Teaching Writing Using Electronic Portfolio in the Multimedia Lab at Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University[*]

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Abstract: This paper attempts to share the teaching of descriptive writing using electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) in the multimedia lab where students can write according to their own pace. Given individual electronic folders, they can continue writing whenever they want. The students can revise their first draft following comments given by the tutor or peers, or continue to the next assignment put in the tutor's folder. Microsoft Word also provides tools, "track changes " and "insert and view comments", which enable students to freely and responsibly accept or reject suggestions given by the tutor. As a result, corrections, comments and revisions have caused improvements in describing things in more detailed ways, and less on the grammar and vocabulary mastery. However, only 25% of the students think their progress relates to an ability to better describe things; the rest believe their improvements are more in grammar and vocabulary mastery. E-portfolio provides a lot of practice, which enables the students to directly read comments and corrections given by the tutor and peers. Another significant finding is that the tutor must use various delivery techniques to cope with students' different learning preferences.

In my last study with Agnes Santi Widiati[a], a significant finding states that students use some strategies in attacking the writer's block,[b] among others, translation. In this study, also on the writing process using portfolio, I would like to see whether portfolio could also assist students in completing their learning outcomes in descriptive writing.

The learning outcomes are: students know, understand, and be able to write about *people*, *places*, *things*, and *events* with enough vivid **details** to help readers create a mental picture of what is being written about.

The subjects of my present study were students of the third semester[c] and according to their curriculum they learned descriptive writing. Although I gave them the opportunity to write description, I was flexible enough to let them continue develop their narration. In other words, this class learned narrative-descriptive writing.

Unfortunately, my Writing B students were not the same as those taking my Writing A class. Some of them had experienced portfolio when they got narrative writing previous semester, but not all. Therefore, at the beginning, I explained to them the requirements of portfolio, and what they are expected to do such as, collecting the drafts, self-correcting, revising, and for the mid-term and final assessments they could choose their best work to submit. They are also asked to write a journal, after every session, on the followings:

- What did I learn from it?
- What did I do well?
- Why (based on the agreed tutor-student assessment criteria) did I choose this item?
- What do I want to improve in the item?
- How do I feel about my performance?
- What were the problem areas?

However, in the middle of the semester the class moved to the Multimedia Lab and the portfolio became an electronic portfolio. Without collecting their drafts, they had access to the collection of all the drafts and revisions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study is a narrative description of the students' writing process using e-portfolio in the multimedia laboratory. It aims answering the following questions,

1. What does the tutor and students do during the writing process?
2. What do students think about the use of electronic portfolio in the Multimedia Lab?
3. Does the use of electronic portfolio in the Multimedia Lab assist students to achieve the learning outcomes?

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Descriptive writing is a skill that needs extra attention. This is because my students -or, I can say, Indonesian students -are not used to describe things in details. For example, if they write about a dog, they tend to stop there. There is no effort to tell readers what kind of dog it is: a German Shepherd, a Dalmatian, or a mongrel. When it comes to color, they tend to mention the true colors, whereas red can actually be blood-red, brick-red, maroon, etc. The use of adjectives such as, fantastic, gorgeous, marvelous are not their active-productive vocabulary.

On the other hand, descriptive writing requires students to be able to write about *people*, *places*, *things*, *moments* and *memories* as detailed as possible to help readers create a mental picture of what is being written about. Students writing a description is like taking a picture using a camera, or a video using handy cam, if narration is included.

The teaching of writing is normally done discretely and students are to focus on the kind of writing they are supposed to learn. However, in free writing--as opposed to writing for the sake of teaching writing--it is difficult for students not to exercise beyond the class target. The creativity just lies in the ability to flesh out the composition.

DELIVERY TECHNIQUES

The delivery system of this class used the portfolio and student-centered learning. In portfolio, students were expected to collect their drafts and revisions to self-evaluate their writing progress. **Portfolios is**

defined as the "collections of student work representing a selection of performance. ... A portfolio may be a folder containing a student's best pieces and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces. It may also contain one or more works-in-progress that illustrate the creation of a product, such as an essay, evolving through various stages of conception, drafting, and revision.[d]

Similar definition of portfolio in subject areas is ". . . a systematic and organised collection of evidence used by the tutor and student to monitor growth of the student's knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a specific subject area"[e]

In my writing class, portfolio means student's collection of drafts and revisions of their writing tasks, where revisions are done through self-, peer-, and tutor-evaluation. The activities were done in the classroom, and in the multi-media laboratory. At the mid and final semester they were encouraged to submit their "best" work, and their portfolio. Interview was also done to ask them for feedback.

