marshalling of information, evaluative and critical thinking skills). Faculty should attend to students’ writing so as to discover “strategic junctures” within “students’ learning processes where intervention and collaboration can be most effective and can help students” (Milson-Whyte, 2008, p. 323).

Still pertinent to the issue of grammar is that within the Anglophone Caribbean where a majority of the M. Ed. Summer and Online learners reside, Creole tends to be the dominant spoken language, while the target language,

Standard English, is the medium that is expected to be utilized for formal speech and written communication. Within this bilingual context, however, Creole, the first language of the majority, contends with Standard English in all spheres of life as users seek to appropriately negotiate both languages for rhetorical and communicative purposes. Within the academic setting where there is an insistence on the use of Standard English as the community's language of currency, learners hoping to be accepted into and eventually succeed within it will need to have, Craig (1999) reasons, a "strong conscious awareness of the formal linguistic characteristics of both their home language and the English they are attempting to learn" (p. 7) to be able to appropriately distinguish their contexts for use. Within this century, however, increasingly more Anglophone Caribbean students, irrespective of their language proficiency, are choosing to access for use – in any academic or rhetorical context within which they find themselves – any of the language varieties along the continuum. While on the positive side this situation reinforces the shifting nature of language codes to accommodate newness and differences within human language communities, on the negative side it has become a cause for anxiety and tension within the academic discourse communities in higher education. Generally, within ADCs the perception is that "English Only" (Horner, 2010) or "linguistic homogeneity" (Matsuda, 2010) is what ought to obtain as the dominant language of academic currency. Matsuda (2010), however, calls this expectation a myth, the "tacit and widespread acceptance of the dominant image of composition students as native speakers of a privileged variety of English" (p.82). This is because increasingly more tertiary level students, due to their language proficiency, or lack thereof, are finding it to be a major challenge selecting and using Standard English appropriately to carry out academic related tasks (Ramsay, 2011).

Methodology:

This chapter is extracted from a larger, expansive research on writing transformations within the VLRSS between 2010 and 2015, of 345 finalizing M. Ed. Summer and Online adult/mature learners who were from Creole-influenced backgrounds across the Anglophone Caribbean. The adult/mature learners returned to tertiary level study for educational and professional upgrades. However, in their final year of the programme they needed concentrated and focused help with writing their research thesis. These adult/mature online graduate learners (OGLs) were assigned writing tutors (WTs) (n = 7) who worked alongside academic supervisors (ASs) (n = 49) and the programme coordinator, the main researcher (n = 1) to help them develop their writing skills for tertiary level study. Of the 345 finalizing OGLs who were sent e-questionnaires, 58 learners completed and returned them. Following that, four rounds of purposive selection were conducted so as to reduce the number of participants from 58, to 17, to 6, and then finally to 1 for deeper case study analysis. Specific criteria that were used to reduce the number of participants included learners' levels of engagement with the VLRSS; the main researcher having access to drafts of participants' chapters with feedback from their WTs and ASs; and participants' availability to be interviewed by the main researcher for the purposes of gathering and teasing out rich, thick data, so crucial for case study research. It is Sharon's (pseudonym) narrative that is singled out for case study analysis for *her voice* to be heard and *her writing transformation* to be understood, vis-à-vis the perspectives of ASs and WTs. Sharon's narrative, however, will invariably shed light on the writing transformations of other adult/mature OGLs from Creole-influenced backgrounds who had similar learning experiences.

Findings and analysis of data:

To answer the research question of this paper "How, by engaging with the VLRSS, did the writing of Creole-influenced adult/mature learners in a higher educational institution transform over one academic year to meet the writing expectations of the SOE's ADC?" has to begin with knowing the writing expectations of the SOE's ADC. Clearly, their expectations have served as the plumb line against which all SOE OGLs' written pieces have been assessed and considered to reflect improvement, or not. Fourteen of the forty-nine academic supervisors (ASs) responded to question 5 on the e-questionnaires, which stated, *What are your expectations of online graduate students' writing in your courses and/or for the research projects?* Distilling from their responses were the following themes: grammatical competence and clear, cogent expression of ideas; content selection and judicious organization of information; evidence of wide reading to improve knowledge; documentation skills; and evident critical thinking.

