'If only we knew what they wanted': bridging the gap between student uncertainty and lecturers' expectations

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Abstract

It is increasingly accepted that the development of the academic writing required to succeed in higher education (HE) is most effective when embedded within the discipline in which students are studying and when integrated with formal teaching. The many initiatives and programmes discussed in this journal suggest a variety of models and collaborations in the move from generic study skills to the integration of writing in the disciplines. As a contribution to this, we discuss the evaluation of an academic writing development module for Masters students in the School for International Development at the University of East Anglia (UEA). The module was devised collaboratively by the learning developer, subject specialist and postgraduate research students from the department. It was delivered by postgraduate research students, who also participated in its evaluation. The evaluation led to changes not only in the writing module itself but to the main Masters programme. We argue that the postgraduate research students played a key role in these changes and that through dialogue between students and the department, academics who were only peripherally involved nonetheless gained insights about the students' experience, potentially informing their future practice.

Keywords: writing development research; academic literacies; disciplinary writing; writing in the disciplines; international students; student writing; collaborative learning development; postgraduate writing mentors; peer learning.

Introduction

Writing is central to assessment in UK higher education (HE), in what Candlin and Plum (1999, p.197) call 'the ineluctable integration of writing with the display of disciplinary knowledge'; it is therefore also central to student success. Thus there is no such thing as 'academic writing' but rather students are required to write in a variety of genres and text types. There are significant differences in academic conventions and styles across disciplines (Swales, 1990; 2000) and cultures/languages (Duszak, 1996; Golebiowski and Liddicoat, 2002). Discourses (including academic discourse) are argued to be 'connected with displays of identity' (Gee, 1990, p.155). Thus success also means 'representing yourself in a way valued by your discipline, adopting the values, beliefs and identities which academic discourses embody' (Hyland, 2006, p.22). In response to this, there is a move away from generic provision and teaching of 'academic writing skills' to embedding writing in the disciplines (Bailey, 2010; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2003). The emergence of academic literacies research (Lea and Street, 1998; 1999) has contributed to a more nuanced approach to understanding these contextually and culturally shaped social practices. It has also helped to challenge deficit discourses around student writing (Lillis and Scott, 2007).

Insights on how writing is intricately linked to other academic practices underline how essential learning development is as a field of enquiry. For example, the 'different language and semiotic practices associated with the requirements of different genres in academic contexts' (Lea and Street, 2006, p.371); notemaking as an empowering practice (Hoskins and Sinfield, 2007); and the potentially alienating language of 'assignment briefs, marking criteria, feedback, lectures, tutorials and even learner support' (Bowstead, 2009, p.5). Although 'the responsibility for supporting learning rests ultimately with teachers in the disciplines' (Bailey, 2010, p.1), learning developers continue to play a role in instigating, promoting and developing writing in the disciplines (e.g. Queen Mary's thinkingwriting project www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk). Clearly, in complex contexts such as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), how and when to offer writing development and who should design and deliver this provision, will depend on a variety of contextual factors: the department, its disciplinary and pedagogical culture and relationships; its student cohort; the wider institutional culture in terms of teaching and learning, prior practices and relationships; availability of resources; the expertise and interests of the learning developer and where learning development is situated within the institution. The brevity of one year

Masters programmes is a further factor influencing how and when the embedding of academic writing can take place.

In their discussion of models and processes of embedding writing, Blake and Pates (2010, p.5) identify four stages, from generic writing workshops taught by learning developers to an embedded approach led by the subject specialist in which writing is integrated with the discipline. The academic writing module we discuss here fits into the 'embedding' stage in that discipline specific writing practice was offered using the course materials and assignments as much as possible. The module was intended as developmental rather than remedial or a 'preventive fix' (Gibson and Myers, 2010), although as we discuss later, student perceptions of such programmes as remedial was a barrier to participation. Before discussing the evaluation in more depth, we introduce the School of International Development (DEV) and its students and give an overview of the module.

The academic writing module: origins and beginnings at UEA

While most programmes may not assess students exclusively through written assignments, in DEV, written assignments play a major part. Taught Masters students are required to submit on average four 2500 word assignments in the first semester, four in the second semester and a 10,000 word dissertation at the end of August/summer. Student success in DEV is therefore predicated on the acquisition of the particular discourses and rhetorical styles that characterise this field of enquiry. DEV is also an interdisciplinary department, drawing postgraduate students from a wide range of disciplines. Thus there is no easily definable 'tribe' (Belcher, 1989) into which students can be acculturated.

