

## **VOLUNTARILY OFFLINE: HANDWRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS STILL DO**

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**Abstract:** In association with teaching profession, in this extensively and intensively digital world, the use of online modes and materials has popularly exerted tremendous changes in the way of teaching and learning as well as in classrooms activities. This paper is to explore the students' opinions on using online and offline materials to support academic writing classes. It particularly inquires their opinions on the application of voluntarily offline mode portfolio in forms of handwritten works and assignments in Academic Writing I Class at EED UMK in Odd Semester of Academic Year 2009/2010. This discussion covers the background, purpose, method, results and suggestions.

### **Background**

Nearly all students and lecturers in English Education Department of the University of Muria Kudus (EED UMK) have used internet and/or computerized materials and media to support their activities, works and assignments. The computerized and online worlds have obviously given various advantages in terms of ease, speed and wide access of supporting materials. On the other hand, as many students and lecturers often complain of, they also present some weak points. Both online and offline materials are used by students and lecturers. We have also learnt the advantages and disadvantages of the two modes to support the academic writing classes.

In this digital era, I strongly wonder whether handwriting modes to accomplish works and assignments still do for my students in my academic writing classes. Do they agree with and get some benefits of this handwritten mode? In my opinion, in addition to the online and computerized modes, the offline modes, such as handwritten works and assignments, should offer some strong points and advantages. They are also, to some extent, able to eliminate some disadvantages of the online and computerized modes. In the Academic Writing I Classes in EED UMK in the academic year of 2009/2010, I made a deal with the students that all works and assignments had to be totally handwritten (initially as to avoid copy-paste modes), and the work was called "portofolio" or a collection of the students' works and assignments over a period of time (i.e odd semester 2009/2010). To my surprise, this voluntarily offline modes got so positive responses and compliments from the students. This paper is to present a brief description of the use of hand writing modes during the course, some positive points of this offline mode and the students' opinions in association with the mode.

### **Purpose**

This paper is to explore the students' opinions and responses in relation to the application of handwriting modes to the portfolio assignments in Academic Writing I classes.

### **Method**

To obtain data for this exploration, I had written interviews with 40 students who belonged to Classes of Academic Writing I of odd semester in Academic Year 2009/2010. Those subjects or the sample were selected out of population of around 240 students, who have been all computer and internet literate, through a cluster random sampling. I gave the subjects a couple of questions to answer and they have to presents their responses in the form of a written essay. When necessary, a direct clarification to the subjects was done. The questions investigate the students' open opinions and responses to the application of handwriting mode for the portfolio assignments in Academic Writing I Course. The data collection took place on March 2010, fairly long after the announcement of the final grade of the course.



The analysis was done by identifying and classifying contents of students' opinions expressed in the composition associated with the application of handwriting mode for the portfolio in the course.

### **Handwriting Mode**

In EED UMK, there are several courses primarily prepared to improve students' writing skills. They are courses of Writing I, II, III, Academic Writing I, and Academic Writing II. The last two are prepared for the students to support their final project of the program. The last one is especially devoted to research proposal writing for final project (or Skripsi). While the main objective of the Academic Writing I course is that the students are able to compose academic essays related to issues in English Education.

In Academic Writing I, as a review of the previous writing courses and an entry to essay writing, in first two meetings, the students were asked to compose simple, compound, complex, compound-complex sentences and paragraphs. After that, they got theoretical session on how to compose a good essay and they were asked to analyze several model essays on English Education. In the following meetings the students had to compose several pieces of essay based on several choices of topics related to English Education. Individual correction and advice were applied by the lecturer. Peer editing and correction were also done in the session to improve the quality of the essays. Next, individually they had to compose some pieces of essay based on the classroom video (by Harmer, 2007) displaying three teachers (namely Elly, Bill, and Laura) teaching English. In the following weeks they had to present their composition in a group discussion in which the classmates will do a peer correction over the essay. Based on the suggestion from the group members, the students have to correct and improve their essay. The improved essay will be discussed with the lecturer for final drafting. Finally they had to compose their own essay based on a topic of their own choices. All their works and assignments must be compiled in a note book of their own design and we called it the Portfolio. And the most important point to ponder was that the portfolio had to be handwritten. This was a voluntarily offline project of the course.

Handwriting must be the oldest mode of literacy history. People use typewriters and computers only recently. When a lot of communication takes place digitally, in emails or by using word processing software, Harmer (2007:323) says, to worry about handwriting may seem strange. Even for the most computer-literate people, handwriting is still used in many occasions. Many language exams, notes, postcards, memos, journals, etc. are still done in handwriting. At least in my Academic Writing I classes, the use of handwriting for works and assignments is still significant and it is not something old-fashioned.

