3 Innovations, activities and principles for supporting students’ writing

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Despite some of the critiques of the conventions of academic writing that have been outlined above, it is also clear that nurturing good writing skills among students enhances their ability to think in complex and coherent ways (Bean, 2001). Writing is not only valued in academia; good writing skills are important for the enhancement of our students’ professional lives. Despite its centrality in academia and professional life, it is often left up to the students themselves to become good at writing. While there have been notable changes in the UK and Ireland in providing dedicated support for student writing, many higher education contexts rely on students being acculturated or somehow induced into academic writing simply by being immersed into university life (Lea and Street, 1998).

The academic literacies approach proposed by Lea and Street, which encompasses the traditional skills model, the socialisation model and the academic literacies model, has the potential to bring about positive change necessary to support writing practices among students. This section will focus primarily on one aspect of this approach, most notably on how educators can enhance students’ writing by integrating writing and a dialogue on writing into their classrooms and learning environments. It builds on some of the ideas and exercises in Section 2, and shows the value of embedding writing within the disciplinary curriculum. Such an approach ensures that writing becomes more deliberately integral to the process of learning and thinking.

Integrating the teaching of writing directly into the curriculum (which is what we recommend) means that a helping hand is extended to all students, not just those who seek help. This approach is informed by thirty years of US/UK scholarship on writing and teaching and learning. A little over thirty years ago, Janet Emig made what she referred to as ‘a first effort to make a certain kind of case for writing specifically to show its unique value for learning’ (1977:127). Four years later, Joyce Armstrong Carroll (1981) showed how talking was an effective method for learning how to write. Not long after that, Stephen North’s call for ‘a pedagogy of direct intervention’ (1984:439) anticipated the ethnographic methodologies advocated by the academic literacies approach.

At the same time as these ideas were emerging, ‘Writing Across the Curriculum’ theory began moving away from a cognitive view of learning towards a more social, constructivist position (Young, 1994). Writing can support and develop active learning and discovery. We believe that there are huge benefits in the simple activities of listening and responding to our students speaking and reading their writing. By learning from these activities, we have come to favour social constructivist theories of knowledge and inductive methods of teaching and learning. And, alongside James Moffett and Stephen North, we move from the subject to the learner, for the subject is in the learner’ (Moffet cited in North, 1984:439).

Analysing academic writing to help students

As we have discussed in Section 2, academics can initiate a dialogue among students to discuss features of academic writing and criteria that will make their writing more effective. From these discussions, students can generate a list of the most important features of good academic writing, which, as suggested by Murray and Moore (2006:135), can be used as a sort of ‘writing charter’ that they can consult for guidance. Many prompts can be used to initiate these discussions. Since disciplinarity is one of the most important features of academic writing, research articles in the student’s field can be a particularly useful starting point. Equally, familiarising students with samples of literature reviews, research reports, theses or any form/dimension of academic writing will guide them in producing such writing. According to Hyland (2002), there are two useful means of getting learners acquainted with the patterns and conventions of an unfamiliar genre, namely analysing the genre/text and modelling. Using models to initiate students into the unfamiliar language and conventions of their disciplinary discourse community is a good habit to get into at a very early stage. Equally, analysing journal guidelines for contributors will help them focus on the features of writing which are important in their discipline.

Exercise 4: A framework for encouraging students to understand the writing conventions of their own disciplines

The following types of questions could focus students’ attention on certain discipline-specific features:

- What are the important conventions in your discipline?
- What essentially makes good writing and is acceptable in your discipline?
Freewriting is an excellent means of initiating the writing process and getting ideas on paper. More than anyone else, Peter Elbow (1998) has promoted the wonderful benefits of freewriting in academic contexts, showing how it can help students (and lecturers – see also Exercise 6) to overcome writer’s block, get words on paper, tap more fully into their creativity and find their own voice. Freewriting may well be the simplest and yet most effective activity to help students and their teachers to become confident, fluent and even at times effortless writers. Many lecturers and tutors find that freewriting is an excellent use of class time.

