Attention to Student Writing in Postgraduate Health Science Education: Whose Task is It – or Rather, *How*?

Brenda Leibowitz
Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Abstract

This article reports on an action research study designed to stimulate the metacognitive awareness of the writing of assignments in English of a group of students from diverse language and educational backgrounds, studying health science education at masters level. In the study, students were required to give and receive feedback on a marked written assignment to a peer, and receive feedback from a consultant working at the Writing Lab. They were then required to submit a reflective report, which constitutes the key data source for this study. An analysis of the reflective reports revealed that the students claimed that they learnt about their writing habits, about good academic writing, and about the experience of giving and receiving feedback. The study suggests that although an intervention making extensive use of a variety of sources of feedback appears to be able to stimulate students' metacognitive functioning in relation to their writing of assignments, a number of issues require concerted attention. These issues include: power relations and emotion, perceptions of legitimate authority, and the central role of the lecturer as disciplinary expert and guide. The article concludes with a recommendation for enhanced attention to intersubjective relations of power, language and identity in relation to feedback on writing, especially when peer feedback is involved.

Introduction

If we assume that language, and by extension academic literacy as discourse, is ubiquitous and seemingly invisible in the academy and only "marked when it is perceived as being faulty" (Turner 2011: 6), then how do we propose to support students' acquisition of the disciplinary academic discourse? Two immediate and interrelated problems come to mind: the first is that many academics are either not willing to respond to the issue of language, in depth and meaningfully, or do not feel competent to do so; and the second is where, precisely, does one draw the line between language and academic literacy, on the one hand, and 'content' or disciplinary knowledge, on the other? Turner (2011) maintains that these should not be seen in terms of the 'content v. form' dichotomy. The first problem pertains to issues of role and function: whose function is it to attend the language and academic literacy development of students? Barwell (2005: 145) asks this question in an illustrative manner:

> How, for example, can a language specialist work effectively with a mathematics teacher, when the mathematics teacher has little familiarity with theories of language learning and development and the language specialist is not familiar with the practices of mathematics?

A related question is, can one separate language from the context in which it is deployed? On this matter Barwell writes, '[w]hilst there is broad consensus around the participatory view of language and subject learning, there is much work to be done to explore and unravel the

subtleties of how they interact' (2005: 146). Barwell is referring to the complexities of the interaction between language and content. It is perhaps when one looks at the messy realities of classroom interaction - realities of student learning, or of how academics approach their responsibilities - that it becomes evident how complex matters really are. The realities involve a far larger number of issues than just language and content. They include matters of identity, power relations, emotion and intersubjectivity, supporting the position of writers who emphasise the political and socio-cultural dimensions of language learning in contexts of diversity (Burgess and Ivanič 2010, Janks 2010 and Turner 2011).

The article begins with the setting for the study: a postgraduate programme on health science education in South Africa. This is followed by a description of the action research adopted, after which the findings in relation to the innovation are presented. These findings are used to problematize questions of content and language-integrated learning in the postgraduate health science education context, with a specific focus on feedback to written assignments.

Research Setting: Postgraduate Health Science Education

This study is based on an action research intervention implemented within an MPhil Programme on Health Science Education at a South African university. Five years ago the Programme Committee minuted the perception that the students' writing of assignments in English requires attention. This perception is related to a broader set of challenges facing postgraduate education, which is receiving much attention in South Africa of late (see for example Fataar 2012) and internationally (see Aitchison *et al.* 2012, and McAlpine *et al.* 2012). This attention is due to a variety of trends: the pressure to increase numbers of postgraduate students, and the transition to postgraduate study that students experience. The transition is acute when it involves students moving to a new institution, a different country or studying in an additional language. A further aspect of transition is when students are required to undertake a cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary course, and are required to learn a new disciplinary language. Most of the students on the programme featured in this study would have completed a four-to-six or seven-year degree, generally in the health sciences. Those who have taken the directly medical programme route have had limited or no exposure to social theory. They are familiar with medical discourses, which transpose more easily to a positivist approach to research on education than to an interpretivist approach. Adendorff (2011) has shown how moving from discipline-based research to educational research can be extremely challenging for teachers. Her research deals with three aspects of the transition: lack of community of practice around teaching and research on teaching in the home department; lack of recognition of the value of research on teaching; and most significantly, the challenge posed by the jargon and writing practices that are associated with education as a discipline. A further complicating factor influencing transition, is that unequal provision of education exists in South Africa not only at the general school level, but at universities as well (Leibowitz 2012, Badat 2012, and Bozalek and Boughey 2012).