Students learned writing through various techniques. They were the reading-writing technique where the text became the inspiration to write. They had to describe the character according to the text, and according to their own imagination. Here is an example of a student doing her task after reading "The Sacred Grove of Oshogbo" by Jeffrey Tayler (May 26, 1999)

Example 1. Reading to Write

After reading the text given, students were assigned to draw the character as they perceived objectively and subjectively. After some revisions, Subject 2 wrote:

The Sacred Grove of Oshogbo
Objective description:
Pastor Paul was a young Nigerian man. He was very fat, so his belly was spreading under his shirt. He wore a white Izod shirt and a tight beige high water trousers. I could see that he was living a plenty life.

Subjective description:
Pastor Paul was a Nigerian man. Like a common Nigerian man, he had curly hair. His moustache and beard adorned his dark colored face. He was young, but he was very fat. It seemed that his shirt did not fit him anymore because it could not cover entire belly. Despite of being young, he was a wise person.

The second technique used was a game: one student came in front of the class touching an object in a bag. He tried to describe the object and his classmates drew whatever he said. Later on, students exchanged their drawings, discussed with the student sitting next to him/her, and started writing the first draft.
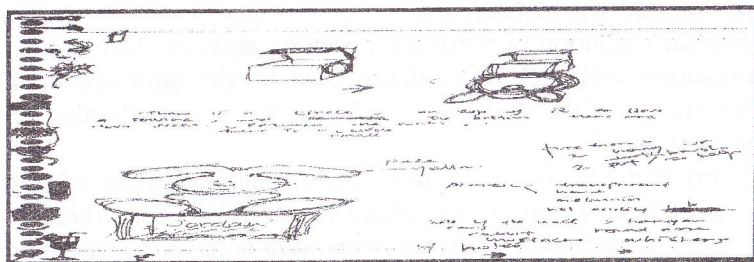
Example 2
Writing Using Games

From the drawings and notes on the left, the student wrote her first draft:	Liana
My Toothbrush Hanger Yesterday, I bought a new toothbrush hanger. It is very unique because it is different from other toothbrush hangers. There is a rabbit shaped plastic on top of it. The rabbit has eyes, ears, a round nose and whiskers. Its color is pale yellow. There is a small hole in the middle of its ears. The holes are for the nails. The toothbrush hanger itself has a rectangular shape of the same color as the color of the rabbit. Inside of it there are four holes to hang the toothbrushes. There is a transparent flip to open and close the toothbrush hanger. The surface of the flip is inscribed with "Jordan" brand in blue. Everybody in my house likes it, and they also hang their toothbrushes inside it.	

Another technique was by asking students to list descriptive words (adjectives and nouns) about their special room so that when they wrote, they could use "rich" vocabulary. This was when the class moved to the Multimedia Lab.

Example 3
A list of Vocabulary

Describing my bedroom	My Bedroom
• A small bedroom: 3 by 5 m • The color of the wall: yellow • The shape: rectangular • Material: bricks • The ceiling is made of eternit • A big spring bed with pillow • Three dolls on my spring bed; Teddy Bear, Panda, Mickey Mouse • A big wardrobe, made of teak • A small table with many books on it • An old television from my grandma • A small mirror • Three pictures on the wall; Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Sharukh Khan • Two lamps in the center of ceiling • A door, made of wood • The weather is quite cold • Two big windows • A big table with many cosmetics on it • There is red curtain to cover my window	I have a beautiful bedroom in my house. My bedroom is quite small, just about 3 by 5 meters. So the shape is rectangular. It is made of bricks. The color of the wall is yellow because yellow is my favorite color. The ceiling is made of eternit. On the right corner there is a big spring bed with a pillow on it. There are also three dolls on my spring bed; they are Mickey Mouse, Teddy Bear, and Panda. Beside the spring bed, there is a small table with many books on it. On the left corner there is a big wardrobe with three doors, which is made of teak. In front of it, there is an old television that is given by my grandma. There is also a big table with many cosmetics on it. The mirror is located above that table. Between the television and the cosmetics' table, there is a door, which is made of teak. Three pictures are hanging on the wall; they are Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Sharukh Khan. In the center of the ceiling, there are two neon lamps. Although in my bedroom there isn't an air conditioner, it's quite cold because it has two big windows. It is covered with red curtain. It's really a nice bedroom for me. **(Mitha)**

The last was writing from a picture. A picture was projected on a screen using an LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) in the multimedia lab. While watching the picture for ten minutes and taking some notes, they were assigned to write on the computer. They had their own folders so that they could continue their writing next time they came back to the lab.