Exercise 5: Freewriting – fostering writing fluency and confidence among students

Have your students engage in freewriting exercises as ‘warm ups’ for dedicated writing time, or to help them to generate a more fluent approach to their own writing activities.

1. Write to a prompt that you create for your students or encourage them to create their own prompts.

Sample prompts:
The next thing I want to write about is...
The reason I am writing this is...
The objectives of my essay are...
My ideas about (topic X) include...

2. Encourage the freewriting to be strictly private. You may ask your students to talk about what they have written in small groups, but assure them that no one will read or evaluate their free-written pieces.

3. Encourage students to write continuously for a period of, say, 5 to 10 minutes, without stopping, editing or correcting.

So, freewriting consists of short writing sessions where the writer keeps on writing without editing or censoring their writing in any way. Because the writing is not evaluated, there are no repercussions for the person writing, thus alleviating feelings of anxiety. Given that constant editing can impede production, encouraging students not to edit while writing removes an additional burden from the process. To begin with, lecturers and tutors can integrate short freewriting exercises of five minutes into their lectures or tutorials and work up from there. Initially, they might provide students with very general prompts such as ‘a writing problem...

Students could be asked to negotiate and generate a list of important discipline-specific conventions and of what constitutes good writing in their discipline. You could provide them with a classic paper in their discipline as an example from which they could work.

Reading will help students who struggle with finding a voice in academic writing to uncover how other writers develop a voice in their writing by analysing linguistic choices and modelling them. Similarly, encouraging students to view academic writing as an opportunity to join the conversation already taking place within a specific discourse community can encourage them to make their own written contribution to that conversation.

Developing effective writing strategies, orientations and skills

It should be the responsibility of academics in all disciplines to cultivate students’ writing (Mitchell and Evison, 2006) and to help them develop strategies to become effective writers. Bean (2001) recognises that there is often a worry among lecturers that integrating writing into their courses will take away from content, will not be suitable for certain disciplines, will lead to an excessive burden of marking or grading, or will confront them with their own writing-related difficulties. In response, he argues that these are misconceptions.

Getting those first few words down on paper is often the most difficult aspect of writing. Lack of confidence, motivation and knowledge can cause writers to procrastinate. If they are going to wait for the writing to flow or for inspiration to strike, it may be a long wait indeed, as they may never feel ready and therefore never write anything at all (Murray, 2006). Consequently, writers must develop strategies that will help them to produce text even when they do not feel ready.

\[<\text{What organisational features/patterns are in evidence?}>\]
\[<\text{How are arguments and counter-arguments presented and structured?}>\]
\[<\text{What types of evidence are important in this discipline?}>\]
\[<\text{What stylistic features are prominent?}>\]
\[<\text{Is the text cohesive? How does the author achieve such cohesion?}>\]
\[<\text{What kind(s) of persuasive devices does the author employ?}>\]
\[<\text{Are there noticeable features that can be transferred to other disciplines?}>\]
encountered’ or ‘how I go about writing’ that get them to reflect a little on the writing process. The prompts can then become more focused, with lecturers asking students to write about a particular topic before it is addressed in class, thus actively engaging them in the subject.

Repeating such activities regularly is an effective means of improving writing and helping to build confidence and fluency among student writers. Once students get into the habit of engaging in freewriting, they can use it independently of the teacher to get them started on any writing task.

Peer review can form a very useful support as part of the writing process. Murray (2005) suggests combining freewriting with generative writing, which allows someone to read what has been written. Building this element of peer review into the writing process at an early stage helps writers overcome their fears of having their work reviewed by others and gets them into the habit of receiving and giving feedback.

The discussions that take place during the peer review can then be used to stimulate further writing. Murray (2005:85) refers to this method of combining writing, talking and writing again as ‘the writing sandwich’. This process allows the writer time to write and ensures that there is feedback from a peer or writing ‘buddy’ (Murray and Moore, 2006).

