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How do students learn to write in UK higher education and how does this influence my practice as a professional teacher of academic writing?

Introduction

This enquiry relates theories of learning to my own learning journey as an academic writer and teacher/counsellor of academic writing. I feel that my voice has yet to fully emerge in my own academic writing: as a junior academic (with 7 years' experience teaching writing, but without post-graduate qualifications or publications to my name) I feel must negotiate the tension between playing by the established rules and conventions of my profession and, at the same time, speaking with my own voice and challenging the political, cultural, and social moulds that prevent true creativity, expression, and discovery. Similarly, I try to help my students understand the 'formula' of academic writing in order to help them meet the expectations of their writing, but also so that they can deviate from those standards as a tool for effective writing.

In my role as the coordinator of a learning development unit at a small teaching-led, post-1992 university, I spend much of my teaching time helping students understand the socio-cultural background to the types of assignments set to them (for example, the pervasiveness of the rhetorical essay and introduction of reflective assignments) and helping them develop the confidence, knowledge, and skills to meet and exceed the expectations their tutors have of their writing. By understanding how students learn how to write, I hope that I can become a more effective and influential teacher, as well as a more confident writer, ready to challenge the traditional customs of academic communication.

Although over the past decade there has been increased scholarship around the teaching of academic writing,[1] I believe that educators must also consider how students *learn* to write in higher education. Hounsell claims that writing is a core part of learning and assessment in the academy (1984:103) and,

[1] For example, Lea and Street's 1998 article 'Student Writing in Higher Education: An academic literacies approach' has sparked many other researchers to react to and implement the academic literacies theory; Lillis (2003), Haggis (2003) and Wingate (2006) all call for a move toward considering power, identity and social contexts when teaching academic writing. In addition, the Royal Literary Fund has commissioned several studies examining student writing in higher education, such as *A Report on the Teaching of Academic Writing in UK Higher Education* (Ganobcsik-Williams 2004); *What' Going on with Student Writing?'* (McMahon, 2004); and *Writing Matters: The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education* (Davies et al, 2006). Furthermore, two edited readers have been published in the past eight years: *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts* (Lea and Stierer, 2001) and *Teaching Student Writing in UK Higher Education* (Ganobscik-Williams, 2006). Several UK and European research groups (eg. the academic literacies group in the CREET research centre at the Open University), associations (European Association for Teacher of Academic Writing and the European Writing Centres Association) and conferences (Writing Development in Higher Education) address the issue of student writing. Clearly, the teaching of academic writing has developed, for whatever reasons, into a priority for many researchers and practitioners of higher education.

based on my own experience as both a learner and a teacher, I agree that writing to persuade and inform forms an integral part of the under- and post-graduate experience, as well as a foundation for life as a professional academic. As a professional teacher of academic writing, it is necessary for me to understand how students learn how to write and how I can facilitate and improve that learning process; to this end I ask 'how do students learn to write in UK higher education?' with the aim of helping students negotiate and challenge the socio-cultural and institutional contexts of academic life.

Methodology and Methods

In this paper, I draw on theories of learning; scholarship on the teaching of academic writing; interviews with students and staff in a small, teaching-led university; and my own experience as a student and teacher of academic writing.

I interviewed four students studying in the 3rd year of an Early Years Education (EYE) degree; all four entered higher education on a two-year foundation degree (taught in a further education college) and progressed to the final year of an honours degree. These semi-structured interviews were designed as 'critical ethnography', an attempt to understand the students' experiences of academic writing from their own perspective. Using the framework of Ivanič's four aspects of self (1998: 29), I asked the students about their life stories (autobiographical self); organisational and linguistic choices in their writing (discoursal selves); confidence in making claims (self as author); and willingness to challenge the socio-cultural and institutional expectations of their work (possibilities for self-hood).

In addition, I interviewed three members of the teaching staff on the same degree programme and asked them about their expectations of students' writing, how they communicated those expectations to the students, how they help their students learn to write, and their confidence in challenging the socio-cultural and institutional expectations of students' writing.

All interviewees agreed to the interviews being recorded on digital voice recorder and participated voluntarily with no compensation for any expense of time or money. I also examined the course handbook, one module handbook and several pieces of student writing for evidence of the comments that the staff and students made in the interviews.

Defining Learning

First, what is learning? Is it the acquisition of a skill, which one can repeat in a variety of contexts, such as tying shoelaces; is it a 'deep' understanding of a subject; or is it 'knowing', that we didn't understand about the world before, acquiring not only skills and knowledge, but an ability to apply this new understanding to our worldview, our conceptualisation of the world around us and our place in it?

