

Essay Assist – Self-accessed Guidance in Essay Writing*

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Writing academic essays of the argumentative, expository genre poses difficulty for many post-secondary students, especially students from non-native English speaking cultures studying in an English-medium polytechnic or university. Students may have the required topic knowledge and sufficient language proficiency to write understandable sentences, but still fail to produce essays that meet the expectations of faculty. This paper presents an attempt to improve student writing through an application of the cognitive and social models of writing to developing a self-accessed, computer-mediated instructional package called *Essay Assist*.

■ Introduction

Writing academic essays of the argumentative, expository genre is difficult for many post-secondary students, especially students from non-native English speaking cultures studying in an English-medium polytechnic or university. Even when language proficiency is not a major hindrance (as in the case of English educated students like those from Singapore), students have difficulty measuring up to faculty expectations of academic literacy. Problems include being “drowned in detail” (Johns, 1991, p.169), giving information about a topic instead of constructing a focused argument, and not being able to display valued discourse behaviours like moving “from concept to examples or facts and back to concept” (ibid, p.171). The thinking and language skills students have to master include a) organising information to match communicative purpose and reader expectations, b) making moves towards the communicative goal, c) adopting the posturing appropriate to the situation, and d) engaging in the discursive practices of the disciplinary community of which the tutor-reader is a member. The student’s problem is not so much linguistic ineptness as inadequate awareness of the norms governing thinking and discourse in an academic discipline.

Instruction in academic writing in general writing classes is unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. The first is that it is “atypical” (Freedman, 1995, p.130) since it does not engage students in responding to the socially constructed exigencies of authentic disciplinary writing. General writing instruction has tended to be product-centred, with teacher and textbooks describing the desired features of successful writing (for example, an essay must have a thesis), and leaving students to work out for themselves how the desired features are realised in their

own discipline (for example, what constitutes an acceptable thesis in history or educational psychology). The second reason for the ineffectiveness of general writing instruction is that students in a writing class tend to come from different disciplines. The diversity of disciplines poses a problem for the teacher who sees the wisdom of sensitising students to the typical ways of thinking and the discourse acts in a student’s major discipline. Neither is it feasible, in a class of students majoring in several different subjects, to situate writing skills training in the context of authentic, discipline-related writing tasks so as to exploit the “situated nature of cognition” (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p.32).

One approach to providing writing instruction situated in the disciplinary context of students’ actual writing tasks is providing electronically delivered, self-accessed guidance that students can activate whenever they encounter a composing problem while engaged in writing a content course assignment. *Essay Assist*, an instructional package funded by a grant (RP 10/99 ANT) from NIE’s (National Institute of Education) Academic Research Fund, is a step in the direction of making available self-activated programmes that guide novice writers towards appropriate decisions whenever a problem or uncertainty stalls progress during their writing.

The next two sections explain the theoretical models that guided and continue to guide the construction and on-going development of *Essay Assist*. A few pages from *Essay Assist* are included to demonstrate how theoretical approaches to writing and learning writing translate to instruction.

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■ Sensitising students to the social and cultural dimensions of writing

The theoretical framework that guided the construction of *Essay Assist* may be described as socio-cognitive in the sense that writing is viewed as a social interaction activity situated in a social and cultural context, and involving decision-making and problem-solving operations that reflect the culture of the writer and reader. The writing of an essay is embedded in a socio-cultural context to serve a social function, which, from the student's point of view, is to participate in the on-going conversation of the disciplinary discourse community so as to obtain the approval of the community's expert members for displaying the thinking and discourse skills valued in the community.

The view of writing as a social activity situates the process of writing firmly in the context of communities of people that have distinctive ways of thinking, speaking, and "acting together" (Miller, 1984, p.36) on issues involved in the community's work. It follows that the best way to learn academic writing skills is to learn at the site of a writing task situated in the discourse community that requires the writing. This is because, as Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) have argued, knowledge is an integral part of the context and activity in which that knowledge is learnt and applied. In other words, the ideal

time for a student to learn the thinking processes and lexico-grammatical features that go into the creation of the essay genre is when the student is struggling to write an essay required for a course he/she is studying.

To situate the improvement of writing skills in a students' own writing assignment, the writing lessons in *Essay Assist* are activated by students themselves when they encounter a problem or a doubt that stalls their writing. Entry into *Essay Assist* is thus through the student identifying his/her problem or doubt. To help students articulate their problem, a menu of problems is provided from which students select one that they think most closely represents the problem they think they have. (See Figure 1 for a page from the "Problem Menu".)

