

Application of Team-Working Model to Training OER Writers of Distance and E-learning Pathways Course Materials in Ghanaian Public Universities

A.A. Saah

Institute of Distance Learning
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
Kumasi, Ghana
alasaah@yahoo.com

Abstract

Collaborative course design and materials development has been a project that depended on qualified subject matter specialists and educationists working together to produce distance learning materials. Ghanaian public universities including the University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), commission qualified lecturers to write course materials for delivery in the distance and e-learning mode. Writers have complained that they were lecturers and not course writers and hence require course-writer training. Open Educational Resource Writing Trainers identified and linked four (4) writer-types to quality writing at KNUST and Central University College, Accra. Of the writers (N=65) studied; only 7.7% were totalistic writers. About the 7.48% of the hardcopies of course materials surveyed had the totalistic writing style associated with quality course material writing. Some 92% were non-totalistic. Researchers designed Team-Working Model to enhance writer type and writing style.

Keywords: Foundational writer, process writer, conclusive writer, totalistic writer, course materials, distance learning materials, course writer type, and training, OER

Introduction

In harnessing and enhancing an enabling access to higher education through Open Educational Resource (OER) development and availability, the aspirations, access and attainments of both the learner and the distance learning institutions, work towards adding value and transforming lives through widening participation. This endeavour will be an essential ingredient for initiating and sustaining collaborative course design and materials development locally and globally to and for higher education. In this educational process, distance education promises an already tested and trusted approach in education, now making a global impact of OER, especially in developing countries including Ghana to access higher education. Course materials which have been developed and produced by local subject matter specialists and course writers from national universities will be crucial in producing appropriate and adequate course materials. These will be both effective and efficient in providing access to the learning process and help learners to assess the progress of their own learning.

These materials serve as the interface for learning-teaching between the adult distance learner and the distance learning institution. Cogent to this, the researchers of this study considered the practical linkages between access to higher education and quality OER; availability of quality OER to academic qualification; and competence of the qualified lecturers to their manifestation of intellectual property in them as quality course writers; writer type to writing style, and the implication of all these for the training of course writers. Further, from experience of five years (2006-2011) of active editing over one hundred course materials and training sixty-five course writers for writer-competency in interactive writing for distance learners and working with several writers' hands on and consulting, and observed behaviour of writers, their strengths, style of writing may lead to some categorisation to enhance training them to improve their writer and writing qualities, and making their course materials learner-friendly.

An observation of KNUST course materials has established that quality may have been compromised (Osei and Saah, 2009) by lack of writer quality. Researchers' task has **been to create models for making quality course writers out of qualified lecturers, who previously had very low**

competency in interactive writing for distance learners.

The problem is that distance learning institutes in Ghanaian public universities including Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi have to grapple with challenges in making quality course writers out of qualified lecturers who though are subject matter specialists are not quality course writers. The commissioned course writers from academic departments commented that they were lecturers and not course writers. Yet their work has shown that they have strengths that could be harnessed to enhance the overall quality of their course material. Further, there is lack of competence in their quality writing, a strategy showing how a distance learning institute will identify them and develop and harness their characteristics to produce quality course materials delivered in a higher education by the distance learning mode. However, there exists a gap between what commissioned writers in the university perceive of themselves and what they are commissioned to perform.

*The objectives of the study therefore were to identify the characteristics of **writers, and develop a classification model for course writers to enhance quality course writing in KNUST. This paper sought therefore to identify factors that could be used to construct a team-working model that would enable subject matter specialists work in teams to draw on their strengths to create quality course material writing strategies. Course developers and writers collaborate to make available their intellectual property to be accessed by learners and course facilitators.***

Research Questions were as follows: (a) What types of writers exist?(b)What types of writers exist in KNUST? (c) What factors in the distance learning institute could be applied to create the team-working model?(d) How does the team-working model promote access to higher education through opening up distance and e-learning pathways?