Students on the MPhil for Health Science Education have experienced all of these challenges of transition. The MPhil programme typically draws its students from the town in which the programme is located, Cape Town, with a significant further number of students from the rest of the country, and a significant minority from the rest of Africa and Asia. This means that the students speak a variety of home languages and in any given year a minority of students on the programme would have English as a home language. The students have varied disciplinary influences. They might have studied directly medical degrees or the allied health programmes such as physiotherapy, nursing or speech therapy.

The MPhil on Health Science Education has been offered for the last six years. Examples of the topics covered in the programme are: assessment, facilitating learning, professional development, e-learning, and educational research. The discourses in the programme comprise typically essayist literacy practices such as class discussions, the writing of assignments in the form of long essays, some more fluid reflective pieces (about the students' own learning habits, for example) and online tutorials. The final piece of work to be handed in is a dissertation, which constitutes 37% of the final mark. Students are expected to be able to

read, talk and write about theory on learning and teaching, to apply this to their own teaching and learning contexts as well as to the empirical research that they conduct.

The group on which the study is based was a smaller cohort than in most other years: nine students, of whom eight live in South Africa, and one in Namibia. Two work at the university where the course is offered, and others work elsewhere in Cape Town and South Africa. Five are at universities and four conduct training in the private healthcare sector. The group had five white and four black students, eight female and one male. Biographical variables should not be read off in an essentialising and predictive manner, but they do serve to inform the degree of diversity in a group and the levels of inequality along socio-economic, and more specifically educational lines, that might exist.

Action Research Intervention

As an action research intervention, this study was a response to a problem, namely that the writing of assignments in English by the students on the two-year programme did not seem to improve over the two years, despite the fact that many of the lecturers gave students significant feedback and advice on how to improve their assignments. The aims of the action research intervention were, firstly, to stimulate the students' metacognitive functioning with regard to academic writing and to make them aware of their own writing strategies, strengths and challenges; secondly, to encourage them to think more deeply about feedback on written assignments in general; thirdly, to encourage them to be more supportive towards each other; and finally, since this was a research based project, to use the data to generate scholarly debate about academic writing in the Programme Committee.

In brief, the intervention involved the following: during an orientation session at the beginning of the academic year the University's Writing Lab gave the students two short sessions on academic writing and on giving and receiving feedback. The students were instructed to take the first academic assignment they produced on the programme, which was marked by one of two lecturers facilitating the first section of the programme, to the Writing Lab, where they would engage in discussion with a Writing Lab consultant. This discussion was either face to face, or if the student lived outside the town, conducted via Skype, and as a last resort, as written correspondence via email. They were also instructed to discuss their assignments with one other student, in pairs, where they would give each other feedback. Due to the odd number of students on the programme, one student ended up giving and receiving feedback from two students. Finally, the students were instructed to write a short reflective report on this experience of receiving feedback from various sources and of giving feedback. They were allotted a score for this reflective report, which was then marked by a different lecturer on the programme, namely the writer of this article, who has specialized in academic literacy in higher education. The instructions for the reflective report are reflected below (Figure 1):

Assignment Two: Feedback to Assignment on Contextualising HSE

Instructions

Arrange to visit the Writing Lab or to have a Skype or email session on the basis of your marked assignment on Contextualising Health Science Education.
Have a discussion with your MPhil partner about the same essay.

Write a reflective report in which you
a) describe the two discussions;
b) describe what you learnt from each one;
c) describe what you would do differently with regard to your writing in the future (or do the same).

Figure 1. ERC Assignment Two on Feedback

This intervention was conducted with three cohorts of students on the programme, each time with small refinements. For the third year a formal research proposal was written up, given the

green light by the Programme Committee and approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The third iteration forms the basis of this article.