From a socio-cultural perspective, the academic essay as a genre is an event in which thinking, knowledge construction, discussion, argument, and persuasion are conducted according to an underlying value system that is not readily apparent to 'outsiders'. To write successful essays, students must be aware of the value system or culture of the community of scholars, teachers, and experts in their discipline of study. *Essay Assist* aims to move students from a sentence production and knowledge display view of writing to a model that sees essay writing as an opportunity to "participate in the actions of a community" (Miller, p.39) according to the

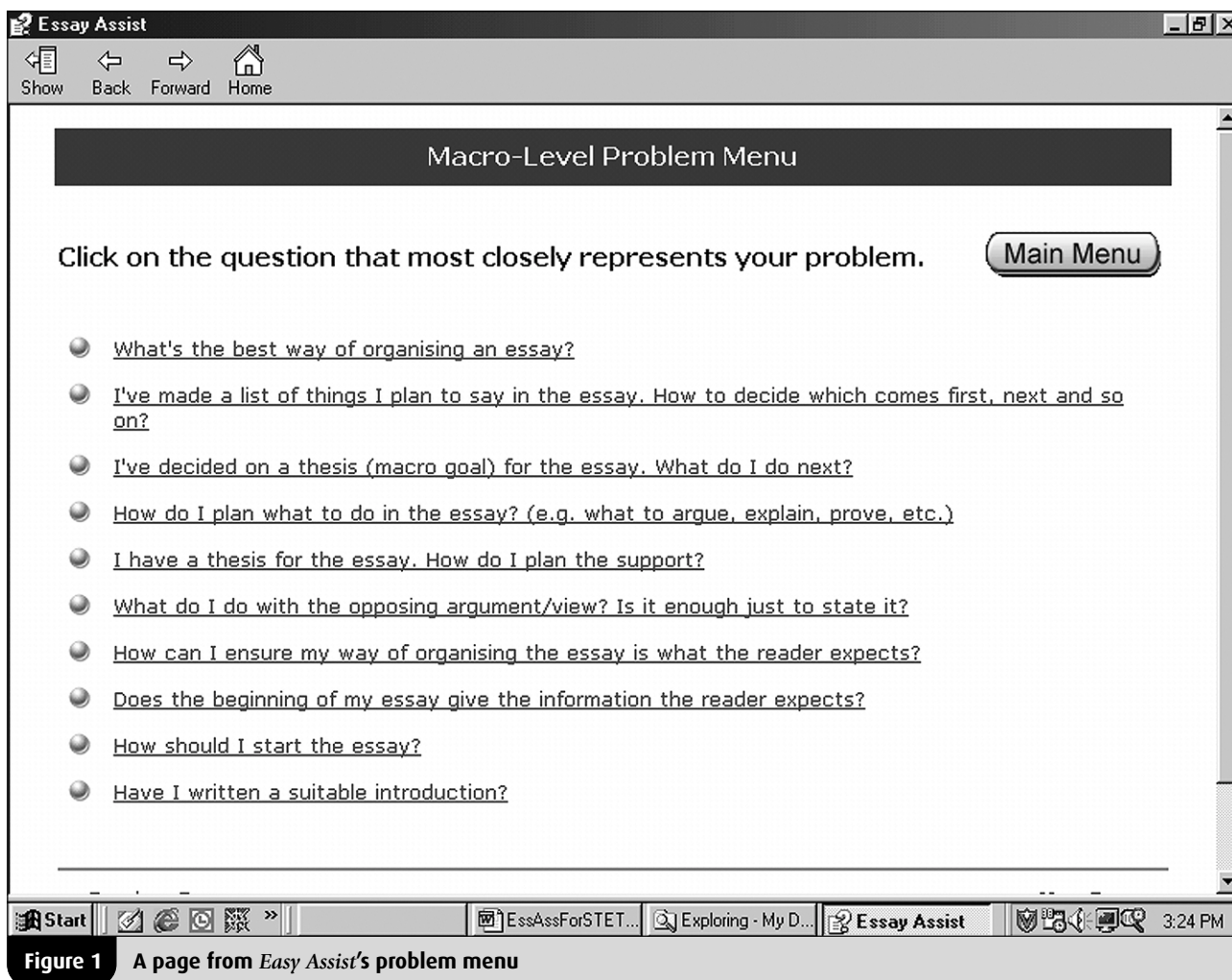


Figure 1 A page from *Essay Assist's* problem menu

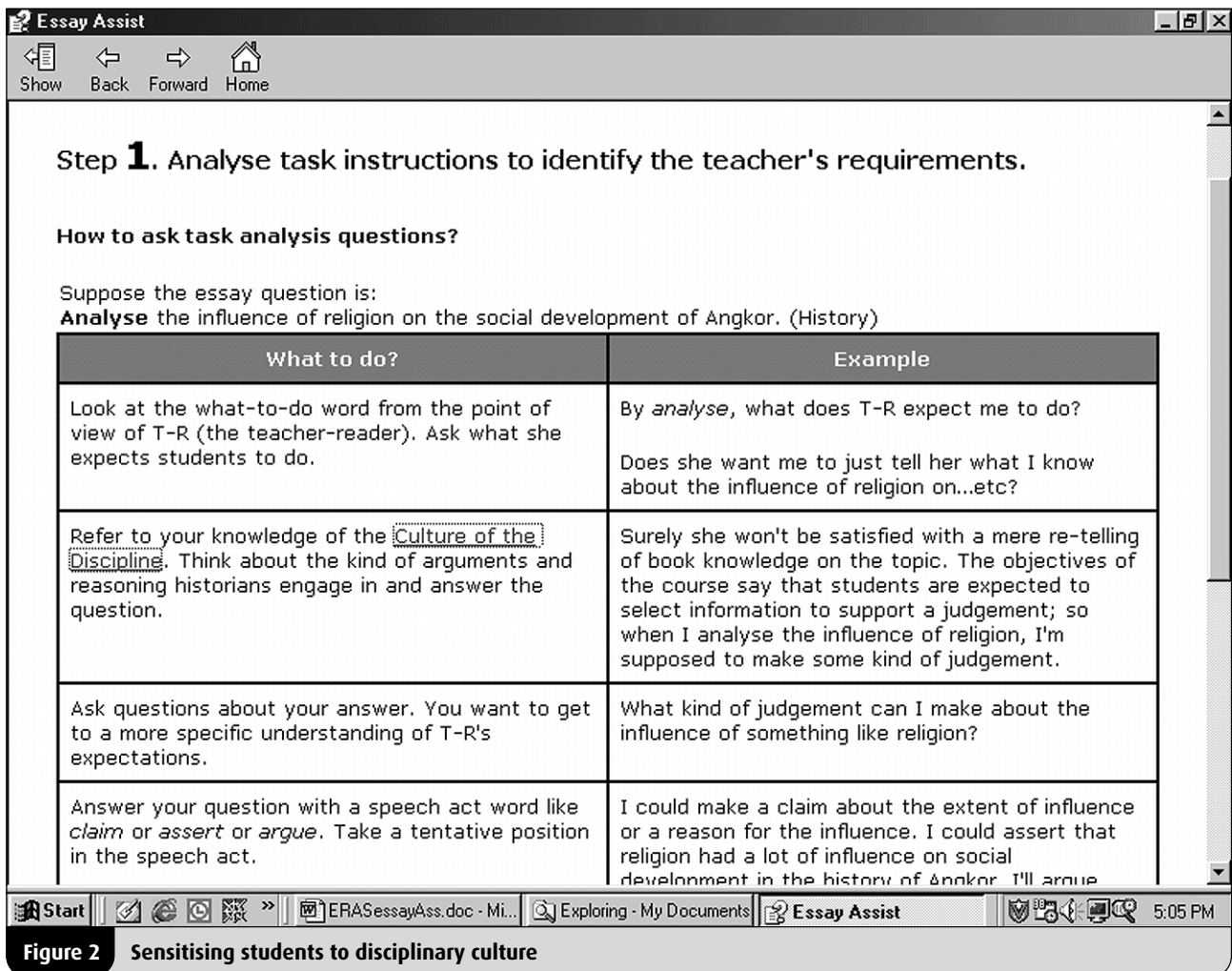
norms governing interaction in their disciplinary discourse community. To enable students to interpret experience in alignment with the world view of their discipline, *Essay Assist* demonstrates how to take into account the culture of a discipline as they make composing decisions (See Figure 2).

The screen page shown in Figure 2 is part of a section aimed at helping students to work out the unspoken requirements in an essay assignment so that a macro goal (thesis and global intention) can be formulated to guide the writing of the essay. The instructions in the left column and the example in the right demonstrate to students how the tutor-reader's expectations are shaped by normative discourse practices, which can be gleaned from course documents such as course description and course readings. The exemplar self-instruction in the right column "to make some kind of judgement" models for students a discourse act that characterises perhaps all academic writing: interpretation. "All discourse communities ... interpret experience," says Bizzell (1992, p.92) in her account of what makes academic writing difficult for students. The explicit articulation and modelling of some of the discourse acts (support a judgement, make a claim) typical of one discipline (e.g. history) would hopefully lead to students' noticing of similar acts in the discourse of their own discipline. Conscious or

unconscious noticing of discipline-related genre conventions would, over time, add to students' knowledge of the genre as they become "inducted into the ways of thinking, ... construing and interpreting phenomena valued in that discipline" (Freedman, 1997, p. 187).