Example 4
Writing from a Picture

Instruction:

1. Look at the picture carefully and describe it in details.

2. What are they doing? What do they wear? What is the relationship between the texts and the elephants?

Example 5 was the second revision of Subject no.1 (whose GPA of the previous semester was 3.61) to show her creativity and imagination using narrative-description.

Example 5
Writing from Picture by Subject #1

Elephant in the Wonderland
(2nd Revision)

On a particular day, when I was reading *Alice in the Wonderland*, I fell asleep and dreamed about the wonderland. At that time, I was standing in front of a very huge door. Its size is about 4 x 2.5 square meter. On the wall, near the door, there was a sign, "INVENTIVE THINKING" which was written with capital letters on a piece of big, black paper.

Because of my confusion about the meaning of the sign, I tried to look for something that could explain it. Then, I looked inside the room through a big glass window on the right side of the wall, and I saw

many chemical equipment, test tubes, and colorful chemical liquid in the test tubes on many shelves. I thought it was a chemical laboratory.

While I was observing it, suddenly I heard a big voice--like an elephant's voice from my left side; therefore, directly hid behind the bushes in front of the lab. From there, I could clearly see what was happening.

There were three elephants, a big one and two small ones. They were marching and singing happily. I could hear their voice, but I didn't know the meaning. The big elephant was in the first row. He wore black and beige trousers, a white ivory shirt, a black tie, and a black jacket. His jacket was covered with a white smock. There were two big pockets and two button holes on his smock. He also wore small spectacles. Besides, his left hand was holding a thick file.

Behind him, a small female elephant was holding his tail by her trunk. She wore a black and white blouse, a black skirt, casual shoes, while there was a black and white bow on her head.

Another small elephant was behind her. This elephant was a male; he wore a white shirt, black trousers, white shoes, a black bow-tie, and a white cap. He was also holding his female friend's tail by his trunk, while wagging his tail.

I thought the big elephant was the tutor, and both small male and female elephants were the students. They walked closer to the chemical lab, and then, in front of the door, they stopped. Next, the tutor said something in "elephant language" to his students, and then both of the students entered the lab. On the other hand, the big elephant was still standing in front of the door in silence. Then he said loudly, "I will*ooo* conquer*ooo* the world*ooo* and kill*ooo* people*ooo* using my new*ooo* invention*ooo* "*unltragenic gun*". Wait*ooo* people*ooo*, I wil*loo killoo* you all*ooo* because*ooo* you had*ooo* killed my family*ooo* and took ou-*roo* ivory." After that he laughed loudly and it made the land shake,

then he followed his students.[6]

After a few minutes, I went out of the bushes with a confused and coward brain. I was afraid of what he had said and surprised because they didn't walk on four feet, but on two feet like human beings, and their high intelligence t invent something great.

I tried to know further what they were doing, but suddenly I heard my mother calling my name repeatedly. When I opened my eyes, I was sitting on a rocking chair holding Alice in the Wonderland, and my mother was standing in front of me. Knew she was angry, so I directly got a broom and swept the floor. While I was doing it, I was still thinking about the smart elephants in my dream, that wanted to rid people.

At the end of the semester, they submitted one of the writings they considered the best to be evaluated. Further, they also had to hand in their portfolio: all the assignments and journals. The electronic portfolio was copied from their folders.

MULTIMEDIA LABORATORY

In Multimedia Laboratory, there are twenty-four computers for students and one computer for the tutor (console). All of the computers can be connected to a server to create local area network (LAN). The students as well as the tutor are given login names and passwords to connect themselves to the server. The server, which uses Novell Netware 5, provides subdirectories (or also called as folders) for the students to store their data. The students can access a shared subdirectory that is created for the tutor to share important data or files for the students to open. This subdirectory is in read-only mode – the students can open the files but they cannot modify them. By logging in to the server, the tutor has an authority not only to modify the shared subdirectory but also to open all subdirectories of her students.

Besides looking at the tutor's instructions and examples from the shared subdirectory, the students can pay attention to their tutor's explanations, which are presented by using a LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) projector. It is connected to the console computer.

