Seeking to Identify Student and Staff Perspectives on the Nature of Pedagogical Support for Academic Writing.

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SEEKING TO IDENTIFY STUDENT & STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE OF THE PEDAGOGICAL SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

This paper presentation explores the evolution of institutional support for academic writing in an Irish Higher Education Institution and the role that two key Centres (the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre and the Academic Writing Centre), have played in sustaining both students and staff. The centrality of placing pedagogy and practice at the core of our support, with a view of subsequently informing institutional policy is also investigated.

Summary

Most literature in this area tends to focus on students’ academic writing inadequacy and on how to improve instruction and pedagogy, but rarely focuses on exploring students’ views on the nature of the support received or the interaction itself. This study aims to counter this by considering students’ and lecturers’ views on the effectiveness of the pedagogic approach and writing activities they engaged with, both in class and at one to one tutorials. While an earlier study by Lea & Street (2006) examined the contrasting expectations and interpretations of academic staff and students regarding undergraduate students’ written assignments, this current research continues the discussion on the nature of writing practices from these dual perspectives.

Abstract

This paper discusses the pedagogical approach adopted for the support of academic writing for both students and academic staff at a higher education institution (HEI) in Ireland. It builds on previous research conducted in our professional development context on supporting lecturers in academic writing (Donnelly & Crehan, 2012; Donnelly, 2014). The study uses a reflexive and data-driven evaluation of two initiatives in existence in the HEI: a Continuous Professional Development Module (CPD) for academic staff and postgraduate students (PGs) entitled ‘Academic Writing and Publishing’, in existence since 2009, and a more recently established Academic Writing Centre (AWC) for supporting undergraduate and postgraduate students. The evaluation reports on students’ and lecturers’ perceptions of the effectiveness and nature of academic writing support provided by the two Centres. The evaluation analyses the results of two online surveys: students (n=140) and lecturers/PGs (n=60) as well a focus group interview with six lecturers. Three Forms of Data Collection 1 STUDENT online survey with the most recent recipients of the AWC support 2 STAFF online survey across all cohorts who completed the AWP module since 2009 3 STAFF Focus Group resulted in a series of useful vignettes of experiences Analysis of the data indicates that lecturers and students hold different views about the type and nature of the academic writing support and its effectiveness. Academic staff remain very aware of the importance of writing development and practice both for themselves and their students. Combining skills, socialisation and academic literacies approaches allows academic staff the opportunity to develop their own practice, and consequently improve the learning experience of their students. Analysis of student data, on the other hand, reveals that students have a preference for the use of reflective strategies to address issues such as structure and paper organisation. Thus supporting students’ development as academic writers requires a commitment to providing meaningful feedback to support them in becoming reflective about their writing. These results provide useful insights to inform the development and future provision of academic writing support in the two Centres, and go some way towards consolidating the current and future role of academic writing within this 21st century educational institution.

Selected references

Institutional Context

- Dublin Institute of Technology

- Arts & Tourism
- Business
- Sciences & Health
- Engineering & Built Environment
Evolution of Academic Writing Support

Learning, Teaching & Technology Centre
Academic Writing & Publishing Module
2009

- Lecturing Staff & Postgraduate Students
- Semester-long module
- Taught & assessed
- Process of assessment, analysis, action, and review

Academic Writing Centre
2014

- All students
- One-to-one consultations
- Thematic Workshops
- Non-instructional approach
Shared Pedagogical Values

Academic Writing Centre
- Awareness raising
- WAC/WID
- Academic Literacies/EAP

Academic Writing & Publishing Module
- Fostering critical thinking
- Writing Knowledge (Genre, Audience, Purpose)
- Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary
- Independent & Peer Learning
- Active & Interactive Engagement

• Collaborative
• Student-centred
• Writing as a process
• Feedback & Reflection

Lea & Street (2006)
Why we wanted to do this study

• To see how the approach to the academic writing support for the two initiatives works
• to use the student data from the study to raise awareness amongst lecturing staff as to the students’ preferred reading and writing strategies so that they can include them in their own classroom practice
• to inform our practice at the one to one sessions
Bridging Literatures

• Feedback and Reflection
• Self-efficacy
• English as a second language
• Academic literacies
• Professional development for academic staff
Research Study

**Research Question:**
How are initial approaches to academic writing support provision being perceived by students and academic staff, and what support strategies do students and staff prefer in academic writing?