■ **Guiding the cognitive processes in writing**

While writing is social interaction situated in social and cultural contexts, there remains the fact that decisions about what to say and how to say it have their genesis in the writer's cognitive structures. Viewed through the cognitive lens, writing is a goal-directed, decision-making and problem-solving activity that begins with defining the "rhetorical problem" to which the writer has to respond (Flower and Hayes, 1981). The rhetorical problem, according to Flower and Hayes (1981), is "the most important element" at the beginning of composing because "if a writer's representation of her rhetorical problem is inaccurate or simply underdeveloped, then she is unlikely to ... attend to the missing aspects of the problem" (1981, p.369). It follows that, in the context of academic essay writing, any writing instruction programme must first guide students to arrive at a comprehensive representation of the rhetorical problem presented by their essay assignment and to discover for



themselves the explicit and implied demands of the assignment, and second, set goals targeted at those demands so that the students can select and “transform” knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) to accomplish the goals.

The cognitive approach to writing is realised in *Essay Assist* through instructions and examples designed to shape students’ thinking along the lines of macro rhetorical goal setting, audience awareness, and the use of higher-level goals as the reference point in decision-making. To illustrate, the student who needs help with organising his/her essay is advised to anticipate reader questions and comments with respect to the student’s macro rhetorical goal, and then to use the anticipated reader response to plan moves (rather than topic content) that would form the organisational framework of the essay’s holistic argument (See Figure 3). Instead of merely telling students the desired features of the finished product (e.g. *logical organisation, a clear thesis*), which writing handbooks tend to do, *Essay Assist* guides students through the mental operations that take them to decisions tailored to the particular demands of the writing task of the moment. The learning of the cognitive operations for meaning selection and essay organisation is thus situated in the *doing*, rather than decontextualised.

■ Student response to *Essay Assist*

At the time of writing, trials of an initial version of *Essay Assist* are still in progress, but preliminary feedback from students is encouraging. The feedback has uncovered the strengths of the programme, its shortcomings as well as problems relating to students’ capability for independent learning in an electronic environment. What students found most useful was guidance with content selection and generation, that is, deciding what to say and what to omit in the essay. Two other areas of assistance many regarded as “helpful” were thesis formulation and whole-text organisation. The guidance offered in *Essay Assist* for thesis generation, content selection, and macro-level organisation all aim at directing students to a) analyse the task (essay question) and reader expectations, b) plan speech acts and the global rhetorical goal (thesis) that address the task requirements, and c) vet their content against the global goal. Hopefully, students will begin to move from a topic-focused method of content selection to a more reader-centred, rhetorical strategy.

Shortcomings most frequently reported fall into the category of lack of technical sophistication. There was dissatisfaction with aspects of screen appearance such as layout and colour. Some students reported problems with pursuing links that led to pages they did not need and then facing the difficulty of returning to an earlier page they now thought relevant. These complaints about

Essay Assist

Show Back Forward Home

How to organise an essay at macro level?

Think up possible moves

Look at your macro goal for the essay and anticipate the reader's (R's) queries. (If you don't have a macro goal, write a tentative one now.) Your macro goal will contain a major claim or thesis. You have to persuade R to accept this thesis. What moves must you make?

Think up possible moves by predicting the questions, comments, and objections R would pose to you if you told her your thesis. You must keep in mind the culture of R's discipline. Consider only queries and comments that R is likely to ask. For instance, the geography teacher is unlikely to ask "What do you mean by temperature?" if "temperature" is not at issue in the essay question/topic.

The reader questions, comments, and objections you anticipate will suggest moves you may have to make in the essay. Write down all the moves that occur to you.

[Show an example of thinking up moves by anticipating R's questions.](#)

[What kind of questions/comments can I anticipate?](#)

[<< Back <<](#)

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Figure 3 Guiding the decision-making in writing

screen interface and navigation problems point to the need for technical expertise in programming and software design, expertise that may have to be sourced from professional software designers.

The feedback on navigating links throws up a problem with the mindset that students bring to self-accessed learning in an electronic environment. Students seem to think they must pursue every link available on the screen just as they would read every page and every paragraph in a printed handbook. To be effective as an independent learner, students must first learn to set their own goals for learning and to use those goals to direct their choice of links to pursue or pages to read. Perhaps, before the software is distributed, the instructor should meet students to advise them how, and how not, to use the software.

The technical problems notwithstanding, the reception of *Essay Assist* by students who used it to guide their writing of content subject essays has been positive. For the research team, the positive feedback is gratifying evidence that there is a place across disciplines for computer mediated, self-accessed writing instruction that aims to develop competence in socio-rhetorical strategies of writing. As *Essay Assist* is still under construction, student feedback on the shortcomings of the trial version will be valuable for indicating the direction of the work still needed to make the programme more user-friendly and more effective in raising student awareness of the thinking processes and socio-cultural knowledge involved in academic writing.

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