MICROSOFT WORD TOOLS

Microsoft Word is actually not only user-friendly, but it is also equipped with lots of tools. However, most people use Microsoft Word more as a computerized type machine (word processor). After some time they will learn from other users that it has a spelling check, or thesaurus. Later, when they have to submit a composition of a certain number of words, they learn to use the word count.

Microsoft Word assists writers not only with spelling check, language thesaurus, and word count, but also with other tools such as, auto correct, auto summary and others. For the purpose of teaching writing, it is equipped with tools for giving comments by clicking **insert**, and then **comment**. Students later can read the comments by clicking **view**, and then **comments**. The Microsoft tools are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3.
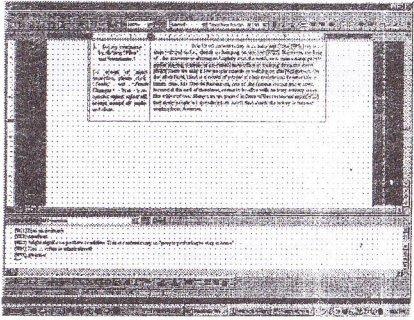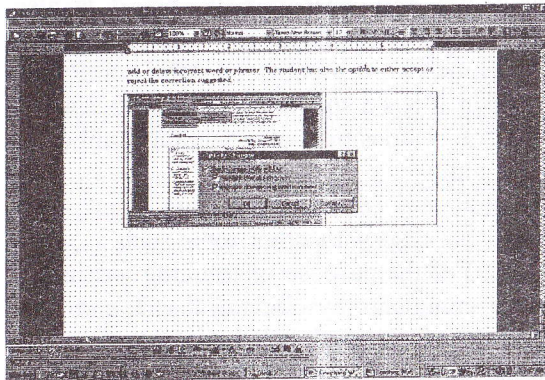
Figure 1. Insert and View Comments

Subject #1
Date: Friday, January 24, 2003
Status: Final Assessment

| Notes:	Mc Donald Restaurant
1. See my comments by clicking "*View*" and "*comments.*" To accept or reject correction, please click, "*Tools,*" and "*Track Changes.*" You have options: *reject, reject all, accept, accept all, undo,* and *close.*	It is 13.00 am and today is a sunny day. The sky is clear without clouds hanging on it. Moreover, the king of the universe is shining so brightly over the earth, so it makes many people prefer staying at home or air-conditioned office to walking down the street. There are only a few people outside or walking on this street. On the other hand, there is a crowd of people at some restaurants because this is lunch-time. Mc Donald Restaurant, one of the famous restaurants in town, located at the end of this street, seems to be alive with its busy activity looks like a hive of bee. Many cars are parked in front of this restaurant signs that many people are spending their lunch time inside the luxury restaurant coming from America.

Figure 2. Direct Correction by the Tutor

Besides **Insert and View Comments**, Microsoft Word gives the ability for direct correction using **TRACK CHANGES**. By clicking "**Tools**," and then "**Track Changes**," the tutor can add or delete incorrect word or phrases.

Figure 3. Students' Option to Accept or Reject

The students have also the option to either accept or reject the correction suggested. By clicking "**Tools**," and "**Track Changes**", and then "**accept or reject changes ...**" they can choose to click one of the following options: *reject, reject all, accept, accept all, undo*, and then *close*. (See Picture 2)
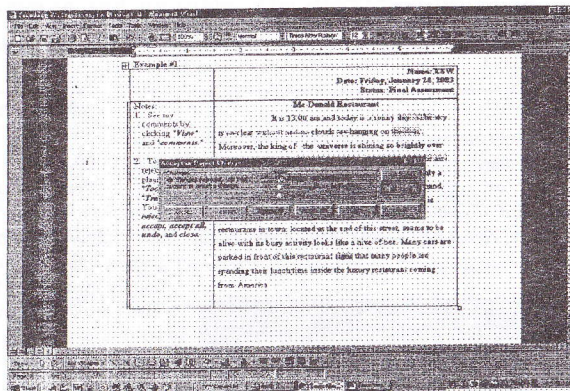
RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was a participant observation of the process of writing of my students learning descriptive writing when they made use of the multimedia lab. In this lab, I was assisted by Johanes Leonardi Taloko. Taloko who taught Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL) encouraged me to gradually move to digital or electronic portfolio, i.e., by the use of electronic technology where the portfolio functioned as an opportunity to employ other media such as, audio, graphics, texts, drawing, etc.