The module was established in response to a concern that a significant number of Masters students (i.e. students on taught postgraduate Masters programmes) in DEV were not sufficiently prepared to meet the demands of academic writing in a UK Masters programme. As a result they might not effectively demonstrate their intellectual capability and understanding in their assessed written assignments. There was particular, although not exclusive, concern regarding DEV's increasing cohort of international Masters students ('international' students as used here excludes students from North America, Australia and New Zealand). In common with other institutions across the UK, a significant proportion of students on taught Masters programmes at University of East Anglia (UEA) are

international. In DEV the proportion was 53% in 2009, 60% if one adds students from the EU. In 2009/10 students came from 46 different countries, compared with 41 in 2008/9.

At this stage we did not consider a more embedded approach (Blake and Pates, 2010, p.5). Anecdotally it was felt that lecturers would view any involvement as an added burden to their already heavy workload. A subject specialist who had responsibility for undergraduate skills development became consultant and collaborator in the designing of the programme and evaluation. The decision was taken that postgraduate research students (PGRs) in DEV would be involved in planning and would lead and run the sessions. In addition, the learning developer was keen to introduce peer assisted learning to UEA, having encountered UCL's Writing Learning Mentor Programme (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/calt/acp/wlm.htm) in which PGRs – in collaboration with lecturers in their departments – offer a supplementary provision aimed at supporting students with their writing within the discipline (Crème and McKenna, 2008). As far as we know, the academic writing mentor module at UEA is the first which focuses exclusively on Masters students.

Four PGRs were identified as potential mentors and were invited to a two-day training in which they were introduced to an academic literacies approach to writing development. This was provided by the learning developer and fortnightly peer supervision sessions carried on throughout the academic year. A teaching fellowship funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) enabled us to evaluate the programme. At the time of writing, the DEV academic writing programme is about to be offered for the third year, beginning in and integrated with induction week. In the second year of the writing module, in-sessional English language sessions were offered to Masters students with 6.5 IELTS scores or less in any of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), with the idea of following up the writing sessions with more language focused activities, using the same or similar discipline specific texts and materials. This model had its difficulties – some purely practical – and for the coming year, the team is working closely with the in-sessional language coordinator to offer language sessions which meet the needs of the students more effectively within the constraints of a Masters degree.

The programme in 2008-09

In autumn 2008, group tutorials (90 minutes each) were offered over a period of eight weeks. Each mentor devised a plan for the sessions, which they discussed during the supervision meetings. During the first session, students were asked to talk about the problems they faced in relation to academic writing. This discussion formed the basis for planning subsequent sessions, covering structuring an assignment, referencing, notemaking, reading and constructing an argument.

During the second semester, four parallel 90-minute sessions were offered over a period of six weeks. The following topics were covered: assignment feedback, analysing assignments, effective reading, referencing, and avoiding plagiarism. In addition, several sessions were organised to support students in the dissertation process. This included a dissertation workshop providing parallel sessions for students in the different Masters strands (economics, gender and development, environment). Each session was run by a mentor and supported by lecturers.

Adjustments were made to the second semester programme based on student and tutor feedback. Firstly, the programme was opened to all Masters students in the School (not just international students or those previously identified as 'needing support'). Secondly, the groups were organised not on the basis of their skills level but according to student availability. This was in response to previous timetable clashes and a request to 'mix' students with different abilities to promote peer support. Thirdly, one of the tutors was assigned the role of programme coordinator in order to ensure consistency in the provision of writing skills support across tutorial groups.

The appointment of a coordinator provided both continuity and coherence. She was pivotal in creating a suite of discipline specific resources, a dissertation guide and a writing guide for the School, and since she was then asked to organise induction in the following academic year, went on to incorporate into induction week many of the lessons learnt from running the skills programme in respect of the key challenges which students feel hold them back from performing as well as they might.

In response to student feedback, individual tutorials were introduced after Easter. Students could sign up for a 30 minute slot to get individual support in relation to their academic

writing (such as understanding feedback given on assignments, planning new assignments, thinking about their dissertations). A total of 10 such slots were available per week, over a period of 10 weeks.

In July/August, group tutorials were organised to provide support during the dissertation process. These focused on the following three themes: analysing/interpreting data; writing and structuring the dissertation; editing and proofreading the dissertation. The one-off workshops were attended by as many as 120 students out of the 140 students on the taught masters programme in the academic year 2008-09 with about 70 students attending at least one tutorial group and/or one-to-one tutorials.

Research questions and evaluation methods

The research questions that guided the evaluation were:

1. What did the students and tutors feel were the strengths and weaknesses of the module and what recommendations did they have to improve it?
2. In what ways did the students feel that the module enhanced their learning experience at UEA?
3. In what ways did the students feel the module increased their confidence in writing and their understanding of the discipline?

