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How Should Digital Tools for Writing be Evaluated? Reflections from Digital Pedagogies and Applied Linguistics

Niall Curry
Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract

The use of digital tools in academic literacies remains an emerging field, having advanced greatly in recent years. This dialogue responds to Scholnik (2018), by arguing the benefits of considering the use of such tools in light of advances in digital pedagogies and applied linguistics. Going beyond understanding how academic writing developers engage with digital tools, an important next step is to consider whether their use of such tools is effective.

How should digital tools for writing be evaluated? Reflections from digital pedagogies and applied linguistics

Scholnik (2018) recognises many of the well-established motivations for using digital tools to “brainstorm, research, take notes, outline or map, draft, cite, rewrite and revise, add graphic elements [to, and] edit” an article (p. 121). Her work addresses clear lacunae in the field of academic literacies and gives much welcome insight into the academic writing practices. For example, among language tools, she finds spell checkers and dictionaries are the most used. However, while it is worthwhile knowing which tools writing developers use, an important next step would be to identify whether or not writing developers use tools to effectively support their own writing development. Moreover, upon reading the study, questions arise as to why some tools with established value in academic writing development, like corpus analysis software, are less used. While digital tools for developing academic writing remains an emerging area of interest in the field of academic literacies, research in digital pedagogies and applied linguistics offers valuable insight into this issue, with many developments emerging in recent years following the publication of Scholnik’s (2018) paper.

Like Scholnik (2018), literature on digital pedagogies recognises many applications of digital tools to learning and development. In key areas, digital tools have been seen to be effective for increased engagement (Croxtton, 2014; Curry & Riordan, 2021; Power & St-Jacques, 2013), motivation (Abdelhafez & Abdallah, 2015; AbuSaleek, 2016; Chen 2012), autonomy (Barber, et al., 2016), accessibility (Godwin-Jones, 2018), and personalisation (Curry, 2022b; Kerr, 2015). However, analysing how digital tools ought to be applied based on our knowledge of how people learn (Johnson & Marsh, 2016) is increasingly recognised as an important practice for determining whether or not specific tools are best placed to achieve learning and developmental ends (Kirkwood & Price, 2005). Ultimately, the avoidance of tool-centricity (Curry, 2022a; Mishan, 2016) in favour of pedagogical—or developmental-centricity—is a widely shared view. Nevertheless, Tsui and Tavares (2021) offer an interesting alternative perspective on the topic, arguing for a more nuanced approach to the use of technology for informing, supporting, and potentially reshaping how we teach and learn.

Generally, criticisms of digital tools in education and writing development are reflected in discussions of how a lack of digital literacies impacts the effective exploitation of digital technologies (Claypole, 2016; Kerr, 2015). Further studies centre on the inequitable distribution of technology globally, causing a digital divide (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018), the blurring of academic and corporate roles in educational technology innovation (Wagner & Kunnann, 2015), and, in this age of data capturing and exploitation, ethical use of technology (Sharkey, 2016). Overall, a critical interrogation of the use of tools for writing development would offer insight into how to best exploit them, recognising that “digital pedagogies will not automatically support and enhance the learning process unless some thought is given to the ‘goodness of the fit’ between the learning task and the learning technology” (Selwyn, 2011, p. 88).

Scholnik’s (2018) study is illuminating in identifying the range of technologies with which writing developers engage. However, research from second language acquisition and language pedagogy offers further insight into writing development from a language tool perspective. Take the example of concordancers. Scholnik rightly identifies their value for collocation analysis. Yet research in data-driven learning and direct applications of corpus linguistics to learning and development shows there are many ways in which corpora and corpus analysis software can be used. Data-driven learning, or “the learner as researcher” (Bernardini, 2006, p.16), takes an inductive approach to learning (Gavioli, 2005). Writers can first observe academic language and then classify what they have observed. They can identify rules for the item being studied through grammatical analysis (Hadley, 2002) or lexical and lexico-grammatical analysis (Timmis, 2015). Interest in this type of autonomous approach to development is increasing (Granath, 2009), potentially owing to its established efficacy for learning and development (Boulton & Cobb, 2017; Pérez-Paredes, 2022).

The model in Lee and Swales (2006) exemplifies this application of data-driven learning to writing development. They report on a project in which novice writers create a small corpus of articles in their discipline and analyse them to improve their own writing. Their study produced generally positive results for using corpora to develop academic writing. Academic corpora could be examined by researchers at any career stage to investigate discreet and disciplinary facets of writing, such as how the authors express aspects of stance and engagement like rhetorical questions in their writing (e.g., Curry, 2021a). These applications could employ the use of a monolingual specialised corpus of expert writing or a comparable corpus of expert and novice writing, as in the case of Lee and Swales (2006), while multilingual corpora could be used to identify differences across languages (Almazova & Kogan, 2014; Curry & Chambers, 2017; Schmied, 2011). Overall, data-driven learning offers more than collocation analysis as Scholnik’s participants identify and, for writers to effectively exploit language tools like concordancers, it is imperative that they be trained in their myriad uses.

Such a view is now, arguably, more important than ever before, following many fast-paced developments in digital pedagogies over the last number of years. As is well established by now, there has been a growth in use of tools for teaching and learning writing in recent years, owing to the online pivot of the COVID-19 pandemic (Curry, 2021b). At this time, there was a clear movement from the initial crisis pedagogies (Ganobcsik-Williams et al., 2022; Tsui & Tavares, 2021) that shaped global practices to a more advanced digital pedagogy. Building on this collective growth, there is an evident case to reflect on the affordance of technological advances for writing development. Moreover, these developments have been followed by a further technological advancement, the lasting effect of which on academic writing practices remains mostly unclear. That is the growth in use and access to artificial intelligence writing tools, like ChatGPT. Now occupying a growing literature in academic writing circles (Anson & Straume, 2022), much consideration is given to risks that ChatGPT poses for education (Benuyenah, 2023) as well as the ways in which it can or may be used as a tool for writing development (Anson & Straume, 2022). Pre-dating both these technological revolutions, Scholnik’s (2018) paper offers a pathway for interrogating these new developments by grounding our reflections in established practices and developing training resources for contemporary digital pedagogies.

Kerr (2015) identifies that the untrained and ineffective use of digital tools is likely to lead to premature abandonment or misuse. Therefore, while knowledge of the practices of academic

writing developers and their engagement with digital tools holds value, this knowledge must go hand in hand with the pedagogical and theoretical rationales that guide their use. Looking more broadly to fields in education and applied linguistics, as briefly presented here, can help writing developers critically engage with digital tools and technologies to develop recommendations of not just the tools to use, but how to use them more effectively.

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