- Reflexive & Data-driven study
  - Online survey to students and staff
  - Focus Group Staff = 6
  - Sample population: Student respondents n=21 (200); Staff respondents n=30 (45)
Reflexive Approach

The researchers reflect continuously on how their own actions, values and perceptions impact upon the research setting and can affect data collection and analysis (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006)

We are exploring how we are creating understandings from within our ongoing, shared dialogical relationship
Engaging with the data
Interpreting the data
Engaging with our practice
Common Perceptions

• **Affective Domain:** Motivation, self-efficacy, confidence-building (McLeod, 1991; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Pajares, 2003; Baikie & Wilheim, 2005; Lavelle, 2006; Carter, 2008; Al-Mekhlafi, 2011)

• **Cognitive/Technical Domain** academic writing support (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Benton et al., 1984)

• **Most valuable perceived writing strategies:** reflection, feedback (Yancey, 1998; Carless, 2013)
Affective Domain
(Motivation, Self-efficacy, confidence building)

**Affective Domain** one of the three domains of learning: Cognitive (thinking); Affective (emotions & feelings); and Psychomotor (physical & kinesthetic) (Bloom, B.S., & Krathwohl, D.R. 1956)

**Self-efficacy** refers to our own belief in our ability to do something, such as write a good essay or to paraphrase material effectively. Self-efficacy was developed as a construct by Bandura (1977) and is one of the most important constructs in contemporary psychology (Maguire, 2016)

Two decades of research on the influence of self-efficacy beliefs in academic functioning have strengthened Bandura’s (1986) claim that **self efficacy beliefs play an influential role in human agency.** Consequently, an important pedagogical implication to emerge from these findings is that teachers would do well to take seriously their share of responsibility in nurturing the self-beliefs of their pupils, for it is clear that these self-beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences (Pajares, 2003)
Affective Domain & Self-efficacy

Staff Comments

• “prior to the AWP module, my academic writing experience was very limited and it was an area I would have been uncomfortable approaching, however after completing the module I was much more at ease....”

• “I didn’t have confidence in myself but the module opened up my eyes to the possibility....”

• “.....confidence in academic writing”

• “provided knowledge and confidence and excitement, the impetus and ability to carry on....”

• “enablement. Improved confidence in writing ability”

• “gave me the confidence I need to produce a solid piece of research”

• “to take ownership of the process for self-management’

• “yes, to encourage quality writing and that it was within everyone to do so”

• “encouragement and confidence building”

Student Data
Technical/Cognitive AW Support

• [...] Writing is a complex cognitive activity and writers typically encounter three challenges:
  • Planning a text (invention/reflective process)
  • Drafting a text (text production/expressive process)
  • Reading a text (text interpretation & multi-level analysis)
(Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980)
Staff Comments

• “the need of planning for writing and to think critically in the process”
• “writing a piece with a good structure to carry your argument, previously my writing was less focused and lacked direction”
• “importance of structure has been elevated in my priorities. ”
• “the importance of planning for writing”
• “the practice of writing was demystified. Structure and systematic approach”

Student Data

What aspect of completing your written assignment was causing you particular concern?

Answered: 21  Skipped: 21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What aspect of completing your written assignment was causing you particular concern?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>deciding on how to organise and structure the assignment</td>
<td>38.10% 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing and correcting grammatical/spelling mistakes</td>
<td>28.67% 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding on what ideas to include</td>
<td>14.29% 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>9.52% 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting together an argument</td>
<td>9.52% 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing clear paragraphs</td>
<td>0.00% 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 21
Most valuable perceived writing strategies

Staff Comments

• “I got powerful feedback”
• “reflection on your writing style and tools to diversify”
• “constructivism and social constructivism…”
• “student-centred and constructivist in its ethos; it was scaffolded support”
• “…how quality feedback impacts on learning ..”
• “audio feedback…”
• “receiving feedback during the article writing process from the tutors….”
• “listening to the diligent feedback received …. Ignore feedback at your peril – one does not have to agree with it but at least stop and reflect on what is being said and why it is being said, and believe me you will learn […] feedback is at least a catalyst for reflection and subsequent action. […] critical thinking, for me, is fostered by reading my writings through the eyes of a potential reader”
• “self-reflection and formative feedback”

Student Data
Feedback & Reflection

• Yancey p.6: “Reflection, then, is the dialectical process by which we develop and achieve, first, specific goals for learning; second, strategies for reaching those goals; and third, means of determining whether or not we have met those goals”

• Feedback at the AWP and One to One sessions: constructive, meaningful, contextualised, and specific to the task in hand

• Staff Comment:

“feedback is at least a catalyst for reflection and subsequent action.”