Monitoring and evaluation were integrated into the module from the start in the following ways:

- Two online surveys were created for students to complete, one half-way through the programme and one at the end.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students in the summer term.
- Mentors were asked for a brief report at the end of each session describing the activities of the session, reflecting on what worked and what did not and recording important comments/reactions of the students.
- Students were asked to contribute comments on post-its or other media relevant to their learning experiences.
- Periodic observations of sessions were carried out by academic staff.

- Informal conversations with lecturers were held in the summer term.
- Fortnightly peer supervision attended by the mentors, the learning developer and subject specialist provided opportunity for continuous monitoring of the programme.

Given the significant proportion of students speaking English as an additional language, a reflection on the inter-related roles played by language proficiency, academic literacy and cultural practices in writing development at Masters level became part of the evaluation process.

Benefits

Students' ongoing feedback and suggestions were used for the programme's improvement. They also gave us a better understanding of the huge transition many students were making in studying at Masters level in the UK.

Group tutorials

The group sessions were seen as beneficial in several respects. Firstly, it was easier to ask questions in a small group. Problems and solutions could be shared. In fact, helping to solve other people's problems built confidence. Advice and guidance from these sessions was seen as time saving and was particularly helpful for general issues such as structuring an essay or dissertation and preparing for exams. Analysing assignments and working on specific essay questions was found to be the most useful, as they often found working out what the question was asking very difficult. The most useful group activity from the student point of view was critiquing/reviewing each other's work. This taught them a great deal about how to do critical writing and structure their work.

South Asian and African students did not have much problem with their English but were unfamiliar with the British style of academic writing. For example, they found writing the article review during induction week very difficult as they had no idea how to tackle it. Thus they felt that the writing they submitted was not a fair reflection of their understanding of the course, their language or intellectual ability. The writing skills programme was

therefore invaluable for introducing them to writing genres in DEV, to use of evidence and citation, to developing an argument and paragraphing.

Twenty students who completed the first online survey (71 per cent) found the group sessions useful or very useful:

> The session really helped me to improve my essay writing. Issues of critical and analytical writing improved my skills. The peer review of short paragraphs we did in the session were also very helpful and they helped me to come up with some good essays.

> Very useful, for example, I'm an international student, at beginning, I don't know how to write reference and how to avoid plagiarism. If I didn't participate in this program, I would not write my essay in right way.

> The sessions helped me the most for structuring the essays. I reckon I was very lucky to have 'Mary' as a tutor. I've had a lot of English classes for the sake of academic writing during last term and even before the term began, but it was through 'Mary' that I learned to apply those theories of academic writing into my actual essays. For example, I referred to the handout 'Essay structure' that she distributed, when I worked on structuring short essays.

The benefits of peer learning were made stark by the experience of one Japanese student who said that she was shocked at how difficult the course was and could not understand the content at all. She thought about leaving since it was a waste of money if she could not understand anything. What changed her mind was talking to other students who had the same experience, and attending the writing skills programme, in which she could see that she was not alone with her problems.

One-to-one tutorials

While group tutorials were viewed as confidence boosting and reassuring, individual tutorials gave an opportunity to address specific questions and students felt they were able to take what they learnt into subsequent assignment writing. These tutorials were seen as invaluable for getting tips on improving assignments and choosing topics. This was an

opportunity to ask anything the students wanted and get detailed responses on, for example, how to build structure or on their essay plans and again, the value of mentors as peers, and therefore being more approachable was highlighted by the following comment:

> I wish to continue one to one session in summer time or upon request of students, a tutor can come to university and give advice…because I sometimes hesitate to ask lecturers a question when I feel it might be too simple or silly to them.

The advantage of the mentors was – as one student put it – 'they know we have problems because they are students like us'. On several occasions, the PGR tutors were able to mediate between the students and lecturers, for example, over an assignment that had confused several students.

Criticisms

The programme was viewed by some as 'remedial' and therefore these students (invariably international) were reluctant to attend. This was fuelled by the fact that students who struggled with English had been told they had to attend. Initially there was concern that groups would get too big so many home students were discouraged from attending.

Some of the criticisms were not directed at the module as such but at the whole experience of attending a Masters course. One student suggested that she would have liked more exposure to disciplinary knowledge during her pre-sessional course while another felt they would have liked content-based rather than skills-based sessions for those 'who have problems with even understanding their own subjects from the lectures or reading […It] sounds stupid but this was what happened to myself and several other friends I know of'. Another student felt that in light of their high fees they should be offered more dedicated support and for others the number of contact hours did not fit with their notion of a 'taught' course.

