

# TECHNOLOGY IN PEDAGOGY

## Series



## Google Docs and the Lonely Craft of Writing: by Eleanor Wong

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It has been widely acknowledged that the use of collaborative technologies increases students' engagement with the content and enhances their learning process. By using Google Docs, instructors can better understand students' thinking process and can help them learn to write in often different and sophisticated ways, says Eleanor Wong, an Associate Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Skills Programme at the National University of Singapore. She is in charge of developing the skills component in the Law faculty – the task of getting students to analyse, reason, research for themselves and finally be able to communicate in a cogent and clear way. She teaches courses on Legal Skills, and specifically the module on “Legal Analysis Writing and Research”.

In this session, A/P Wong shared her experience with using Google Docs over the past three years in teaching persuasive writing to law students. She explained that she wanted to examine whether the learning skills – the positive ones – that students develop were achieved through the correct process of thinking and reasoning.

### Teaching skills of analysis and communication

#### The current situation

The law faculty uses interactive classes to enhance the learning skills of students. These classes are geared towards students who are open to speaking up. Instructors intervene at appropriate times to give feedback to their students. However, this was not the case with writing assignments. Traditionally, writing is a solitary work and can be an intimidating and a harrowing experience. Hence, it is rather tough to get into the students mind while they are writing and to understand what's going in their mind.

Written assignments have the following limitations due its nature and format:

- **Format:** The format of an assignment allows instructors to see the result or the final work but not the students' thought process or the drafting process.
- **Feedback:** Feedback given to students for written work is very often a balance between timeliness and detail. Feedback provided may either be timely but not detailed, or detailed but not in time for students to improve on their work.
- **Assessment:** Assessment given is a bit more summative than formative. Due to the long time lag between the assignment being given and detailed feedback coming back, there is not much time left for the students to improve on their work.

Hence, these constraints on written assignments are not as good for teaching skills as one would like. Ideally, an activity that tests substance as well as excavating process (format), whether feedback is timely and detailed, and an assessment that is both summative and formative are the most necessary

aspects when teaching skills. In the field of Law, the quintessential model to achieve this is the moot court. Instructors will be able to intervene and help students to think by asking the “What If” questions, giving students the opportunity to respond, rephrase their arguments. Even in terms of argument style, feedback on hand gestures or voice control could be provided on the spot.

### **Selection of an appropriate tool**

A/P Wong was aspiring towards this kind of model – “helping students to learn writing” as well. She wants her students to think about the process of writing and break the act down into simpler steps to demystify it. Though she feels that using Google Docs is not 100% similar to the moot court model, it is the nearest approximation. Before moving on to Google Docs, she tried out the following activities to improve student-writing skills:

- **One-on-One conference:** Students submit their assignments. She then sets up a one-on-one conference to provide customised feedback on specific issues and problems that her students face. Though this platform enabled her students to understand the problems in the assignment, feedback given is not timely enough as students were unable to recall what they did and thought at the time of writing. She also realised that it is difficult to make this type of activity an open learning process.
- **Mahjong Paper:** She gets her students to write their analyses on sheets of mahjong paper in class and displays to the entire class. In this activity, the feedback is timely but the result of the draft is not in its final form. It generates good discussion and gets students well prepared to explain their written position orally. However, this activity does not enable the instructor to understand the students’ thought process.
- **Using IVLE:** The IVLE platform is used to get students to submit their arguments. Based on the submission, A/P Wong will highlight good arguments to the class.
- **Google Docs:** Google Docs is an online platform that allows her students to work easily on their documents allowing her to share documents with the class. It supports synchronous editing and comment writing, and saves versions of the document – options that are necessary for real-time collaborative learning.

### **Framework for exploring the collaborative writing process using Google Docs**

A/P Wong chose to use Google Docs as it allows her students to work easily on their documents using a web browser. Each student would need a Gmail account (which can be obtained from Google free of charge) to access the application.

She created a folder for her tutorial class and shared the folder with the group. She then uploaded a “clean sample” of the objective memorandum on a topic that the class had worked on earlier during the semester. Students work in pairs, with each pair working on a clean sample in class. The activity was designed to be interactive and required students to rephrase and convert an objective memorandum into a persuasive argument.

During the activity, she suddenly realised that her tutorial classes became very quiet from the usual interactive session and the only discussion that was happening was between the teammates working in

pairs. However, when she shifted her attention to the documents in the Google Docs folder, there was a flurry of activity with students working on counter arguments. Some teams rightly analysed the facts and reasons, reframed the arguments into persuasive ones and peppered it with punchy headings. She was able to make comments in a timely fashion as students were rephrasing their drafts and pay specific attention to individual teams. Students felt encouraged and motivated to improve on their writing with the constructive feedback (timely) given by the instructor.

This activity engages students, requiring them to attend to feedback and allows them to redraft on the spot (formative). After teams responded to her feedback, she pulled out the work of a group who had organised their arguments well and then displayed it for the entire class to see. This allowed teams to see each other's drafting process and enabled them to follow suit and work towards making their arguments better.