There are many other short but very effective Writing to Learn activities that can be very easily integrated into the classroom. Examples suggested by The WAC Clearinghouse (2008) include:

- writing a definition or annotation
- writing a short response paper (to an idea/issue/text that has been discussed in class)
- summarising, paraphrasing or synthesising texts
- writing a letter.

Engaging in short, simple, impromptu writing activities focusing on an idea being discussed in class concentrates the students’ attention on content and discipline-specific writing, while helping them to clarify their thoughts, to learn and ultimately to develop their critical thinking. It also ensures that students are engaging regularly in writing, thus keeping their writing skills sharp.

Since writing is a personal process, students must find strategies that work for them. It is important for students to establish what they like about writing, what they do not like and what strategies could help them get over these issues. Keeping a learning diary (Moore and Murphy, 2005) or a process journal (Elbow and Belanoff, 2003) allows student writers to focus on what happens when they write and to reflect upon their writing experience. Information about when they feel most/least motivated to write and strategies that have/have not worked in the past, for instance, can be recorded and capitalised upon at different stages of the writing process. Keeping a learning diary on a regular basis also encourages students to write regularly, albeit informally, thus injecting confidence and fluency into their writing. Moore and Murphy suggest that encouraging students to write a little bit every day is one of the most effective ways of becoming an accomplished writer: ‘we learn to write through writing’ (Hyland, 2002:81).

Effective peer review

Finding in-class time for peer review in an overcrowded semester is challenging, but offers enormous benefits for student writing and learning. By learning to comment meaningfully on fellow students’ essays, students practise reading and gain insights about how to go about revising their own work.

For peer review to be as effective as possible, students usually need some guidance. Peer review is intended to make students aware of the desirability of thorough revision and, by advising others, to see for themselves ways of improving their own revision process.

Here are some possible guidelines that can be helpful in coaching students to become peer reviewers of each other’s work:

1) Ask students to write a brief assessment of what they think are the strengths and weaknesses of their own essay. They should give this to their reader.

2) Ask students to read their partner’s essay and fill out a form with questions for feedback. Sample questions might include:

- What did you like about the essay? What ideas seemed strongest to you? Are there any particular passages or sentences that seem particularly strong?
- Does the essay clearly answer the specific question that has been assigned? Which aspects are not really focused on the topic? Do any aspects need to be related more closely to the question?
- How well is the essay organised? Does it flow smoothly from point to point? Is the material arranged logically? Which sections seem less well structured?
- Is there a clear introduction and conclusion?
• How does the writer use evidence (be specific about the evidence that is relevant for this assignment)?
• What do you think could be changed or improved?
• Are there any questions that occur to you as you read this essay?

Try to make sure there is time for the authors to read the feedback and to discuss it with their reader.

**Formal versus informal writing (and how the latter can nourish the former)**

Some academics question the value of engaging students in informal writing (such as that suggested in the above exercises) on the grounds that the writer may produce a lot of rubbish and develop bad writing habits. The first of these objections is rejected by Elbow (1998), who argues that informally produced text can contain the seeds of very good pieces of writing. Bean (2001) allays fears of developing bad writing habits, stating that writing without concern for organisation, structure or mechanics is an important and necessary developmental stage in the process, allowing the writer time and space to sort through their ideas, which can be quite disorganised when starting out. Drawing the focus of the attention away from the grammar and spelling at the initial stages allows the writer to focus on clarifying their thoughts and captures their creative energy. Engaging in this type of writing stimulates thinking and helps students to become more productive.

Making writing an enjoyable and positive experience for students is extremely important. If the only writing our students ever do is for assessment, then they may never find the intrinsic pleasures that can be part of the writing experience. Once in the habit of writing regularly, students will become more confident and fluent in their writing and, as a result, be in a better position to make the transition to formal academic writing with greater ease.