The educational principles informing the intervention are in keeping with the setting of the programme as a part-time, postgraduate module undertaken by adult learners from a variety of locations. The first principle, influenced by ideas on work-based and situated learning, (Gherardi 2012 and Wenger 1998) is that the learners should practise the core activities and principles they engage with formally, thus that there is an experiential component. This is especially relevant in a module which encourages reflection on and in action amongst educators (Schön 1983). The experiential component involves the students practising giving, receiving and reflecting on feedback to a written assignment. It was perhaps unusual that students were instructed to use their marked assignments as the basis for the feedback sessions. This would lead to their giving and receiving 'feed back' as opposed to 'feed forward', that is, feedback that is not oriented to improving a subsequent draft or assignment. This is often seen as less effective (see for example Dysthe 2011). However, the students were under a lot of pressure, and would be unlikely to use feedback to redraft, and in addition, there was a hope that using a marked assignment would stimulate reflection more deeply. It would help students to think through how to respond analytically to the assessor's comments, which they often struggle to do (Poverjuc 2011 and Paxton 1993). There was also a hope that this experience would stimulate the students to actively solicit feedback from peers or the Writing Lab in preparation of writing assignments in the future.

A second and related principle is that reflection on writing enhances one's understanding of the writing process and one's sense of identity as a writer (Fernsten and Reda 2011). The third principle, stemming from constructivist approaches to learning, is that learning is both individual and social, with mediation as well as input from a more expert other (Vygotsky 1978). In this intervention the students received feedback from the lecturer who marked their assignment (the disciplinary expert), a Writing Lab consultant (the writing expert), and a peer. The adoption of the idea that learners can and should learn from each other, and support each other in a community of practice (Wenger 1998) was an elaboration of the idea of collaborative learning, and was important in a module where students come from various geographical locations, as indicated above, and where there are many stresses and challenges associated with learning away from home – as experienced by some of the students. A final and most important principle is that interventions designed to foster the acquisition of academic literacy occur most effectively when integrated with disciplinary learning. Despite the widespread acceptance of this latter principle in the international literature on ICL (indeed, its very rationale) and on academic literacy (see for example Turner, 2011, Ivanič *et al.* 2009 and Lea and Street 1998), as well as in South African ICL and academic literacy literature (for example, Leibowitz 2011 and Jacobs 2007) curiously and sadly in many university settings in South Africa this idea has not found widespread acceptance, amongst disciplinary experts and language in education experts alike.

Data sources
The key source of data for this study was the reflective reports on the experiences of giving and receiving feedback, which comprised nine reports of two to three pages each. These were accompanied by the actual written assignments that served as the basis for the feedback. Some students included the feedback that they received from peers, when this was provided via email. A further source of data was the email correspondence the students engaged in around the feedback process (twelve emails of varying length).

Data analysis
The reflective reports were analysed according to a set of codes generated from the data, and benchmarked with other texts on feedback, for example that of Dysthe (2011) and Hattie and Timperley (2007). The data was first analysed in relation to pre-determined questions, namely:

1. What was the experience of the process of receiving feedback from: marker, peer, Writing Lab consultant?

2. What was learnt from feedback (from marker, peer, Writing Lab consultant) about:

- Own writing product and style (content, rhetorical strategy, language),
- Own writing drafting practice,
- Sense of agency and intentionality,
- Feedback in general.

A deeper and inductive reading of the data led to a further set of codes linked to the themes of form versus content and intersubjectivity. These themes are dealt with below.

Findings

What students learnt about writing and feedback

An analysis of the data according to the preset questions revealed that each student learnt from the various processes. Each student found the process of giving and receiving feedback from a peer, and of having a consultation at the Writing Lab beneficial, although they did not all mention learning the same lessons. Students learnt about the following issues about feedback to writing: the value of receiving feedback; the value of obtaining feedback from multiple sources; the value of reading and giving feedback to a peer; the emotional disposition necessary in order to receive feedback productively; and more specific guidance about their own academic writing in general, as well as how they could have improved their first assignment. In addition to cognitive gains they mentioned, they referred to affective or emotional gains, in that they were being motivated to consider their writing more carefully. A summative comment in one of the reports provides a sense of the range of benefits the students mentioned:

> It was a good idea to solicit feedback from two diverse sources, namely a writing expert and a fellow student in the field of higher education, i.e. sharing the same work environment as myself. From both I have gained new insights on where I did well but also where I can improve my writing, which I am eager to do. This exercise has taught me how to dissociate myself from my written work in order to view my writing style critically and objectively (as far as that is possible). In future I will make sure that I put my written work away overnight and then return the next day to read it over (aloud) from the viewpoint of a stranger, imagining how an HSE scholar somewhere in cyberspace will read and perceive my essay.