Some students tended to see the group tutorials as a tolerable substitute for what they really wanted, namely one-to-one tutorials. One student commented that although it was comforting to know there was support and that you were not alone with your problems, one to one sessions were better because 'everyone has different questions and they [the other

students] will hate you for asking questions and taking up the tutor's time'. The problems are brought to the classroom, she explained, but 'we are all foreigners, we are not fluent, we are not familiar with the system'.

These comments indicate a number of things. Firstly, that 'international students' are not a homogenous group but rather have diverse perceived needs, motivation and expectations. Secondly, the comments highlight the challenge in HE of helping students to engage with the language, disciplinary knowledge and academic literacy that is required in HE. Thirdly, there is the tendency for students (and educators) to try to address these separately and the difficulties of doing so. Despite the intention of the module to be embedded in the content of the course, the students saw the sessions as 'skills' driven. This may have been because of the dominance of the skills model in HE teaching and learning culture and to the tension between skills and content. Lecturers may feel uneasy when PGRs focus too much on content as they see this as their territory, the curriculum tending to focus exclusively on content, leaving the skills development to 'extra-curricular remediation' (Gourlay and Greig, 2007).

Concluding summary

While the perceived improvements are encouraging, it is difficult to establish a baseline from which to compare improvements across years. The module enhanced the student experience of studying and contributed to the continuing improvement of teaching and assessment in DEV. Several students attributed their increased marks to the module and anecdotally, DEV's examination board expressed surprise at the marked improvement of some students. Unfortunately, the perception remained that the module was for 'weak' students and for those struggling with English, which put off some students who had been strongly advised to attend. At the same time, many students who had not been invited to attend, wished to do so and home students who attended felt they benefited.

Overall, many of the criticisms relate to the how, when and who delivers writing development and suggest that for students to fully engage, an entirely embedded approach is needed. For international students, attendance on 'pre-sessional' courses adds to the complex question of where, at what point and how best to prepare students for studying at Masters level. Comments about the overlap between what they were doing in

these sessions and work they had done in their pre-sessional language programmes highlights the complex intersection between language and academic literacy demands and the need to create highly contextualised academic literacy development – preferably embedded in the curriculum – so that students feel that they are learning their subject whilst improving their writing (Mitchell, 2009).

However, within the particular institutional constraints and time constraints of the DEV Masters programme, the module has worked. It has also led to other changes which have contributed to a less remedial approach to writing development in the department.

Self-selection or placement tests?

Addressing language issues and developing academic literacy on a one year course (effectively in 24 weeks of teaching) is clearly a challenge. While some international students may struggle because of insufficient fluency in English, the lack of familiarity with the norms and values of their new institution is likely to be a more universal experience (Carroll and Ryan, 2005). As familiarity and understanding grow, language becomes less of an issue. For others, their command of English may simply be insufficient to handle the conceptual complexity of their chosen subject and particularly, writing at this level of study. For a significant group it seemed to be a combination of both.

To address these different dimensions, students were grouped according to how they performed linguistically and conceptually in a written task set at the beginning of the year. However, the nature of the task meant that it was not possible to differentiate between students whose writing was 'bad' because they did not understand what was expected and those who were struggling with English. On the other hand, students who may have performed well in the short written task, faced similar challenges when required to write extended assignments and felt they were missing out from the provision. In addition, this approach to selecting participants for the programme may have contributed to sending out the wrong signal in that the programme was perceived as 'remedial'.

It was decided that what was needed for the following year was more of a separation between academic literacies (which it would be assumed that ALL students could benefit from) and English language, where students with scores of 6.5 or less in any of the four

skills would be likely to benefit significantly from English language sessions. Whilst it was felt that it was imperative to detect as soon as possible those students who were likely to struggle, whatever task was set to do this, it should not assume too much knowledge of the discipline or the ability to tackle a particular kind of academic task. On the other hand, it was decided that it should be formative, by introducing them to key concepts and in providing useful feed forward for students to take into the start of the academic year. It was also felt that the aim of the activity and the assessment criteria used would need to be made very explicit.