There are relevant literature on the subject of types of writers and their respective styles of writing. Babe (2000, pp.51-88), Friedman (2006,p.29) show the types of writers, and Lawson (2011) has cited the foundational writer. Linked with the writer type is the style of writing. Jerz (2011) mentioned and described technical writing and technical

communicators or technical writers. Those who write course materials may be described as non-fiction technical and academic writers (Johansen,2000). However, there was no statement linking writer type to writer training.

Some definition of terms and description of concepts used in this study are worth highlighting. Course material was defined as interactive learning session based on curriculum and learning objectives. Course materials may be described to be course-specific and pedagogical. Distance learning material was defined as instruction medium-specific (print or non-electronic and electronic media) interface between course facilitator and learner.

This research is justified by the fact that it throws light on the importance of course writer type in the design and delivery of course writer training and workshop in a distance learning institute in a university.

Method of Study

As exploratory research, this study assessed the substance of course materials through literature survey. Literature survey was performed on 107course materials first drafts written by KNUST commissioned course writers based on reasoning and writer's style of writing as recommended by Asante (2000,pp. 51-53,55, 57) to include deductive and inductive thinking, expression of ideas, and economy of expression. The researchers developed the following characteristics:

- 1) subject content pedagogy
- 2) module focus and number of words in the work, and
- 3) content concentration, strategy of sourcing and applying ideas of others.

The population of the study was course writers (N=65) who wrote for M.Sc./M.Phil., B.Sc. and BA programmes; range including Physical and Applied Science, Engineering, Technology courses, French and English Language courses, Business and Art courses, Health courses. The social unit of the study was commissioned course writers of KNUST, Kumasi. Writers ranged from being holders of Master and Ph.D. degrees. Some were

professors. They were qualified lecturers and senior lecturers, and experts and experienced in their fields, but not necessarily quality course writers for distance learners.

To gather respondents' self-perception of their type, they were asked to study and identify which writing style or type described in Table 1 best described them. They were asked to further comment on their self-perception, whether they saw themselves otherwise. Data on self-perception were collected using questionnaire and interview methods.

To analyse the intervention strategies of the distance learning institute at KNUST, two of their experts were purposively selected and interviewed with respect to their experience. This was to identify the parameters their intervention strategies and training process applied by distance teaching institute's experts to transform the university's qualified lecturers to quality course writers. Data were collected with experience survey method as well as participatory observation.

Findings were presented in Charts and Tabular formats. Descriptive statistics was used in the analysis of data.

Results and Discussion

Respondents' feelings and opinions regarding research questions are presented and discussed below.

What types of writers exist?

Survey of literature showed that **classification of type of writers includes:**

- The stuffy writers-writers who write business stuff
- The rant and raving type of writer-The blogger writer
- Fill in the web writers-content writing for websites
- The sell sell-sell writers-copy writers (Lawson,2011).

Further, identified types of writers include:

- 1) Authors
- 2) Poets
- 3) Journalists, investigating the facts
- 4) Advertising writers (copy writers)
- 5) Script or freelance writers,
- 6) A variety of specialties (technical writers),and
- 7) Script writers and freelance writers (Friedman,2006,p.29).

Some writer types have been characterised to reflect their attitude. Two types of writers are mentioned as:

- 1) One type writes in order to write, and
- 2) The other writes in order to be published, obtain fame, and receive impressively large royalty cheques (Maass,2009,p.4).

A style of writing explained to be close to the writing by commissioned writers for educational purposes in the university was technical writing (Jerz,2011).In this style, the presentation of information helps the reader to solve a particular problem. Technical communicators write, design, and/or edit proposals, manuals, web pages, lab reports, newsletters, and many other kinds of professional documents. Though course writers were technical writers, they may, however, not be professional writers within the university system per se. However, there seemed to be some gap when it came to how writers' workshop trainers considered writer's characteristics in designing the training content and approach.

What types of writers exist in KNUST?