**Giving and receiving feedback**

Conversations among academics about feedback often begin with frustration over the imbalanced relationship between the monumental amount of time and effort put into composing feedback on written work and the diminutive improvements it seems to inspire. Expressions of discontent eventually wind their way toward questions about the most effective forms of feedback and about the amount, timing, mode of delivery and content of good feedback.

Task-level, directive or formative feedback (Shute, 2007; Brookhart, 2008) can all be used to help build writing competence. Summative feedback, because it tends to be evaluative, judging performance rather than encouraging learning, is less valuable as part of the learning process. Summative feedback also tends to generalise performance in relation to assessment criteria, a tendency that Nancy Sommers describes as feedback that is 'not text-specific', seemingly designed to be easily 'interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text' (1982:152). This lack of contiguity between the comment, its context and its lack of specificity is often a source of student frustration and discouragement (Shute, 2007). All too often, students who experience 'writing assessment' more than 'writing development' come to the conclusion that error-free writing is more important than the generation and exploration of their ideas (McCarrell and Verbeem, 2007).

Formative feedback, on the other hand, tends to be associated with low-stakes, or unassessed, writing. A formative orientation is often seen as being an ideal approach for addressing cognitive, metacognitive and affective - especially motivational - factors, helping students to see 'where they are' at any given time in relation to their learning goals, thereby giving students a sense of control over their learning (Brookhart, 2008; Shute, 2007). It does this by focusing on 'information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify the learner's thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning' (Brookhart, 2008: 55). For instance, once a draft is produced, unclear meanings, relevance, insufficient or unreliable support for claims, digressions and disorganisation can be addressed through questions that facilitate learning, as in the facilitation strategies outlined by Ryan and Zimmererelli (2005). The trick is to keep the feedback student-centred by scaffolding the learning - not to give information that the student is not ready for, but to guide students by inviting them to discover what they are ready to discover.

Brookhart encourages writing instructors and lecturers to seek out 'as many opportunities as you can to talk to students about their work' (2008:56). Out-of-class conferencing, for instance, increases opportunities to give students feedback on their progress in reaching agreed goals, and to negotiate new learning targets that are manageable. While understanding that conferencing can be time-consuming, it tends nevertheless to be much quicker to deliver feedback orally than it is to put that same amount of feedback down on paper (Fassler, 1978). In addition, oral feedback allows both instructors and students to ask for clarification.

In-class writing exercises that are designed to get students to think critically about content issues and to represent their thoughts orthographically also increase
opportunities for feedback. Once their thoughts are on paper, their writing is open to review by themselves, their lecturers and their peers.

**Checklist for giving feedback to students on their writing**

Ideas that can help academics to give useful, actionable and encouraging feedback to their students:

- Give feedback that will be as clear as possible about how students can improve or sharpen their writing.
- Start with something about the writing that is good (e.g. this piece of writing focuses on an important topic and seems to say some interesting things about...)
- Be honest and specific with both positive and negative comments.
- Ask the writer to be specific about the kind of feedback they would find most useful and also specify the stage of development of the writing (Elbow and Belanoff, 2000).
- Differentiate between higher and lower order concerns (Bean, 2001). Higher order concerns include whether the writing addresses the topic/question, is argued in a sound and justified way, is well-organised and clear. Lower-order concerns include such issues as stylistic choices, forms of expression, grammar, punctuation and spelling.
- Always start from a position of respect. Respect the work that the student has done, and give feedback that indicates that positive regard.

**The importance of drafting and redrafting in order to generate higher levels of clarity, precision and effectiveness**

Most of the findings in early studies on student revision practices found that many students still equated revision with proofreading and editing. For Donald Murray (1978: 56-7), this was due to a failure on the part of many academics to recognise the importance of revision, and on the part of textbooks on writing to address the fact that ‘the role of discovery is crucial to effective writing’. Nancy Sommers (1982) wanted to know why novice writers made changes that were counter-productive. Her assertion was that some lecturers’ comments on student writing drew students’ attention away from their own purposes in writing by focusing the student writer’s attention on ‘the teachers’ purpose in commenting’ (Sommers, 1982:149). Even though students were explicitly instructed in the drafting stage to ignore micro-level issues, those were just the features that drew comments in the feedback on early drafts.

