The hard working learner: third party products and academic language and learning
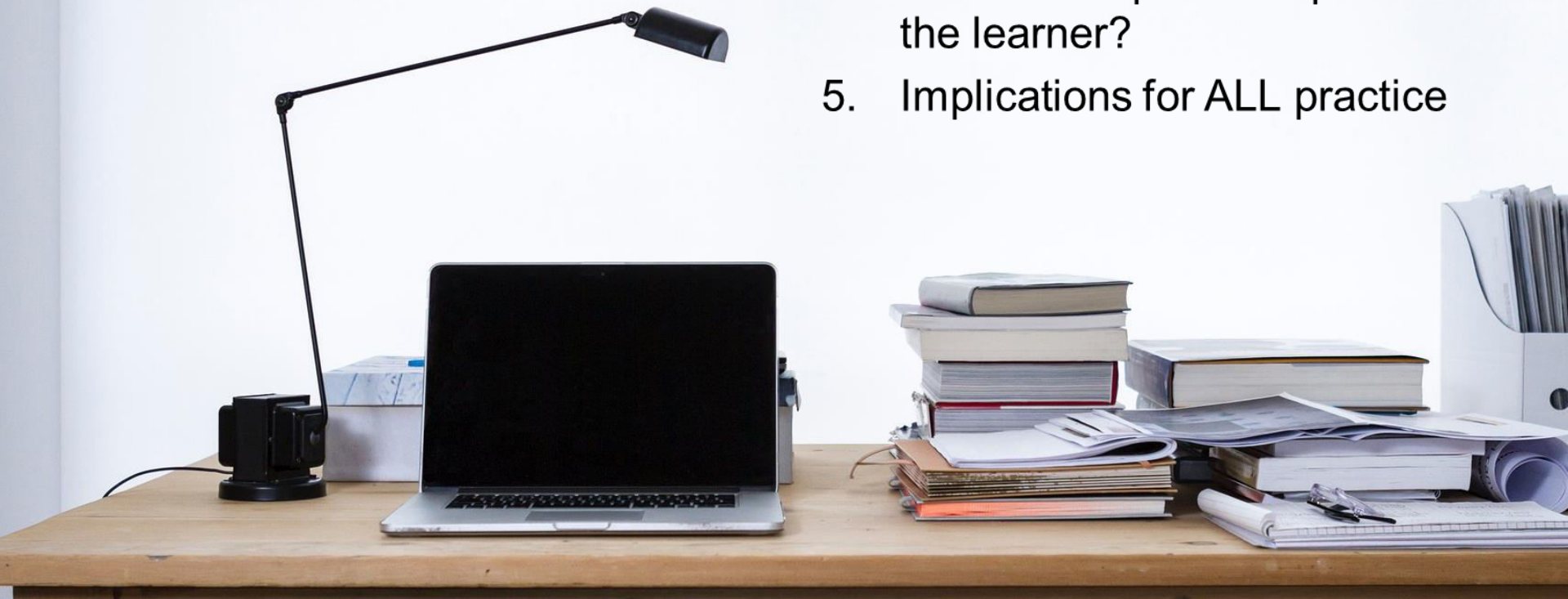
Helen Benzie
Rowena Harper

Outline

1. Theories of writing development

2. Online products for writing development

3. How do the products position writing?

4. How do the products position the learner?

5. Implications for ALL practice

Theories of writing development

Academic literacies

Genre EAP

Study skills

4. Sociocultural and political context

3. Event

2. Cognitive processes

1. Text

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Ivanic 2004

Online products for writing development

1. **Machine-based tools**
    – Spelling, grammar, style checkers
    – Translation and paraphrasing tools

2. **Content-based programs**
    – Online courses, including MOOCs
    – Self-paced modules

3. **Person-based services**
    – Online platforms connecting students to an adviser
    – Feedback on drafts

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Machine-based tools

Machine-based tools primarily address word choice, grammar, spelling and sometimes style. Many are open and available for free online, some charge a subscription fee to individual users, and others form part of large commercial suites which may be made available to students if their institution has purchased access. Grammarly® is probably the most widely recognized of the free automated tools. It identifies spelling errors, grammatical errors, and suggests alternative vocabulary with synonym suggestions that are reportedly 'context-optimized'. According to the website, Grammarly® "makes sure everything you type is easy to read, effective, and mistake-free". ProWritingAid® advertises a similar range of services, offering to help the user 'eliminate errors', 'find the right words', and improve on style issues. Hemingway App® focuses more on style, and 'highlights lengthy, complex sentences and common errors'. Such errors include words that could be exchanged for simpler ones, adverbs, and the passive voice.

