

Calliope, A Belgian OWL: Part II

By Liesbeth Opdenacker

In my last article I talked about the specific educational environment at the University of Antwerp. This environment influenced the characteristics of our writing center. Calliope is a multilingual online writing center, focusing on business, academic and technical communication. The use of the writing center will always be integrated in the traditional seminars.

We encountered two major problems with the development of our writing center:

- How do you create a learning environment that supports different learning processes?
- How do you incorporate a real process approach to writing?

Since the situation in which we work is quite different from the American one, we thought it might be a good idea to describe the context of the educational system at the University of Antwerp. After all, every OWL is a product of its own context.

Supporting different learning processes

Most e-learning environments let learners go through the content at their own pace, individually and independently. However, most environments are designed for one specific learning style, e.g. by wizard-like courses, disregarding other learning modes. With Calliope, we want to accommodate different types of learners.

Calliope is designed as a half-open environment. This means that learning objectives are set in advance, but to reach them, different learning paths are available: case-oriented and subskill-oriented (theory and exercises) paths.

Figure 1 [Sorry: we no longer have access to this image] shows a basic outline of the modules in Calliope. In the subskill-oriented approach you find both theory and practice. The colored letters represent different pages of content. The theory on press releases, for example, contains information on preformulation, headlines, boilerplates, etc. The colored letters under practice represent exercises that correspond to a specific page in the theory.

In this case, a communicative problem is presented. Students have to solve the case step by step. However, they can leave this case at any moment to go to the theory and practice to fine-tune a skill needed to finish a certain task. This enables them to start with the case without having to look at the theory first.

In the module on press releases the case looks as follows. The students are presented with some facts about an explosion at an ExxonMobil plant and they need to write a press release about the event. The case takes them through different stages of the construction of a press release, e.g. headline, lead, disclaimer, etc. At the end they can compare their press release with the original from ExxonMobil. Contrary to the exercises under practice, we don't offer annotated solutions in the case. Students send their press release to a fellow student, who will review it using a feedback form. The press releases and the peer feedback are then discussed in their next seminar.

The goal of this half-open structure is to allow students to go through a learning process that corresponds to their preferred learning profile. No matter which approach they choose, at the end of the session they have to meet the learning objectives defined in the opening screen of each module: they have to master the theory and they should be able to produce a correct and strategic press release.

Creating a process approach to writing

Another problem we encountered during the development of Calliope was incorporating a process approach to writing.

A lot of writing centers offer a selection of subprocesses characterizing writing, e.g. planning, formulating and revising. However, these subprocesses are often offered in a linear instruction, through lists of tips for idea collection, approaches for revision, etc. We believe that implementing process characteristics on different levels will create a more open and realistic non-linear writing approach. Therefore, we chose to develop a half-open environment that supports the process approach to writing. Not that the end-product is the most important, but the process leading to it. This process approach becomes apparent at different levels, and it influences the construction of the modules.

Writing process modules and metacognition

We want to stimulate metacognitive reflection about the different components of the writing process, and we want our students to monitor their own writing process.

We do this by confronting them at various stages of the writing process with:

- (i) exercises solved by peers and/or experts,
- (ii) task materials of peers and annotated by experts, or
- (iii) videotaped process models of peers solving a writing problem while thinking aloud.

Students' metacognitive awareness and metacognitive skills are trained by exposing them to these materials.

Writing process and text genre

We chose a genre-specific approach to writing instead of a general approach. This means that we take into account the particular context of a specific genre. For example, the writing process leading to a complete set of minutes is totally different from the process leading to a persuasive business letter.

Writing process and writing profile

Finally, there is a connection between the process approach and different writing profiles. Different people organize their writing activities differently, but even one person can change his or her writing dependent on the genre, the writing medium, the task, the deadline or the social

environment. One of the advantages of Calliope is that it takes these different preferences into account and that it supports different profiles.

Bridwell, for instance, defines a very simple taxonomy of 2 writing profiles: the Mozartian type and the Beethovenian type of writer. According to her, writers following the Mozartian strategy rely strongly on extensive, initial planning. Then, they write mainly sentence by sentence, while revising and rewriting every sentence before continuing with the next one. When they have written their last sentence, hardly any revision takes place any more.

For this writing profile, Calliope offers planning strategies and guides students systematically through the different elements of a business letter, for example. Advice on revising cannot be put off until the end of the writing process, but has to be offered permanently to allow writers to make revision decisions on different text levels and at every moment in the writing process.

Writers following the Beethovenian strategy, however, will be offered a different approach. Such writers start writing almost immediately, with hardly any initial planning of the structure or the specific content. After having written a raw draft of the text, they evaluate it thoroughly. This kind of writer is in need of a more elaborate set of writing support at discrete stages in the writing process. In the theoretical component a more reference-based guidance will be offered to this type of writer.

The next step in the development of our online writing center is the integration of collaborative writing tools and feedback possibilities. I will talk about our experiences in my next article.