Apparent also was that effective writing among the OGLs was highly privileged, with a strong emphasis on grammatical competence. Some ASs strongly felt that it was solely the learners' responsibility – as graduate students – to know how to fix their grammatical challenges, the biggest issue preventing OGLs from being strong writers. The suggestions proposed in some of the verbatim responses of the ASs was for special accommodations to be put in place at the departmental and institutional levels to help OGLs improve their writing skills. One consideration worth exploring was for process writing to be built into a majority of the first year graduate courses so that by the time OGLs got to final year and the writing of their research projects, they would have already had the experience of process writing to then apply to that high-stakes writing task. Although the attitudes of the ASs

to OGLs' ineffective writing tended to generally register a level of discontent with grammatical ineptitudes at the graduate level, they need to be mindful of Sommers' and Saltz's (2004) reminder that "academic writing is never a student's mother tongue" (p. 145) so that the ADC can move beyond their role as gatekeeper to that of enabler of students' writing skills development.

Online graduate learners' writing challenges:

Via Skype and telephone interviews to get a deeper sense of the OGLs' writing biography and whether it significantly contributed to their current writing challenges in the programme and as they worked on their research projects, these questions were posed to them: "*How were your writing skills going into a graduate programme? What accounted for you writing the way you did at the graduate level? Was writing hard, easy, or average, and how did your language background affect/impact/impede your writing?*"

With regard to identifying the causes and manifestations of the writing challenges of those OGLs who were interviewed, four general themes emerged: lack of knowledge, lack of practice, affective factors, and lack of teacher feedback. More specifically, several of the OGLs traced their writing challenges back to an earlier time in their educational experience – to primary or high school years – when their foundational knowledge of grammar, especially, was weak. Some OGLs were unable to identify or name their specific writing challenges, which invariably contributed to their lack of agency to, overtime, address the challenges. Additionally, there was a lack of knowledge of the rigors entailed in graduate level writing, that it needed to meet the criteria of the ADC. With respect to grammar, the main problem area with which the OGLs agreed, and which was also identified by the WTs within the VLRSS, was that when confronted with grammatical problems, the OGLs often made their grammatical choices based on the *sound* of the language rather than on the *rules* of the language. On some occasions, errors remained unattended because the OGLs reported that they were caught up in the flow and rhythms of content integration and accuracy as they wrote, to the exclusion of stylistic and grammatical correctness. This was especially the case for OGLs who had taken a long break from writing between undergraduate and graduate studies. Consequently, some of the conventions, not being practiced daily, were forgotten. For some OGLs, there was a genuine fear of writing. This fear stemmed from not being taught *how* to write; they were just given tasks and *told* to write. Additionally, some OGLs had a false sense of their own writing abilities and refused to be convinced even though the errors pointed out by their WTs were glaring evidence of such writing challenges. On the contrary, some learners did not benefit from insightful teacher feedback regarding their written expressions at the earlier stages of their education, hence, that skill remained undernourished. According to Xing, Wang and Spencer (2008) and Britton, et al (1975), academic writing is a complex and challenging endeavour, involving far more than grammatical awareness. So these adult/mature OGLs would need guidance by the gatekeepers to learn discipline specificity in order to gain entry into the membership of the ADC (Bizzell, 1992; Canagarajah, 2010; Nero, 2010).

The Case: Sharon's story of writing development:

While analyses of Sharon's experiences are fashioned through the lenses of the main researcher, of equal importance is her voice. As such, Sharon's story of writing development is punctuated with intermittent analyses of the researcher to tease out the extent to which as an OGL Sharon rose to meet the writing expectations of the SOE's ADC.

My background...

I am thirty-nine years old and I have been teaching now for over fifteen years. When I did CSEC, I got a grade 2 at English, so I always considered myself average. I didn't do 6th form. I went straight from high school to college. I did Home Economics at Teachers' College, but pursued History at UWI. At UWI, I didn't do well; my writing was always a problem. Prior to UWI, I didn't need to do much writing. At UWI, I failed the entrance English Language Proficiency Test, which made me very afraid of writing. I later realized that it was the mechanics which were the problems. I didn't receive a good language base at high school. I can't remember a good grammar teacher; no one took me through the mechanics of writing, etc. Coming into the programme, I was weak. I felt that I grew as a writer during my final year. Things I took for granted, especially the tightening up of my paragraph, I began to pay keener attention to these areas.

A learner's language and writing biography/history have much to do with the skills and competencies the learner arrives with at the tertiary level. Sharon is from a predominantly Creole-speaking background. This impacted her acquisition of the L2 over the years, to the extent that when she arrived at the University, like so many other students, she was still negotiating the Standard. She epitomizes the "multilingual writer" that Canagarajah (2010) references, who arrives at the "academic arena with multiple identities" (p. 175), contending with language usage that continued to impact her writing skills. Pincas (2007) and Merriam (2001) categorize Sharon's situation as

the adult/mature learner who has gaps in knowledge and would therefore need scaffold support, according to Hicks (1997), to bridge those gaps.