Myhill and Jones (2007:340-41) recommend an institutional reconceptualisation of what revision is ‘...from a rather narrow framing of revision as a *post hoc* correction and improvement process to a more inclusive concept, encompassing revision occurring at every stage in the writing process’. Their recent research suggests that the importance of revision and the nature of the process are still not understood by students. They recommend the use of talk to develop a metacognitive understanding of the nature and value of the revision process, and for the development of strategies that address both macro- and micro-issues. This suggests that the best teachers of writing are still teachers who write, who examine their own writing and revision processes and strategies, and bring that experience into discussions with students about their own writing experiences.

‘Meaning’, Elbow reminds us, ‘is not what you start out with but what you end up with’ (1998:15). Bean (2001) too recommends that time be allowed for dialogue, encouraging in-class peer-review sessions that are designed to get students to talk about their drafts. It is important not just to allow time for talk, but also time for practise. ‘When students do their writing the night before a paper is due,’ says Bean (2001:xiii), ‘they insulate themselves from the intellectual struggle of revision where the true craft of writing is learned’. Submitting multiple drafts for review and feedback and requiring that these initial drafts and comments accompany final submissions provides the time that student writers really require if they are to engage in that struggle (Bean, 2001:33-34). We know that such a process may indeed be very time-consuming for lecturers and writing coaches, and we draw your attention to the important ‘principle of pragmatism’ in the conclusions in order to recognise this.

**A systematic approach to writing intervention: support that develops student writing**

If academics are to integrate writing within their disciplines and engage in conversations about writing with their students, they need support. Additionally, many lecturers and tutors may not have the time or the expertise to deal with all issues relating to academic writing that may arise. Therefore, putting in place a support mechanism which helps teachers in their endeavours to integrate writing into their classrooms and provides students with the additional support needed outside of the classroom ensures that the institution is adopting a systematic approach to writing development. Writing centres are best suited for providing the multiplicity of required responses.
A writing centre is often spoken of as occupying a definable space. This space is defined by a centre’s mission, the services it offers and those it serves, and the expertise of the centre staff. Ironically, writing centres occupy a paradoxically peripheral and, simultaneously, central position because of their disciplinary, and therefore political and rhetorical, neutrality. As a result of this neutrality, writing centres are better positioned to encourage a dialogue on writing across disciplinary divides (Waldo, 1993; Harris, 1999). Their neutrality allows for disciplinary difference to collapse towards the centre, where experts in writing can best collaborate with subject specialists. By helping academics in their own writing development, writing centres put teachers in a better position to develop their students’ writing. Through staff support and guidance, it prepares teachers for the challenge of integrating writing development into their classrooms. The many resources a writing centre provides have an important role to play in helping teachers in areas where they may struggle; for instance, identifying productive writing practices for the classroom, clearly outlining guidelines in assessments or giving productive feedback on writing.

The writing workshops and clinics provided for students by the writing centre can offer the much-needed additional support on different forms of academic writing or different aspects of the writing process. Drop-in sessions allow students to seek writing support on any aspect of their writing in a friendly and safe environment, and are dedicated to helping students develop strategies to become better and more confident writers. The interdisciplinary approach adopted by writing centres combines discipline-specific knowledge with expert knowledge in writing to ensure that both undergraduate and postgraduate students receive support for their individual and discipline-specific writing needs.

Conclusion
Integrating writing instruction into the curriculum and contextualising writing instruction means that writing becomes an important part of the discipline. Getting students to articulate their ideas in writing engages them actively in the class, enhances their learning and encourages the development of their higher-order thinking skills. Combining this with the additional support provided by writing centres ensures that writing instruction is available to all at a time when it is needed.