Determined from writing style in course materials

Two main groups of writing were determined. They were (i) Non-Totalistic (made up of Foundational, Process, Conclusive) and (ii) Totalistic. The Table below shows writing style and main features of work to include: Writing style, its respective characteristics, module focus, and volume of word/work, and content concentration and strategy. The foundational had the following being prolific with concepts, theories and perspectives. Writing exhibited strengths mostly in the early units. It was philosophical. Primarily, it showed essentials and key ideas and building blocks for s- content. The writer

tends to initiate ideas. The process displays mainly themes, models, steps/stages, methods, and illustrations. Writing exhibited strengths mostly in the middle units. Procedures, progression, and links within s-content. In these the writer shows the tendency to glean for ideas. The conclusive focused on end result, conclusions, assignments, and finality. It further, concentrated the volume of work and words in the end units. Work showed writers interest in the final conclusions and ultimate issues and also tends to be judgmental. The totalistic characteristics showed a holistic, balanced, mature in reasoning and concentrated work over entire units. Aggregates s-content; Plans content and structure, tends to have bird's eye view of the s-content. They draw on the strengths of the team.

The four types of writing (in descriptive terms)	s-Content pedagogy features	Module focus & volume Of words/work	Content concentration & strategy	Course materials (N=107) f %
Foundational, Fw	Concepts, theory, perspectives, foundation issues, and ideas. <i>What are the base for your answer?</i>	early units	philosophical, essentials and key ideas and building blocks for s-content initiates ideas	32 29.90
Process, Pw	Themes, models, steps/stages, methods, illustrations. How did you get this answer?	middle units	procedures, progression and links within s-content; gleans for ideas	44 41.12

Conclusive, C _w	End result, conclusions, assignments, finality. What is the answer?	end Units	Final, ultimate; tends to be judgmental, and reviewing summative ideas	23	21.50
Totalistic, T _w	Holistic (combining FWPW and C _w). Balance, mature. What problem are you solving? Did you show the question and how you arrived at the answer?	Entire units	Aggregates s-content; plans content and structure, tends to have bird's eye view of the s-content; Draws on the strengths of team	8	7.48
Total				107	100.00

(Source: field data, April 2011)

Determined from writers' perception of themselves)

Results in Table 1 show that $P_w > F_w > C_w > T_w$. In table 2, results show $P_s > C_s > F_s > T_s$. In comparing results presented in Table 1 and 2, the writing style exhibited in respective course materials with self-perception, course writers perceived themselves to be less foundational than their writing showed. it showed that $F_w > F_s$, $P_s > P_w$, $C_s > C_w$ and $T_s > T_w$. It is also seen in the two tables that totalistic writings and writers. This points to the reason writers needed to be and course materials lacked quality.

Table: table showing learner's self-perception of their writer type best described

Writer-type (self-perceived by writer)

(N=65)

	f	%
Foundational, F _s	13	20.0
Process, P _s	26	40.0
Conclusive, C _s	21	32.3
Totalistic, T _s	5	7.7
Total	65	100.0

(Source: field data, April, 2011)

Further, they were slightly more self-perceived to be more totalistic than their writings portrayed. Their self-perception was less than their writing when it comes to the process. In the same manner, with regard to the conclusive, their self-perception was higher. Process writing and process writer type were the most exhibited. However, totalistic writing and totalistic writer types were the least exhibited. Figure 1. a chart, shows a graphical representation of findings in Tables 1 and 2. Both curves indicate similar vertical bell shape.