• Feedback aids students and staff in becoming reflective about their writing processes, about the writing task itself, about their current competence
Perceptions of Commonalities: successful strategies

• Staff & Students

• Affective Domain
  Confidence building, enabling, student-centredness, empowering, motivation, dealing with uncertainty, encouraging, peer support, scaffolding, formative feedback, self-reflection

• Technical/Cognitive Domain
  Writing as a process, importance of planning, structuring, ideation & content, editing, technical language, critical thinking, argument building

• Learning & Teaching/Tutoring Strategies – scaffolding, constructivism/social constructivism, student-centred (Moore, 2003; Lee & Boud, 2003; Page, Edwards & Wilson, 2012; Brady & Singh-Corcoran, 2016)
Diverging Perceptions

**Staff**
- Critical thinking
- Adapting for practice
- Argument building
- Connecting with previous knowledge
- Greater awareness of learning theories

**Differences**
- Length of time available to support each group
- Type of feedback given to each (audio, screen-casting, written, 1:1)

**Students**
- EAP/Academic Literacies
- Non-native speakers of English/Mature students
- Editing and correcting grammatical/spelling mistakes
- Reflecting on academic language
Limitations of the study

• Low number of student respondents (15%)
• Level of engagement with the research (Staff 66.6%)
• Qualitative versus quantitative research questions
• Different settings to staff & student academic writing support (semester-long semester module to a one to one hour consultation)
• Novice learners (students) & advanced/more sophisticated learners (lecturers)
• Students – native & non-native speakers of English while staff were all native speakers
• Huang (2010) refers to previous studies by Freeman & Huang (2005) and Ferris (1998) in explaining how students may find it difficult to accurately outline their specific challenges and self-diagnose their competency in an academic setting and to understand what is required of them
Conclusions

• Supporting staff & students regardless of the format of the support requires us to adopt a multi-faceted approach to the interaction and/or the instruction

• A constructivist learning & teaching approach allows for the integration of considerations pertaining to various domains from the affective to the cognitive and the use of a range of strategies that promote reflection as a spin-off of constructive feedback on written production.

• At a more granular level, academic writing support should concentrate on issues of the overall structure of the written piece and in some instances for some students a appreciation of language accuracy issues (grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling).
Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for Academic Writing Support

- Extend time allocated for writing in the curriculum
- Explore feedback models for AW in different settings
- Engage students in reflection and conversations on writing
- Integrate a variety of strategies
- Balance confidence building with technical instruction
Our Reflexive Approach: Lessons Learnt

**Issues working with two different groups**

- Nature of the data: type of data we were seeking; staff feedback more revealing (comprehensive and insightful)
- Nature of the support: semester-long process for staff versus 1:1 tutorial
- Bridging the different literatures:
  - Learning Theories
  - Cognition & Writing
  - Reflection & Feedback
  - Professional Development for academic staff
  - Academic literacies approach
  - English as a foreign language

**Questions we still have**

- Is it the feedback strategies we use that prompts the reflection?
- Is it to do with the time for dialogue at the one to one sessions?
- Retrospective nature of staff participants vs immediacy of student support in 1:1 tutorials
Possible future avenues for research

• Longitudinal study with larger sample

• Merging as a Learning Commons
References


Q&A
### Constructivist

- **Ontology:**
  - “Meaning is constructed, not discovered” (Gray, 2013, p.20)
- **Epistemology:**
  - Relies mostly on the participant’s views and opinions (Creswell, 2014)
- **Methodology:**
  - Interpretation of evidence to give meaning and construction of knowledge will include both the researcher & participants, where subjectivity and bias is acknowledged and declared (Grix, 2002; Burton, Brundrett & Jones, 2008). We wanted to elucidate meaning on how and why the students and staff perceived academic writing support in this way.
- **Research Study:**
  - In this study, we were the sole investigators who interacted with all the participants. Thus we were more able to realise, and holistically study all students’ and academics’ constructed realities about academic writing support available to them in the HEI.

### Interpretivist

- **Ontology:**
  - “Meaning is constructed, not discovered” (Gray, 2013, p.20)
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### Exploratory Case Study

- **Ontology:**
  - “...an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data.” (Creswell 2014, P.4)
- **Methodology:**
  - Online surveys & Semi-structured focus group
  - Interview
  - The best way to elicit explanation and statements of experience and perspectives (Hammersley, 2013)
  - To elucidate meanings which generates rich descriptions of research settings (Cousin, 2009)
  - Yields detailed, thick description and in-depth inquiry with direct quotations of participants’ perspectives and experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).