The responses from the students confirmed the impression gained in the previous years of teaching the class, that students in postgraduate health science education would perceive the value of the feedback and use of the Writing Lab consultations. An emblematic response of the intention to use what was learnt through this experience is demonstrated in a comment made by one of the students in email correspondence to me after the reflective reports were marked:

> I have already attempted the change in 2 subsequent assignments (one was this very one) and look forward to evaluating the impact this will have on my performance.

It is not possible to assess precisely the extent to which the metacognitive gains from this exercise would be evident in later writing pieces. Many of the findings are based on self-reporting by the students, and there are multiple factors influencing the utilization of knowledge and understanding gained in one exercise, in other writing activities (Archer 2011, and Leibowitz and Parkerson 2011).

A deeper reading of the data provided a valuable glimpse into the complex manner in which issues of language, academic writing and form, on the one hand, and matters of disciplinary content, on the other hand, intersect, such that they cannot be neatly delineated, and such that the responsibility for attending to either form or content, cannot be assigned automatically to one role player or another.

Form vs. content

Whilst many academics as disciplinary experts might by unwilling to engage in matters of form or language, others do so readily. An example from the summative comments by one of the two lecturers who marked the assignment is provided below (Figure 2). The sections in bold imply comment on content/disciplinary understanding in a general sense. The sections not in bold refer to form and language.

You demonstrated that you studied the work in the module and that you have some understanding of the relevant Acts, policies and trends. You also indicated how studying this module, has assisted in understanding where you fit into this framework. You also stayed within the page length guidelines.

Your work however does not succeed in demonstrating that you have internalized the theory and are also able to apply it to your educational practice.

The main problem is with your writing style in that you make lofty statements that are difficult to translate into its particular meaning to you and your practice. You also list several trends without demonstrating that you really understand what they mean.

I suggest you contact the Writing lab sooner rather than later to help you with the above, including the following:

- Inappropriate use of capital letters
- Incorrect referencing
- Long unstructured paragraphs without headings
- Use of commas, semi-colons and brackets
- Simple formatting mistakes such as spaces, commas
- Lack of page numbers

This will be an investment in your future performance in this course.

Figure 2. Example of Summative Comment by a Lecturer

The feedback from peers, similarly, covered the range of issues dealing with content or disciplinary matters as well as matters of form, as the following example from a reflective report about feedback from a peer demonstrates:

> I was made aware of how to improve the lay-out of my work, focus it better to address the question on hand and to go to greater depth in reflecting on the personal impact of the learning.

In contrast, the students reported that discussions at the Writing Lab did not focus on the content and topic of the assignment at all, but rather on the structure and style as well as the writerly habits of the student. An example of a focus on the functions of various sections of an essay is provided in a student's description of her visit to the Writing Lab:

> [The Writing Lab consultant] started off by discussing the criteria for writing an introduction, mentioning that an introduction consists of three parts, namely (1) the broad context of the subject matter, (2) an outline of the aims and objectives or the hypothesis of the essay, and (3) the layout of the content of the essay, i.e. what topics will be addressed. He then let me analyse my own introduction in terms of these criteria. My finding was that it contained items (2) and (3) but lacked item (1), meaning that I did not commence my essay by stating the broad content of my subject matter.

It would thus seem that lecturers and the students feel free to stray into the domains of content as well as form, but that the Writing Lab consultants see their roles as more constrained.