Sharon went on to report that,

When I began the M. Ed. Summer and Online graduate programme, I considered my writing abilities average. I wasn't very confident. I was afraid of writing anything when I began the programme and also for the research project. For each course I was required to make posts as a way of participating, but even that I was afraid to do. I was just not confident in terms of what and how I wrote. By mid-course when students started saying some positive things about my writing, was when my confidence started to develop. I was always conscious of spelling errors.

Sharon's fears and weaknesses with writing initially crippled her ability to produce writing. Her first order thinking and writing (Elbow, 1986) did not inspire personal confidence; however, the constructivist feedback of her peers who make up the online community of learners providing social reinforcement, as Gallagher-LePak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) have noted, contributed to Sharon's emerging sense of writing transformation within a VLE.

In continuing her story, Sharon said that,

When I commenced the graduate programme, the writing expectations of my lecturers were never communicated to me. They were never said anywhere. I don't recall anyone posting anything in terms of expectations. However, after submitting work, just two lecturers gave us a rubric and we would see what was given for grammar, or expression, etc. Never anything was said; we just figured that at this level we should be writing at a certain level and manner. I don't remember seeing anything on the course outlines. Always in the feedback I got a sense of the expectations; the grade also indicated the expectations of the lecturers.

Although not explicitly stated, Sharon became aware of a censoring body, the SOE's ADC, which had its expectations of students' writing that Sharon herself needed to meet. Knowing that she had to exert much effort to master the complexities of academic writing, which is far more than just grammatical awareness as Xing, Wang, and Spencer (2008) have pointed out, Sharon relayed that,

As I worked on my research project, there were some good Research Projects posted on the site that helped me a great deal. At first I didn't realize they were there. My computer skills might have prevented me from seeing these projects at first. They helped me with refining the structure of my project, etc. My supervisor, ... she used models to help us to see what we needed to do. I learnt a lot from modelling; I am a visual person. Feedback from the supervisor was also a motivating force, pointing out writing strategies, etc. The Skype meeting with a group of us being supervised was very helpful. We just didn't manage to repeat this activity as was the plan. We had only two such sessions, but they were quite useful. Shared feedback (of our peers in the special group) via Skype and email helped us to rethink our writing and research methods. There was one student who was going off track... seeing her feedback helped me to begin to focus on using the appropriate language. Even the language of research methods was new to me. Working with feedback and learning from the mistakes of my peers helped me to express myself better. I was able to avoid some of the pitfalls (in her work) to ensure that the same didn't happen to me. At one point, I was very nervous, because I thought research was a big deal, difficult, etc. From sharing with colleagues, I realized that it was not so difficult; they shared a lot of useful information with me.

Sharon identified and used those tools within the VLRSS that were crucial to her development as a more effective writer – models of past students' projects, feedback from supervisor, Skype meetings, and feedback from the community of learners within her programme. By also engaging the readings, she improved her knowledge and familiarity with the language of research methods. This awareness on Sharon's part accords with Juwah's (2006) point regarding building interactivity into VLEs, that having a diverse range of interactions between learner and learner, learner and content, and learner and interface helps to inform meaning making and deepens understanding and mastery of the subject. Sharon's report, in fact, gives credence to the positive effect of the VLRSS helping her to grow as a writer. She further explained her sense of independence and autonomy as a learner, emerging from her engagement with the VLRSS:

Coming to this course without any background in research, the site was very helpful in terms of steering me through the process. At the end of the period, I pretty much knew what I was to put in each chapter. I came to feel that I could depend on the site entirely, without having to consult with my supervisor.

The VLRSS helped her to become a more confident writer, with the added skill of assisting others to improve their writing. She explained:

I could always find something there to help me, without having to call my supervisor. If I was unclear about a particular area, the site was useful in that I could find something there to address the problem. The mechanics of research, the language of research, the standard of writing research, APA and its importance, ... all of these areas were available on the site. For the first time, my students did very well in their own history research – Why? I gave them what I did not get when I was a student at the high school level – it was the site that helped me to help my students. The how of putting a research together was the best thing about the site.