The subjects of the study were 24 students with GPA's spreading from 2.22 to 3.61 (see Appendix). Besides the observation, an interview to all students are used to see whether e-portfolio assisted students in achieving the learning outcomes of descriptive writing course at the English Department of Widya Mandala Catholic University.

FINDINGS

Given the same assignments, students turned out to show different learning preference. From the various techniques used in the class, only 79% admitted they were assisted by the models, and more than half of them liked pictures. This was also revealed by the "best assignments" they chose to submit (54%) which they wrote as a result of watching pictures. In contrast subject 2 mentioned that the pictures limited her imagination to write. Others started by listing things, or directly wrote the first draft. Although "Describing a Room,"--where listing adjectives and nouns on the room was required as a start-up--was chosen by 37.5% of the subjects, none of them said that the listing of vocabulary helped them in descriptive writing.

When asked whether they preferred individual or team working, 54.2% said they wanted individual, 33.3% wished team working, and others (12.5%) said they liked both. From those who preferred team work, some admitted that they found difficulties to depend on the tutor alone; asking things to friends were easier. Seventy-five per cents said they read their friend's comments and also gave comments to their friends' work. The rest said that comments from friends were not encouraging, and sometimes other students' comments were incorrect.

To my surprise, only 29% knew the function of portfolio. The others either forgot or did not care what it was. It might also because the class moved to the multimedia lab and the portfolio was not compiled in their folders anymore. However, 87.5% said they continuously revised their drafts, and 79% stated they collected the revisions on time. Journal writing, although considered by the literature very useful, was not favored.

One student bluntly said that it was a waste of time. Others found it boring, but 62.5% wrote their journals even though they did not write it regularly.

The replacement of the classroom to the multimedia lab was rejected by one students who said she did not like working in the multimedia lab because she missed the brainstorming and group discussions in the classroom. Others found the multimedia very interesting, especially because they could directly type using computer, erase when they made mistakes, and checked the spelling before submitting their work.

Improvement in writing could not be detected in a semester. Even though, 91.6% thought the activities caused some improvements, especially in their grammar and vocabulary mastery. Only 25% realized they progressed in their descriptive writing, i.e., they could better describe people, places, things and events more detailed. However, from the best works they submitted and the final semester test, 91.6% of the writing papers showed quite detailed descriptions, while grammar improvements were not significantly detected. The difference between those who excelled in writing and those who were slow lay in the frequency of revisions. The first could submit a satisfactory assignment after one or two revisions. The latter had to do it for five to six times. This was probably the reason why students thought their writing did not improve.

CONCLUSION

Improvements in writing is very subjective. The learning outcomes of descriptive writing is that students know how to describe things in details and be able to do it in practice. This is shown by students being able to choose their best writing assignment, and do the final test. The other domains of writing such as language style, grammar, choice of words, and mechanics are not the focus of this study. Writing is a process of continuous learning. The key of success is in a lot of reading and abundant practice of writing. The reading makes students acquire the appropriate language style, and the writing practice makes their writing flow.

Electronic portfolio could answer the second, i.e., practice a lot, and students could directly read the comments and corrections given by the tutor or peers. They could also check their spelling mistakes in the computer. Further, the journal writing, although despised and the benefits not realized yet, could contribute to a positive habit of daily writing.

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[a] "Foreign Language Writing and Translation," *Teflin Journal*. Vol. 13 No. 1 (February 2002)

[b] The process of writing does not always occur smoothly. Often, writers could not come up with ideas, or do not know the exact expressions to disclose what they want to say. This is called writer's block.

[c] At the English department of Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, the learning of writing is divided into Writing A (narrative and social letters) in semester two, Writing B (descriptive writing) in semester three, Writing C (expository writing) in semester four, and Writing D (persuasive and argumentative writing) in semester five.

[d] David Sweet , " Student Portfolios: Classroom Uses," The eighth *Education Research CONSUMER GUIDE*--a series published for tutors, parents, and others interested in current education themes. Number 8 November 1993

[e] Simon Read, ibid.

[6] The " …ooo" is signified as the language of elephants.

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Appendix:

Subject No	GPA 2nd semester	Subject No	GPA 2nd semester
S1	3.61	S13	2.56
S2	3.58	S14	2.51
S3	3.55	S15	2.49
S4	3.17	S16	2.44
S5	3.07	S17	2.44
S6	3.06	S18	2.4
S7	3.06	S19	2.38
S8	2.98	S20	2.33
S9	2.79	S21	2.29
S10	2.76	S22	2.27
S11	2.62	S23	2.23
S12	2.57	S24	2.22