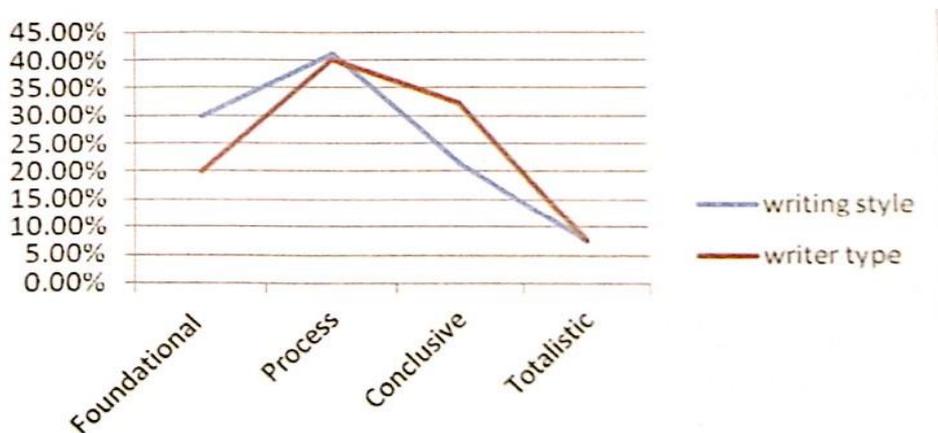


Fig.: Chart Showing Relationship between Writing Style and Writer Type

In response to a question regarding how they perceived themselves with regard to their job description, 95.0% saw themselves as lecturers and not course writers. They found their additional task of course writing to be very irksome as they were not professional writers. Many would therefore want to write as they wanted and be left to their own style, and did not bother if it met the learning needs of their target audience or not. To the question of what writer type would you as a course writer want to be, 46 respondents, almost 71.0% felt that the totalistic writer type and uniting style best enhanced their own writer and writing quality.

Results of the study were used to generate a classification of course writers. This has indicated that quality course writing comes from a team of trained and tasked uniters using quality course writing templates for distance learning materials. Writer quality or writer type could be a reason for poor quality: hence hold the solution to the writing quality.

What intervention did IDL apply?

There are three stages in IDL's intervention to improve writer-quality and quality of writing (Fig. 2). These stages of writers' workshop are explained as follows:

- (i) Pre-training stage involving two steps: assessment of writer-type characteristics, and writing style to identify the foundational, the process, the conclusive and the totalistic. The rationale is writer quality and what mix of strengths writer is resourced
- (ii) Training stage: this involves skill acquisition in template use, and team-building strategy
- (iii) Post-training stage: quality control and assurance in the writing of course materials. This post-training stage leads us to determine whether course writers require going through the pre-training stage again or a retraining afforded in the training stage again. The training process includes the following elements:
 - (a) assessing the capabilities, capacities and competencies of the commissioned writers
 - (b) identifying their course writer type
 - (c) developing the elements of quality course material by training in the skills of using the template
 - (d) listing the adult learner characteristics of learning materials end-user
 - (e) team-building strategies for course writers. Quality course material was course-specific and had to enhance:
 - (1) learners accessing the learning process, and
 - (2) learners assessing their own learning progress.

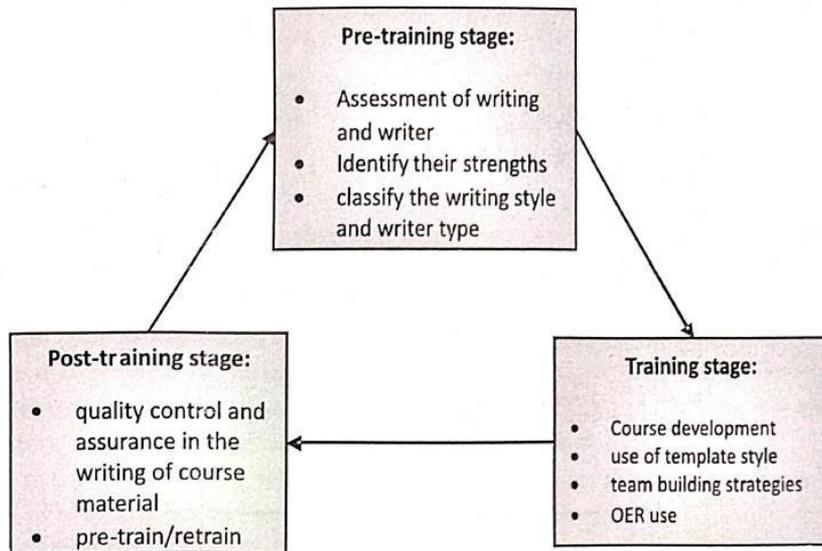


Fig.: Team-Working Model for Developing Quality Course Writers
How does the team-working model promote access to higher education through opening up distance and e-learning pathways?