This was a poignant realization for Sharon, to be able to appreciate the benefits of the site's resources to her growth as a writer. As a matter of fact, she said:

I didn't mind that the site wasn't monitored by a lecturer. I used all that I needed. Persons posted additional stuff (videos) and that was also useful. I downloaded much of the materials and went over them at my own pace and in my own time. The biggest problem I had was the citation.... I learnt how to do this better though over time. The analysis of the sources was much improved for me during that year. I learnt to write clearly, paid attention to sentence lengths so that they would not gather errors of grammar, etc. I applied tips of writing in my final drafts.

Sharon also acknowledged the ways in which she drew from the e-resources on the site, transferring that knowledge towards improving her skill with writing. In fact, she was definitive in her claim when she said,

Definitely, for sure, when I completed the research project, I saw where I had grown as a writer in terms of manipulating information (putting information together better, coherence, sentence structure, etc.). Individuals supported me in the process (at my school), and they helped me to edit and revise, to improve my expression, flow, transitions and connections. Citation and integrating sources, and commenting on them also improved. I learnt to be present in my research. (It wasn't too heavy on quotes that belonged to other writers). Being ignorant of the research process and its language became foreign to me; I now know much of this information at the end. This made me feel as if I was a part of scholars. At work, I now know that I can do simple research around everyday situation. This is something I walked away with... knowing how to use the tool of and for research, the language of research, etc. to make my work more meaningful. I have definitely grown leaps and bounds; for the first time I began feeling like I could continue with further studies, to something else beyond the masters' level. I no longer fear research; having gone through the process, and I didn't fail, made me realize that the work is rewarding at the end.

Undoubtedly, Sharon's transformation as a writer was linked to the VLRSS and also to the support of an external variable – collegial support from work – to connect her to the ADC and to make her accept her dual roles as educator and researcher. Additionally, knowing that she transitioned from a Level 1: Poor or Weak writer, to Level 2: Emergent, and then to Level 3: Competent writer, significantly contributed to Sharon's exuberance, as well as to her confidence and heightened writing skills. Her pride in her growth as a writer is manifested when she noted:

I received an "A" grade for the project; I was pleasantly surprised. Due to my lack of confidence, I had always under-rated myself. I worked hard at the research project, and I really wanted to do well, but still I was surprised by the grade I received. If I had gotten a B+, I would have been disappointed, because I really worked hard at the project.

Conclusion:

In the final analysis, both examiners agreed that Sharon's work that was submitted for examination reflected "a well written and effectively conceptualized research project", and, as such, it received a grade of "A". Upon reflection, the comments of the two examiners, as well as the comments of the supervisor on Sharon's chapter drafts aligned with Sharon's narrative of her writing development. While it might be presumptuous to assume that any significant improvement was solely attributed to the use of the VLRSS, one cannot underestimate its usefulness and value to Sharon's writing development, based on the information she shared in her story and her supervisor's encouragement for her to utilize the e-resources on the VLRSS. One can confidently accept Sharon's claim that by the end of the academic year of engaging with the VLRSS, she had "definitely grown leaps and bounds" with respect to her writing and her writing skills.

The same case can be made for other OGLs like Sharon who engaged the VLRSS; their narrative also reflected that they developed as writers and met the writing expectations of the SOE's ADC. They became autonomous learners, sufficiently empowered and confident to produce successful writing for contexts even outside of the SOE. By tracing adult/mature OGLs' storied experiences, through data gathered from e-questionnaires, interviews, archived documents and the researcher's field notes, the overall findings suggested that OGLs experienced marked degrees of transformation as writers within a virtual learning environment, which have promising implications for policy, practice and theory for higher educational institutions within the Anglophone Caribbean, as outlined below:

1. The ADC needs to be more sensitive to the language backgrounds of OGLs.
2. The ADC needs to carefully consider the place of, as well as their position on, cross-language, trans-language and interlanguage within academia, and their degree of accommodation for these language varieties utilized by students when writing academic discourse.
3. Writing tutors and content lecturers need to assume their roles as writing mentors to the OGLs.
4. The ADC needs to make explicit their writing expectations at the graduate level.
5. Designing virtual learning sites need to be undergirded by theoretical wisdom, grounded in interactivity and engagement for the achievement of course objectives.
6. Users' input in the design of virtual learning environments is just as important as the site designer/manager, and so it must be validated. Without conversations with those who use the site, and without their critical suggestions for its improvement, a virtual learning site will likely miss the mark of its purpose.
7. Content lecturers, as academic gatekeepers, also need to seek out ways of getting students to grow as writers, and not leave that responsibility solely to the language experts or writing tutors.
8. There ought to be bridging transactions in place for adult/mature learners returning to tertiary level studies to come into alignment with the writing conventions of their disciplines

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