An important phenomenon to note is that the organisational insights pointed out in class was quickly adopted by other students prompting them to reorganise their documents. This activity is not only a good way to combine the interaction and group thinking of the students but also to allow students the needed privacy to write on their own. The instructor is able to see the thinking process.

#### **Take away points from the activity:**

- It was easy for instructors to toggle between students' work allowing the instructor and students' to access the documents simultaneously
- Instructors can see what students' were writing and the thinking process involved
- Instructors can choose when to intervene and provide constructive feedback to individual students
- Highlight a good or bad model and allow students to keep an eye on the modeled work
- The writing process that is a "closed" and "solitary" now becomes exposed to everyone allowing other students to benefit

#### **Q & A Session**

Following the presentation by A/P Wong, a lively discussion with a Q & A session followed. Listed below are some questions from the session.

**Q: Elaborate on the required length of the essay.**

**EW:** In the first half of the semester, students are involved in drafting arguments, with a number of face-to-face interaction or one-on-one conference with the instructors, and through intensive research. Students are by then comfortable in preparing documents that are of 2000-word in length, and are ready to write an essay of up to 3000 words. This is the point when I know that my students are ready for this type of collaborative writing exercise. My students feel comfortable when I intervene with feedback and criticise their thinking process. So, I usually reserve this activity for the latter part of the year.

**Q: Do you explore and analyse your students' thought process at a later stage?**

**EW:** I have not attempted that. Writing does not happen as quickly as it happens like in talking. The changes happen quite slowly. I only have six teams at a time and hold this activity at a time when I roughly know my students better. The comments that I give would need to be timely and will improve their writing process.

**Q: You mentioned that you monitor students' thinking process. Do you also grade the process?**

**EW:** I have not used it for grading as that is not my primary objective. I would like to understand my students' thinking process and based on that, I take every opportunity to provide feedback. I will comment on what they did not get right and how they can modify to write better.

**Q: What is the feedback from your students? Did you have difficulties getting your students to subscribe to this activity?**

**EW:** Sometimes students encounter technical problems, for example some students had problems with wireless connectivity in the seminar rooms. Otherwise students were happy with the activity. Three years back, it was tough, not all students had Gmail accounts and it took a long time to set up and get everyone on board. But, during the last two years, students had Gmail accounts and were already working in groups. To make the process easier and smoother, this year I used Google Docs as the platform for some of the initial student assignments.

Some students are non-talkative writers. Top students are forthcoming in face-to-face classes and these students would not write or modify anything in their documents until they have mulled over, discussed and debated on issues they would want to change. Then there are students who are talkative writers. They quickly understand the facts and are usually way ahead in this activity but are typically quiet in class.

**Q: Do you do this activity only during class?**

**EW:** Yes, I have primarily used it during the class as I can understand the process that happens. However, some of my other colleagues have assigned it earlier, and have noticed that some students start working on the documents and make the changes before the tutorial class.

**Q: Students are able to see each other's work. Do they then comment on their peers' work?**

**EW:** Yes, students do comment on their peer's work. During previous lessons, a number of discussions happen, and students are used to each other's ideas and expressions. You might need to moderate if you have not taught the etiquette of commenting in your classes. In general, students behave well when providing comments.

**Q: I would assume that this activity is a type of active learning that you employ.**

**EW:** Yes, you can consider it as a form of active learning. Students are writing and making counter arguments (DOING) while discovering the process and applying information that they get from their discussion, from the instructor and their peers. This activity focuses on developing students' writing skills and involves higher-order thinking skills like analysis and synthesis.

**Q: Do you allow your students to flag when they are ready to receive feedback on their changes?**

**EW:** That is a very good point but I have not looked into that issue. Since I know my students, I would roughly know when they are ready, for example, on a paragraph or a sentence. When they move away to work on other paragraphs and sentences, then that would be an indication that the required changes are complete. Since students are working in pairs, they usually move on to other parts when they have agreed upon the changes made. However, your suggestion is good, as it will make the process more systematic. I could inform my students to highlight the parts in “yellow” when they are ready to for feedback on those sections.

**Q: Do you do this process in stages?**

**EW:** Yes, I do work in stages. We must understand that when students speak, they need to deliver the information sequentially, but when they write, it allows them to decide on what to change and in any order that they wish.

However, when I discuss and comment, I use stages. For example stages in the process would be:

1. Organisation – the headings, the signposts
2. Language – sometimes even exact expression
3. Technical issues – citation formats

**Q: How do you deal with - when and how often to interrupt the students during the class?**

**EW:** I do not interrupt or intervene often. I usually bring up only 3 to 4 points in a class. I will showcase one good model during a class.

**Q: Do you need prompts to guide the discussion?**

**EW:** No, not for this class, mainly because I know the students well enough. In early sessions, it will be low energy, where students will be looking at their own work. The key issue here is to “know your students well and make sure they know each other well”.

**Q: How often does Google save versions? When you have a completed document, do you check to see the number of versions saved?**

**EW:** Yes, Google does save versions. Since I do not use it for assessment, I have not tracked these versions and analysed them. However, I am sure Google offers the possibility to check out the saved versions for analysis.