Thus, the short writing task was replaced by an online 'comprehension and writing' task based on an International Development text. The aim was to alert lecturers to any likely difficulties students might have with reading (since the course is very reading intensive) but also help students themselves identify their own areas of weakness in terms of academic skills, encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning (for diagnostic procedures, see Bonanno, 2002). The academic writing module was introduced to the students during induction week and all Masters students were invited to attend the sessions, regardless of how they performed in the online task. Alongside this, students speaking English as an additional language and who had not achieved a minimum level in IELTS of 7.0 completed an additional language diagnostic test. Based on their result they were allocated to language support sessions which ran over the first half of the semester. There were some misgivings about making this test compulsory. Firstly, whether or not IELTS 6.5 is sufficient for a Masters degree, the admissions criteria for many departments across the UK, including the International School of Development, is 6.5 and international students come to study having been implicitly told that their English is 'good enough' to study in a UK university. In the end, students were told that while 6.5 IELTS was an acceptable level of English, if they really wanted to do well and make the most of their studies, continuing to improve their English alongside their studies was highly recommended.

What we learnt

The programme and the evaluation process resulted in a number of outcomes which have enhanced the learning of the Masters students and we hope will continue to do so for future cohorts. We have a better understanding of the distinction between the challenges

of meeting the expectations and assumptions of Masters level study (affecting all students) and the challenges of studying in a second language (affecting many international students). Our concern has been to avoid segregation and facilitate integration between international and home students as much as possible by focussing on their common concerns and by providing opportunities for mutually beneficial exchanges of skills and knowledge. A more interactive induction programme has now been set up which allows students to explore their expectations and the expectations of the UK HE system, and how teaching and learning are organised (e.g. assessment, feedback, marking system).

We became aware of the impact of the increasing use of Blackboard in making resources accessible and communication of various kinds from lecturers to students. This has implications for students who may not be familiar with this environment. International students commented on the excess of written materials both on Blackboard and hard copy comparing to the more personal channels of communication and face-to-face interactions they were used to. More thorough hands-on introduction to Blackboard and to the library was incorporated the following year.

It became apparent that students who did not have difficulties with English – many of the African students for example – were struggling with a huge gap in terms of the academic culture in the UK and the implicit assumptions underpinning the expectations and assessment criteria. Many lacked experience of independent research, for example, due to lack of resources in their home institution and/or limited access to the internet, and were therefore unfamiliar with online research journals – which play such a central role in the independent research Masters students are expected to carry out in the UK.

We gained insights into the specific challenges Masters students face in this particular department, and a feedback loop between the mentors and the faculty enabled some difficulties to be pre-empted. For example, it became apparent that a particular assignment was causing many students difficulties, so the lecturer produced explicit guidelines for, and an example of, the kind of text they were being asked to write. Discipline specific resources were created for use in future tutorials with future cohorts of students (e.g. analysing questions, identifying arguments, paraphrasing, referencing). A writing guide was written for the Masters programme which goes some way towards making explicit the perhaps implicit writing conventions that lecturers teaching on the Masters programme expect of students. More attention is being given to the wording of assignments and of the

assignment tasks. Lecturers perhaps do not always appreciate that students can struggle with the variety of assignments they are asked to write (see Nesi et al., 2008 for research on genres of assessed student writing in UK HE). For example, in the School of International Development, students have to write reports, concept notes, research proposals, critical reviews and case studies.

A significant and indirect benefit of the programme was that because the Masters students saw the PGR mentors as peers, students raised issues they felt unable to voice directly to faculty members and the mentors in turn were able to liaise with lecturers, thus providing an invaluable feedback loop for the latter. During the second semester, the PGR tutors gave a presentation to the head of School, outlining their recommendations for improving the student experience overall in the School and opening the way for a programme better integrated into the Masters programme itself.

Conclusions

In the context of diverse and changing organisational practices, programmes and curricula that characterise the UK's HEIs, a responsive and flexible approach to embedding academic writing is needed. We argue that involving PGRs in both the design and the delivery of writing development within the discipline is an approach which is responsive and flexible. Unlike learning developers, PGRs have the disciplinary familiarity – they are insiders to some extent. On the other hand, students are more likely to perceive PGRs as 'one of us'. Straddling two worlds, they can act as a bridge between the students and the lecturers, and contribute to the ongoing curriculum development and reflection of the department itself. PGRs bring a unique perspective as 'novice' insiders. Because they are students and perceived as such by the taught masters students, interactions are likely to be less encumbered by power issues that may arise with lecturers who ultimately assess their work. Learning developers also play a vital role, bringing their expertise and knowledge of resources, helping PGRs to adapt resources or providing feedback in the development of resources and activities. Lastly, the aim has to be for all subject specialists to work closely with the PGRs. Without the endorsement and involvement of subject specialists, these writing programmes are likely to be seen as 'remedial' by the students. Conversely, a shift in culture is needed not just from remedial to preventative but from

writing development as need to writing development as entitlement (May and Bridger, 2010)

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