In this cyber period, handwriting may seem old fashioned and out of touch. The use of handwriting is in favor with what Kelly (2007) posits in Newsweek article dated Nov 12, 2007 (Posted By: billdakelski @ 08/05/2009 5:54:39 PM). She maintains that good penmanship is more than just a quaint skill. She further informs that a new study shows handwriting as a key part of learning. For most people, the written thank-you is your best bet for an expression of warm, heartfelt thanks. Kelly also states that many educators agree with handwriting. Handwriting is essential because studies show that "when children are taught how to do it, they are also being taught how to learn and how to express themselves". She then cites a study to be published by Vanderbilt University professor Steve Graham. He discovers that a majority of primary-school teachers believe that students with fluent handwriting produced written assignments which were superior in quantity and quality and resulted in higher grades—aside from being easier to read. And The College Board recognized this finding in 2005 by adding a handwritten essay to the SAT—an effort to reverse the de-emphasis on handwriting and composition.

In the same article Kelly also reveals that in relation to cursive writing, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Zaner-Bloser Co recommended 45 minutes a day. By the 1980s, it was suggesting just 15 minutes. Today the average is more like 10 minutes, according to Handwriting without Tears. In Zaner-Bloser's 2005 national survey, a majority of primary-school teachers said they spent an hour or less on handwriting a week. And Graham's study found that only 12 percent of teachers had



actually taken a course in how to teach it. And, he says, educators are noticing a significant decline in the quality of students' handwriting and an increase in the frequency of problems such as letter reversals. Kelly shows growing evidence that handwriting fluency is a fundamental building block of learning. She quotes Kelly Emily Knapton, director of program development at Handwriting Without Tears, who believes that "when kids struggle with handwriting, it filters into all their academics. Spelling becomes a problem; math becomes a problem because they reverse their numbers. All of these subjects would be much easier for these kids to learn if handwriting was an automatic process."

Finally Kelly reminds us of handwriting, "If we stop teaching penmanship, it will not only hasten the dreaded day when brides acknowledge wedding gifts by e-mail; the bigger danger is, they'll be composed even more poorly than they already are".

Based on the above discussion I more strongly believe that the application of handwriting for students' works and assignments in my academic writing classes has got some theoretical and empirical basis.

### **Handwritten Portfolio**

In this discussion, handwritten portfolio refers to a collection of students' works and assignments accumulated in Academic writing class. Works and assignments of the students must be accomplished in handwriting. The use of portfolio in the teaching and learning process gains some both theoretical and empirical supports.

In a cyber article abstract, Katz (1999) points out "handwriting expert Sheila Kurtz believes that handwriting reflects the writer's personality and character". According to her, the act of writing is a motion that starts off from the brain to the hand and is a good gauge of inner feelings and emotions. Meanwhile, Harmer (2007) agrees that portfolios are also used as a way of encouraging students to take pride in their own work; by encouraging them to keep examples of what they have written, we are encouraging them to write it well and with care. He argues further that portfolio assessment of this kind has clear benefits and provides evidence of students' effort. It helps students become more autonomous, and Nunes (2004:334) as quoted by Harmer states that portfolio can foster the students' reflection (and) help them to self monitor their own learning'. It has clear validity since, especially with written work, students will have had a chance to edit before submitting their work, and this approach to assessment has an extremely positive wash-back effect According to Harmer (2007:340) portfolio can be used for assessment, since judging different pieces of student works written over period of time is seen by many people to be fairer than "sudden death' final test which is often considered controversial.

Handwritten portfolio according to my opinion also gives a better chance for "discovering ability process" (See Munif, 2009:76-78) which enables the best achievement in writing to happen. This is in line with multiple intelligences perspectives of learning and teaching process. In accomplishing the portfolio, the students may explore their own learning style which best meet the relevant intelligence.

Empirically, a journal writing, a similar form of portfolio, works to improve students writing ability. Suryani (2009), for example, in her study entitled "Improving Students' Writing Proficiencies through Journal Writing" proves that her subjects write better after they have journal writing activities compared to that before they have journal writing activities. Also see Syafei (2007) for grammar accuracy improvement.

### **Results**

English is now an essential language. Nowadays, one of the most popular and quickest ways to get supporting data to compose academic essays is accessed by using online learning materials. Online learning materials are those which are provided by computers and cyber technology. The advantages of using online materials covers speed and flexibility, wider access and nearly unlimited data source, while the disadvantages include a validity question of data source, a bigger possibility of increasing plagiarism,

and technology dependence. Meanwhile offline learning materials offer validity and accuracy of the information, better social and interpersonal relationship.

After examining the students' opinions from the essays they wrote, this inquiry reveals some findings as follows.

#### **A. Handwriting Is Welcome**

Surprisingly all subjects, who have been computer and internet users and are accustomed to using them in their daily life, totally agree with the handwriting modes for academic works and assignments. They all express their support and compliment of the projects. Most of them recommend this mode be retained in the future classes of academic Writing classes. Some of them, though, expressed their time constraint related to the project. The followings are examples of students' expressions showing that the use of handwriting in the portfolio of Academic Writing Class is welcome. (Note: When necessary I have slightly modified the wording and the grammar without changing the meaning intended as well as possible).