While a behaviourist might argue that learning is "a relatively permanent change in behavior *[sic]* that results from practice [*sic*]." (Atkinson et al1993), I argue that learning goes beyond demonstrable behaviour and manifests both in behaviour and in cognitive understanding: that 'learning results from inferences, expectations and making connections' (Hartley,1998:18) and that leaning must be contextualized. Throughout their academic lives, UK students must learn to negotiate a variety of contexts: nursery school, primary school, possibly middle school, secondary school, tertiary education at school or college and further and/or higher education. Each of these contexts varies from institution to institution, by region throughout the country and the students own life circumstances: family life, self-confidence, health, and socio-economic background. Within these varying contexts students are expected to negotiate a broad spectrum of expectations, from the social law of the playground and common room to the academic responsibilities of learning and assessment. Learning a new skill or understanding a new context may lead to a change in behaviour, but depending on a students' sense of self, it may be difficult for that student to translate a new understanding into action.

How Students Learn to Write in Higher Education

Students interviewed for this study reported that they learned to write in the academy mostly by trial and error, by responding to feedback and, modelling from the research articles assigned on the course (as one student called it, 'absorbing' academic style, such as 'environmental osmosis' (Newman, 1959 [see Lillis 2001: 54]); meanwhile, the tutors interviewed felt that they explicitly taught academic writing orally within sessions, by showing students samples to model from, and by clearly outlining expectations in course and module handbooks. Understanding how students learn from written instructions, oral instructions, feedback, 'talkback', and modelling can help me adapt my teaching methods to students' needs.

Written Instructions

Written instructions can be a valuable source of information throughout the writing process, but should be supplemented with oral instruction to clarify ambiguous or confusing terms.

The course handbook is one of the first ways in which students will be instructed about their writing. The course handbook I reviewed for this enquiry included a list of possible types of assessment on the course, assessment regulations, instructions on the submission of assignments, responsibilities of students (in relation to assessment), an explanation and warning about plagiarism and unfair practice, and assessment criteria for assignments and essays (*Education Handbook:* 48-52).

Similarly, module handbooks set out more detailed information about individual assignments. The module handbook for *Teaching Creatively with New Technologies* sets out the instructions for various written assignments, including an essay, on-line discussion, and a project report (4); guidance for choosing topics (5-7) (in a third-year module students have a choice of topics

rather than a strict assignment); specific marking criteria for the written assignments (7-9); and instructions for submission (9).

The instructors I interviewed expected students to use assignment briefs in the module handbook as the primary source of information about a particular piece of written assessment; however, many felt that students did not read the course or module handbooks thoroughly enough. Students themselves reported that they found written instructions helpful throughout the writing process, but that at times the language used confused or misled them.

Like the students I teach, I find written instructions helpful, but ambiguous at times. As I identify myself as a visual learner (Kolb, 1976), I find written instructions and guidelines an invaluable source of information about the expectations of my written work; in addition, because my understanding of a topic develops throughout the writing process, I find written instructions a useful resource that I can refer to again and again as my ideas develop.

In my role as a writing tutor, I find that many students struggle with the terminology in assignment briefs; in particular, they often complain that the word 'discuss' confuses them, with many understanding the word to mean that they should report on all sides of a topic rather than adhere to the academic convention of taking a position or creating a thesis which the rest of the essay defends.[2] In order to address these issues, I employ a 'socialisation' technique, where I try to explain to students the role of academic writing as method of conversation between scholars and that an essay can act as a contribution to a continuing conversation on a particular topic. I ask students to imagine academia as a social context where a conversation has been taking place for some time; therefore, their job as an undergraduate student is to get caught up on the conversation taking place (secondary research) and add a point of view (synthesis of their research) to the discussion (their essay); I also try to help them understand that undergraduates are not expected to contribute a completely 'new' outlook or information (primary research) on any particular topic, that this responsibility lies with post-graduate students and professional academic researchers.

Lea and Street (1998) define the 'academic socialisation' approach to teaching academic writing as 'inculcating students into new 'culture', with a 'focus on student orientation to learning and interpretation of the task' (172). This technique helps students understand the socio-cultural expectations of their writing and, I hope, gives them confidence to express the outcome of their critical reading and research in a scholarly manner. Similarly, Bartholmae argues that educators must help students become accustomed to the conventions of the academy: 'The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting,

[2] Of course, some tutors do not expect a defensible thesis, and only expect students to espouse the main issues of a topic. This creates an added layer of stress for students attempting to comprehend the subject material and grapple with the academic writing process, but I use this as an opportunity to teach students about the importance of understanding their audience's expectations.

evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community' (1985:623). Particularly in the current climate of UK higher education, with its focus on widening participation among groups who do not have a cultural history of engagement with higher education, I argue that we cannot expect students to understand the social and academic conventions of university life and must take responsibility to help students understand the contexts in which they write.