This work as illustrated in Figure 3 shows how the Team-Working Model (Saah, et al., 2011), which produces the totalistic writer type of characteristics and writing, promotes access to higher education through opening up distance and e-learning pathways. Further, as lifelong learning also depends on innovative pedagogy and forms of teaching and learning. quality in learning with ICT (Rekkedal, 2006) and OER the Team-Working Model explicitly indicates how it supports holistic and balanced writing and provides the distance learner with subject content (s-content) with interactive content (i-content) embedded with appropriate and adequate e-content. Also, the course writers' use of OER and learners' access to higher education through opening up distance and e-learning pathways is further enhanced. It meets both learner and course writer, and overall goal of the distance learning institute for their aspirations, access, and attainment.

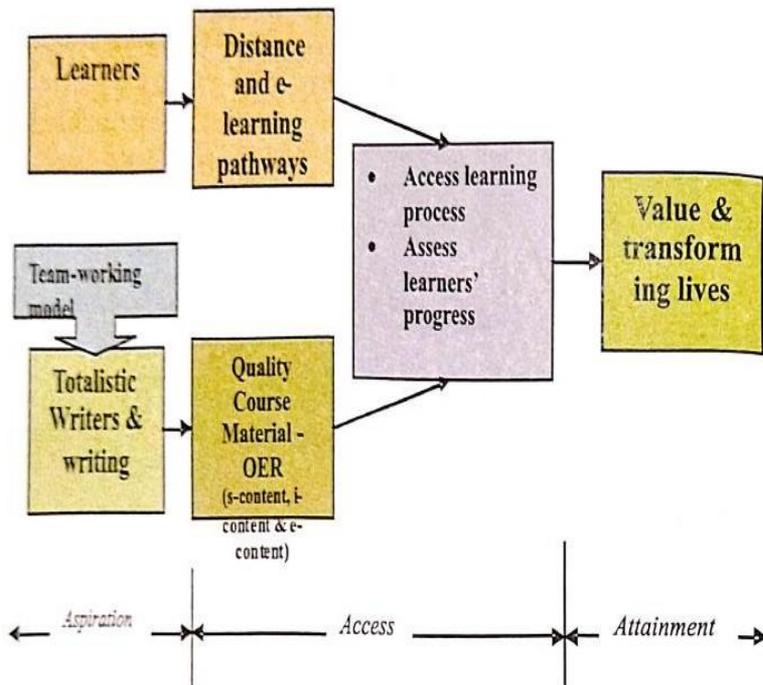


Fig.: How the Team-Working Model Promotes Access to Higher Education and OER through Opening up Distance and E-Learning Pathways

In summary, literature has evidenced and explained writer types. This work has used the writing styles in course materials (Table 1) to identify the characteristics of writing styles and writer types. Writers' perception of their type was ascertained (Table 2). As an intervention for improving quality of writing by the distance learning institute, IDL, it was studied to find how it made use of training to improve writer quality and course writing. The parameters in there were used to generate the Team-Working Model (Fig.2.) Moreover, researcher has shown how the Team-Working Model promotes access to higher education through opening up distance and e-learning pathways (Fig.3). There existed qualified lecturers that were not necessarily quality course writers. Knowledge of writer types will help resource persons in the design of workshop. Writers' workshop is designed to meet writer type toward the holistic quality writer.

This shows a justification of team-writing and multi-authoring for course materials development. There is the need for coaching and mentoring in

course writing. They can draw on the strengths of others to improve on the quality and thoroughness of the course material. Almost all course writers had problems writing course materials though they were qualified and experienced lecturers. It further indicated that quality course-writing comes from a team of trained and tasked writers using a quality course writing template for distance learning materials.