*It is good way to write assignment using handwriting, although it is a traditional one.  
The use of academic writing class is good enough for us.  
I agree the use of handwriting in academic writing class.  
I think using handwriting can be better than using computer.  
In addition, I like hand writing better than computer writing.  
Using handwriting to accomplish the assignments of academic writing class will save our  
money, represent ourselves, and make our writing better.  
Praise be to God. I enjoy to do portfolio in handwriting though it is exhausting.*

#### **B. The Use Of Handwriting Is Positive**

The following are positive points of students' opinions I identified from the data and some examples of expressions showing positive points of handwriting.

##### **1. Practical, Cheaper, Money Saving, and Energy Saving**

*We just need to work by using a piece of paper, a pen or a pencil, and an eraser.  
We do not need a computer set, a printer and ink.  
I know that some friends like to use handwriting too. I could write it down directly  
on a piece of paper.  
We do not have to go rentals. It avoids paying for printing and rentals. In this way,  
handwriting is practical. In our university not all of its students earn their own money  
and have computer sets.  
I think to use hand writing is cheaper than using computer. To get the print-out of our paper  
is more expensive and spend more time if we use computer.  
We do not depend on computer and we can save electricity. It is good to help global  
warming  
We do not depend on special computer, printer, electricity and rental.  
It is good for those who don't have computer.*

##### **2. Instant and Time Saving**

*Direct result can be obtained from handwriting.  
To enjoy the work, we do not have to wait for our work to be printed.*

##### **3. Flexible**

*You can do your assignments anytime and anywhere, on the floor, on sofa, on the bed.  
We can write our assignment in any place we want. It means we can do it in campus, at home  
and any place we want.*



## *Language in the Online and Offline World*

### 4. Relaxing

*I could relax to write my essays and other assignments.*

### 5. Human

*Human relation is better. We have better interactions with others.*

*You can fall asleep while doing assignments and continue to work when you wake up.*

### 6. Creative

*We can develop our ideas completely.*

*Usually the idea can appear spontaneously when we write through handwriting.*

*We can express our character, imagination and creativity using hand writing.*

### 7. Artistic and not boring

*We can add paintings and pictures to our hand writing. It is not boring.*

### 8. Avoiding Plagiarism or Minimizing Copy-Paste

*Handwriting minimizes copy-paste from internet or other work.*

*Handwriting cannot be copied. It is hard to be copied. It is good for students.*

*If I use hand writing my work cannot be copied by other friends.*

*It is about the increasing of plagiarism habit which is included in the disadvantages of online learning material. This is a very crucial phenomena happened in our surrounding as the effect of advance technology usage. There are many plagiarisms of literary works in society. People choose to find an instant product and do plagiarism, even in arranging skripsi or many other literary works which should be a pure idea of the write (Rizky).*

### 9. Unique

*By using handwriting, it will represent myself.*

*Most people believe that someone with good handwriting also has a good behavior.*

*Through handwriting we can see the characteristics and creativity of the students.*

### 10. Better Memorized

*Handwriting enables us to memorize lessons better and easier to retrieve them.*

*The students will better memorize what they have written in handwriting.*

### 11. Good Habit Making

*Handwriting will make our writing better than before.*

*We usually try to make our writing as good as possible.*

### 12. Simple and Traditional.

*I think handwriting is a simple and traditional way to write our assignments.*

### 13. Useful for Letter of Application.

*Handwriting is also a good practice and is useful to prepare letter of application.*

*If we want to apply for a job, we can use hand writing to make an application letter.*

### 14. Improve vocabulary, reading habit and grammar.

*There area lot of benefits I got from joining Academic Writing I, especially after making (handwritten) portfolio assignment. The benefits are increasing my desire to write everything in English, improving my grammar ability, developing my ability in elaborating topics and increasing my reading hobby.*

## **C. There Are Some Weak Points of Handwriting**

*arrangement. It will be a must to find more information and to have extra reading. It is absolutely increasing my knowledge and I do it happily.*

*Those are all my opinions about Academic Writing I assignments. I got many advantages after making my portfolio assignments. They are increasing my desire to write everything in English, improving my grammar ability, developing my ability in elaborating topics and increasing my reading hobby. Every obligation will be really hard in the beginning but we will get so many advantages if we are able to keep on trying and not to be desperate.*

### **Suggestions**

The results of this discussion imply the following suggestions. First, English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, The University of Muria Kudus (EDD UMK) should strengthen the intensity and access of both online and offline materials for students in Academic writing classes.

Second, retaining the application of handwritten portfolio in the academic writing I Classes for works and assignments is recommended, in complement to online and digital materials.

And finally, I dream of, with the help of online technology in the near future, having an online program which enables us to write our cyber diary (blogs) and to send and receive our fastest emails in the form of our own cursive handwriting, so that our personal characters and emotions are inclusive.

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