However, Lea and Street also argue that the 'socialisation' approach has a 'lack of focus on institutional practices, change and power and that it positions student writing as a 'transparent medium of representation' (1998:172); I need to consider ways that I can address these issues in my own teaching, how I can ensure that I help students understand the institutional practices and the recent changes in the academic context. To date I have made attempts in my teaching to situate student learning in the institutional context by explaining to students that they study in a teaching- and learning-led university as opposed to a more research-oriented institution and by asking them to consider how the recent changes in UK higher education such as widening participation, the introduction of fees, and modularisation might affect their learning.

The idea of student writing as a 'transparent medium of representation' needs to be addressed by supplementing written instructions with other forms of information about expectations, such as oral instructions from teaching and learning development staff.

Oral instructions from teaching staff

Students also learn to write in higher education through oral instructions from their course tutors; often this information supplements or explains more fully the written assignment brief. Students reported that this information is sometimes crucial to the understanding of the expectations of the assignment, can also be contradictory to the written instructions, and often differs greatly between the members of teaching staff.

As a student I find oral instructions usually supplement the written instructions; as an undergraduate I found it extremely frustrating to miss a lecture or seminar where assignments were discussed as vital information that was not easily available from the written brief was often conveyed and getting full details from other students' notes was never as satisfactory as hearing the instructor outline their expectations. In my experience as both a student and a writing counsellor, I find that oral guidance offers students the most insight into a specific tutor's expectations, possibly because of the added elements of communication inherent in body language, but also because of the relationship that exists between the teacher and the learner. If a lecturer can impart information about an assignment with passion and clarity, that can inspire students to write in a similar fashion. As an example, I remember that the first time I experienced a 'reflective writing' assignment, it was the explanation offered by the tutor that changed my mind from 'what the hell is a learning journal? Surely I can do better things with my time' to 'what an exciting and innovative way to learn'.

On a practical level, some of the confusion experience around academic writing comes from the way universities organise the delivery of courses and modules. For example, one member of the teaching staff might act as a module coordinator, writing the handbook and managing the teaching staff; however, other instructors also teach the same module to different groups of students and have their own unique expectations of the writing. Students I interviewed, and those I support in my role as a writing counsellor, report that trying to understand each individual instructors' expectations causes stress and uncertainty, which specific guidance could alleviate.

One story I like to tell to my students illustrates the importance of audience: when I was an undergraduate I studied one module by correspondence. I handed in my first assignment by posting it to the university and a few weeks later I received two copies back because there had been a mix up over my registration. Two different people had marked the same assignment for the same module at the same university in the same semester – with a ten percent difference in my grade. I use this story to illustrate to my students that marking is a subjective practice and that the learning inherent in the writing *process* can be more valuable than the outcome of the writing *product*.

When I teach students about academic writing, I ask them about their primary audience; when they answer that their marking tutor is their audience, I tell them that many of their questions about the writing can only be answered by that particular person: as communicators they have a responsibility to respond to the needs and expectations of their audience.

Written feedback

Written feedback helps students begin to understand the expectations of their audience. The students I interviewed reported that written feedback on assignments helped them to understand and meet the expectations of their writing. This method of learning how to write can be understood in behaviourist terms, as operant conditioning (Thorndike; Skinner): students act (write in a particular way), experience a consequence which will cause that behaviour to either repeat itself (eg. positive reinforcement from a high grade) or a consequence which will encourage a change in behaviour (positive punishment in the form of a low grade).

Although learning from feedback helps students understand the expectations of their audience(s), several problems arise from this approach to learning. First, the timing of feedback is crucial: students report that often they do not receive feedback in time to implement suggestions on their subsequent pieces of work. The instructors interviewed acknowledged this problem from a pedagogical point of view, but blamed the problem on institutional constraints with timetabling and staff contractual terms.
In addition, students I teach often have trouble interpreting feedback due to poor handwriting (not to be underestimated as a barrier to communication); use of ambiguous terms and symbols; and a lack of shared understanding about the purposes of an assignment. Similarly, feedback on student work

varies from a simple number grade to extensive comments on content and language, to more structured feedback through the use of rubric.

Staff, on the other hand, complain that students often fail to pick up marked work or ignore detailed feedback and repeat the same mistakes again and again. As a result, staff report that they often wonder why they should bother taking the time and effort to offer detailed feedback on student writing.

In my practice I see feedback from tutors across the university that focuses on the ‘skills’ approach to academic writing, what Lea and Street (1998) describe as a student deficit model (172): tutors approach the ‘problem’ of academic writing as an issue for the students to ‘sort out’ themselves, rather than engaging in the epistemological implications of writing in specific disciplines. As a writing counsellor I make no attempt to be an expert in the subjects my students study; I continually refer them back to their subject tutors for clarification of feedback, especially as it relates to content, whereas I can offer them guidance on argumentation, organisation, and language. I do fear that my approach will degenerate into a ‘study skills’ approach, but I attempt to understand students’ identities with the purpose of helping them to function more effectively as academic writers. If I can understand a student’s autobiographical background and why they make specific discoursal and linguist choices, I can better help them to negotiate the socio-cultural and institutional context of higher education.