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Content-based programs

MOOCs

- Coursera®, edX® and FutureLearn® are leading providers
- Typically partner with universities to develop them
- Globally produced, for a global market of potential students
- Can be linked to from, or 'plugged into', the LMS

Publisher products

- Modules and courses provided by textbook suppliers
- Focus tends to be grammar and vocabulary, and to some extent structure and argumentation
- Produced for a global market of potential students
- Can be linked to from, or 'plugged into', the LMS

Person-based services

- Studiosity® (previously YourTutor) and Pearson's Smarthinking® leading providers
- Offered outside normal business hours or 24/7
- Common selling points: flexible, equitable, timely
- Tutors are in a range of (unknown) locations
- Tutors' experience/expertise is also unknown
- Can be linked to from, or embedded in the LMS

Structure

Aotearoa New Zealand has a unique and challenging training environment due to the many New Zealand and global influences the sector faces. The modern training environment is continually evolving and as an educator [You need a comma both before and after a phrase like this.] I need to effectively meet the challenging nature of the sector. I have detailed below some of the key challenges to the tertiary training environment and how as an educator I work effectively in the sector. [This is a solid intro. I just suggest that you be a tiny bit more specific about what each section, specifically, is going to be about here.]

T [You should have a bigger space between sections.]echnology changes

Like all workplaces globally, including New Zealand, the rapid technology changes are greatly influencing the tertiary training environment and [You need a comma before this conjunction.] training institutions must adapt, together with educators, if they are to have a future.

How do the products position writing?

Machine-based tools

Writing as a technical process

Focus is entirely on the text

Use a singular, generic model of 'good' writing

1. Text

Tend to dislike passive voice, qualifiers, complex language

Automated, not dialogic

'Be bold. Don't hedge.' (Hemingway app)

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How do the products position writing?
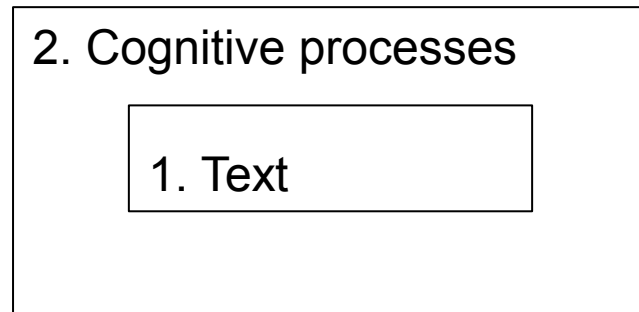
Content-based programs

Some opportunity to see writing as a socially situated practice

Content likely to rely on singular, generic model of 'good' writing

Focus primarily on the text, and structure/argument

Automated or generic feedback

Integrated at level of interface, not discourse

2. Cognitive processes

1. Text

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How do the products position writing?
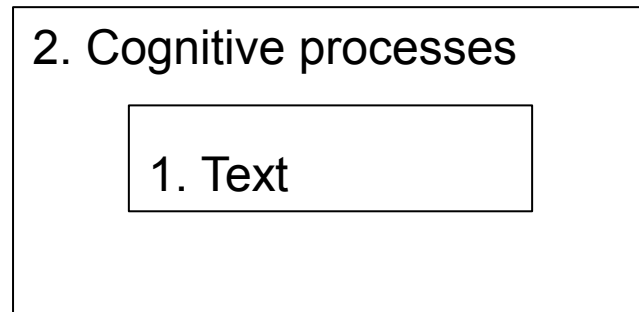
Person-based services

Experience and approaches of tutors are unknown

Can promote appreciation of context, but do not know the context

Generic writing advice?

Focus primarily on the text, and structure/argument

Integrated at level of interface, not discourse

2. Cognitive processes

1. Text

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How do the products position the learner?

- As enacting technical, mechanical processes to produce texts
- Isolated from the community for which they are learning to write (de-contextualised)
- Autonomous – separate from the writing

What do these products teach students about writing?

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http://www.thethinkingstick.com/i-dont-like-learning-alone/

What are the issues?

- The products are limited in their capacity to develop the writing students need at university

- Also, the products introduce *additional* problems

Fragmentation of the learning experience

- Students must cobble together writing advice from different sources that provide inaccurate, irrelevant and conflicting information

Inefficiency and frustration

- Students must figure out through trial and error which bits of advice are NOT applicable to their discipline context

On balance, are these products actually helpful?

Implications for ALL practice

- ALL practitioners need to be able to explain for their University the benefits and limitations of these products
- Assist students to evaluate and use these products effectively for developing writing in their disciplinary context
- Integrating (academic literacies) writing development activities into courses

Key references

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