

Challenges for text-based materials on the small screen: some solutions found in developing a CD-ROM about academic writing

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Abstract

If creating learning material for the 'small screen' creates interesting challenges, then making a CD-based package to present elements of good academic writing to a tertiary student audience provides a doubled opportunity: Opportunity, and a challenge taken-up by *Academic Writing – a language-based approach*, the base on which this paper rests.

The CD-ROM platform offers many potential advantages to help teach students about features of written texts. One could be an ability to incorporate a large number of annotated model texts from a range of disciplines and genres, which students can easily access, manipulate and deconstruct. Another might be the potential for an interactive environment where a variety of mechanisms can prompt and support students in activating features designed to provide more explanation, feedback or exercise in particular aspects of academic writing.

Where subject matter is intrinsically textual and lacks much in the way of vivid pictorial source, however, pressure is brought to bear on presentation and structuring of materials, and the environment does not automatically provide all the solutions of itself:

How many A4 sheets of an example essay fit comfortably onto a computer screen?

How interesting is the result, anyway, if your text is too tightly packed?

How do you distinguish instruction on how to work a package from its instructional material?

How do you provide engagement and meaningful exercise with appropriate feedback when the basic product you are promoting is something like 'good writing'?

Limitations on learner attention and on the amount of physical screen space create a need for succinct expression, but there can also be a competing need to provide sustained examples, to fully discuss technicalities' and to demonstrate good textual practice.

In this paper we give an insight into our solutions to these challenges. We do this by reporting on the implementation of our ideas on clear structuring and easy navigation, on minimising instructions to the user, on exercises including some which require typed responses, and on the use of such functions as rollovers to push complexity from view (and back, when desired). In using mechanisms such as these, we believe we have worked with the medium's strengths, and mitigated its disadvantages to produce a useful learning instrument for the specific subject domain as well as a working model of several ideas relevant to a broader purpose.