Likewise, in an attempt to address some of the shortcomings of feedback, Lillis (2001) proposes that tutors employ a ‘talkback’ approach, where the ‘text is treated as something which is provisional, in the making, aspects of which are thus still to be explored’ (10). Although Lillis uses ‘talkback’ as a written assessment tool, the use of the word ‘talk’ inspired me to think about the ways in which writers discuss their work with other people; oral feedback from other sources can also be a valuable tool in the writing process.

For example, I find that oral feedback from peers in my MA in Education group helps me articulate and refine my thinking about the topic I am writing about; because my peers come from different educational and cultural backgrounds from my own they offer observations and suggestions about my writing that change the way I think about both my processes and product. As an example, for this enquiry the group encouraged me to include more of my own experience as an academic writer to provide validity for my claims; as a result my understanding of how students learn to write has become more immediate and applicable for me.

Similarly, in my role as a writing counsellor I act as a ‘sounding board’ for my students by asking questions about their writing and responding not with evaluative comments, but simply as a reader on the receiving end of their written communication. For example, rather than making a comment such as ‘this essay needs a thesis statement’ I might say ‘I have trouble understanding your argument’. This technique allows students to keep ownership of their own texts: as opposed to a tutor evaluating and assessing their work, I offer them insight into how a reader might respond to their writing. I hope that this

helps students understand the power of their work and to use their communication tools to persuade their audience and that once they understand that their claims are valid as long as they validated by evidence, they will be able to experiment with the form in order to challenge the accepted ideas and conventions of their disciplines.

Modelling

Finally, the students I interviewed reported that they learn how to write by modelling 'successful' academic writers in their field, both professionals and peers and they often ask me for examples of successful essays so that they can understand what tutors look for in academic writing and so that they can emulate effective writing. In practice, students want to adopt the linguistic and stylistic choices of these authors.

Unfortunately, students sometimes find that modelling the style and language of professional academics makes their writing *less* clear and coherent; I often find myself reading undergraduate work and finding the language confusing or impenetrable. When I ask them about their discoursal choices, students will respond that they made those linguist choices in order to sound 'academic' or 'sophisticated'. In my practice I try to encourage students to write in their own voices first and to engage in what Elbow terms 'freewriting' (1973). This exercise, in which a writer simply writes continuously for a specified short period of time, promotes creative expression and allows writers to simply express ideas and thoughts about the subject without concern for conventions of language or the needs of an audience. The work then comes in the editing process, where the writer hones, develops and pares the ideas and language to suit the needs of the purposes of the text. When students engage in this practice they find the freedom liberating, but also that it improves their ability to communicate their findings and arguments more clearly and effectively. I employ this technique when I feel 'stuck' or 'blocked' and want the process of writing to be an epistemological tool for better understanding what I am trying to communicate.

Conclusion

Understanding that students learn to write in higher education through written instruction, oral instruction, feedback, talkback and modelling has begun to help me make changes to the way I teach academic writing.

For example, when asked to give presentations to staff about creating and assessing written work I ask the group 'why do you set your students essay-type assignments rather than, for example, a multiple choice test?'; often the first responses are 'because that's why I had to do in university' and 'to promote critical thinking'. I use that as a starting point for a discussion about the socio-cultural context of higher education, about the role and purpose of universities and what educators hope to achieve in their teaching. Higher education in the UK is currently undergoing a major shift in values and purposes (for example, the focus on student employability and the up-skilling of the employment force); educators should consider the effect of these changes on the teaching and learning activities they engage in and design

assessments that match the intended learning outcomes of a module and the overall purpose of higher education. It seems to me that students receive a mixed message: ‘you must come to university to get a good job, but we will assess you with old-fashioned rhetorical essays which you will never have to write again’, which, I think, is why so many students fail to see the connection between their academic practice and their ‘real’ or working lives. I do not suggest that the academy should do away with traditional rhetorical essays, because I think they perform many important functions, such as building research, communication, critical thinking and rhetorical skills, but that educators should take more time to explain the function, role and expectations of these types of written assignments.

When I work with individual students I try to understand how that person’s life history affects their understanding of academic conventions; for example, if a student is the first in their family to go to university, they may not understand the value of the research and critical thinking skills beyond the academy, whereas a student whose parents had been to university might see the benefits of a university education has made to career options or progression.

I plan to continue researching the relationship between student identity and experiences of academic writing in order to help the students I teach meet and exceed the expectations of their writing and challenge the socio-cultural and institutional assumptions about learning, assessment, and writing that hinder true learning.

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