Conclusion

Writer type is named according to the features of their work focus and output. The distribution of writer types tends to be: Foundational Writer 20.0%, Process Writer 32%, Conclusive Writer 50%, and Totalistic Writer 8%. Most writers were a mix of writer types though predominant with a type. The totalistic writer being the most desirable characteristics of the team-work model was confirmed by 71.0% of respondents. Further, 1) All types share their strength, 2) All course writers find totalistic type to be most desirable and seek to become that especially in the writing skill and team-building strategies as in the team-working model, and 3) Totalistic type combines all strengths to have a pull (mentoring) effect on all the types. The fact that 7.70% of writers were totalistic writers and 92.30% were non-totalistic writers shows the extent to which course materials will largely be non-totalistic and lacking in enhancing learning quality. Team-working model will identify writer-types and help course writing trainers to coach their writers to appreciate and apply totalistic writer characteristics. This study shows the justification of team writing and multi-authoring for course materials development. In relation to the distance learning institute. they are commissioned writers. To the trainer, they are qualified lecturers becoming quality course writers. With respect to relations among writers, they are unique in their writer type but complement one another on the team. Individual writers should seek individually however to become Totalistic writers in their writing style and skills.

The team-working model was used in developing course material writers for programmes including MA (Art Education) and Graduate Diploma (Art Education) for graduate teacher art education of the Art School of KNUST. The model has enhanced also the effectiveness of writer training in the university.

The researchers recommend coaching and mentoring in course writing apart from training during the writers' workshop. Writers can draw on the strengths of others in their teams to improve on the quality and thoroughness of the course material. Further, a course development team should be available in the academic department who would also provide a forum for holistic resource for balanced and mature course curriculum. Also, co-authorship of course materials should be encouraged whenever possible to enrich peer-reviewing of course material.

References

- Asante,E. (2000). *Research and writing-A Brief Guide*. Accra: Africa Christian Press.pp.51-53,55.57.
- Babe.R.E. (2000). "The Communication Thought of Harold Adams Innis." In: *Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers*. University of Toronto Press. pp.51-8S.
- Friedman. J. (2006). *Beginning Writer's Answer Book – 30th Anniversary Edition Completed Revised and Updated*. Cincinnati: Writers 'Digest Books,p.29.
- Gricr, D.A. (April 11,2011). *Foundational Writer in Foundational issues in computing and crowd-sourcing*. Retrieved July 14, 2011 from Crowd research website, http://crowdresearch.org/chi2011-workshop/papers_grier.pdf
- Lawson. P. (2011). *Four Types of Writers*. Retrieved August 12,2011 from http://EzineArticles.com/1521508:http://ezinearticles.com/?expert=Pamela_Lawson
- Osei. C. K. & Saah, A. A. (2009, August). 'An Assessment of the Quality of Print Medium in Distance Learning for Undergraduate Programmes in Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology: Paper presented at the 3d Distance Education and Teacher Training in Africa Conference, Parallel Session, University of Cape Coast. Cape Coast.

- Jerz, D. G. (April 11th, 2011). *Technical Writing: What Is it?* Retrieved September 30, 2011 from <http://jerz.sctonhill.cdu/writing/technical-writing/what-is-iv>
- Johansen, T. (2000). *What Kind of Writer Do You Want to Be?* Retrieved 3rd October, 2011 from <http://www.writing-world.com/basics/types.shtml>
- Maass, D. (2009). *The Fire in Fiction: Passion, Purpose and Techniques to Make your Novel Great*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, p.4.
- Saah, A. A., Essel, R. & Mensah, J.A. (2011). 'Toward a Team-Working Model to Create Quality Course Material Writing at KNUST, Kumasi.' The First International Australasian Conference on Enabling Access to Higher Education Adelaide, South Australia. December 5-7, 2011. Conference Proceedings, Casual Publications, Australia, pp.190-199[1876346639]
- Rekkedal, T.(2006). State of the Art Report on Distance Learning and E-learning Quality for SMEs. Paper prepared for the EU Leonardo project, *E-learning Quality for SMEs: Guidance and Counselling*, May 2006). Retrieved October 5, 2011 from http://ncttskolcn.nki.no/in_english/clq-smc/EL.Q-SMEStateofArt.pdf