Roles

There is a suggestion in several of the reports that the role divisions between lecturer, peer and Writing Lab consultant do not converge necessarily or solely along the lines of form versus content. They might also converge along lines of authority versus support agent or therapist. For instance, as arbiters of the quality of the assignments, the lecturers are also figures of authority and judges. The lecturer as marker and judge gave the final score and a series of comments that could either foster understanding on the part of the student, or simply justify the score allocated. The difficulty associated with the marginal as well as summative comments provided by the lecturers who marked the assignment was that several of the students did not gain sufficient understanding of what this feedback meant in practice, and how it could be used to improve the writing of this or any other assignment in the future. In the literature on feedback the difficulty with making sense of feedback is said to be especially pronounced amongst speakers of English as an additional language (Poverjuc 2011). In the South African setting Deyi (2011) and Paxton (1993) show how when students do not have an adequate mastery of academic discourse, they lack the means to unpack and work with feedback. The power of explication of feedback by the lecturer/marker is possibly higher than that of a peer or Writing Lab consultant, either because the lecturer is the ultimate judge and authority, or because he or she has the expertise to show the student in depth, what is required. This power is well described in the response of one of the students to a follow-up question from the researcher about the three sources of feedback. She had questioned the lecturer who marked her work, as to why she received a mark that was lower than she had hoped for:

> I experienced the marker's feedback to be more educative. The reason being it was a face-to-face session, [X] encouraged me to look carefully at the suggestions and to put these into practice. He was precise about his expectations and where I can improve and this motivated me to excel in my performance. After this session I had more self-confidence. [During the Writing Lab consultation] the tips were more general and covered scientific writing specifically. It was still difficult to apply these tips in the following assignment, whereas I could make use of the marker's suggestions. […] The peer session was conducted with less trust in each other as we are still both novices in our scientific writing skills.

If a lecturer does not have the opportunity, for whatever reason, to sit and unpack the feedback with a student, it might well be the case that a peer, tutor or writing consultant can be made available to discuss the feedback with a student. In this study there were only nine students, but the issue of lecturer time remains a pertinent constraining feature in relation to the provision of feedback generally, especially in large classes, or as in this case, when some of the students work full-time and work far from the teaching environment.

In this study the role of the peer appeared to be a sounding board to discuss or share ideas or an additional source for clarification and understanding. It is interesting that the peers were willing to judge each other's work and to make concrete suggestions as to how to make improvements to the writing, often being more directive than either the lecturer/marker or the Writing Lab consultant. For example, a student wrote about his discussion with a peer:

> She criticised the focus on [X] University as too narrow and questioned how 'meaningful' such an approach was. She suggested that the mention of the TB and HIV epidemic in the introduction was an important one and felt that I should re-visit this in my conclusion to close the circle.

The role of the Writing Lab consultant is quite different: it is a trained 'other' who facilitates the student's emerging understanding of themselves as a writer, and who provides the means for the student to take control over their writerly choices. This is the key role the Writing Lab sees for itself, according to Underwood and Tregidgo (2006). The students were not told in

advance how the Writing Lab consultation would proceed, a weakness that will be remedied in the future. That this role was unexpected and surprising to the students is reflected in a comment in one of the reflective reports:

> I had no clue as to what would transpire during the session. […] She used open-ended questions to probe my insight into my problem areas.

One of the students referred to the session bemusedly as like 'an interview'. The effectiveness of the facilitative approach in allowing (certainly some of) the students to take control of the reflective process is evident in the comment of one of the academically more proficient students in the group, who expressed her own role in the noticing process, whilst at the same time expressing her own areas to improve as deficiencies:

> Analysing the conclusion with the help of [X], **I noted that** instead of making concluding remarks **I actually** addressed new issues (namely what changes can be made in the courses that I teach), which should rather have been addressed in a separate paragraph under a separate heading before the concluding paragraph. **This was my worst structural error**. [emphasis added]

The question of how each role player might play a slightly different role pertains to relations between people. This is dealt with in the next section.

Intersubjectivity

The third issue which emerged from the data was a broad ranging set of issues to do with relationality and intersubjectivity. These comprise the intersecting relations of language, identity, role, authority and privilege. The issues of expertise and authority have already been referred to in the section on roles, where the lecturer may be perceived as having more authority, the peers seen as novice and the Writing Lab consultants as having expertise in the area of structure, process and language.

One aspect of intersubjectivity, discourse and positioning of people, is the messages that are generated in the comments to students, from whatever source. An example is from one of the lecturers who marked the first assignment, who suggested the student visit the Writing Lab to address her language 'deficiencies'. The student seemed to assimilate this concept and developed it into an extended metaphor of the autopsy in her description of her visit to the Writing Lab:

> At this stage it was clear that the consultant was performing an autopsy of the format, words and sentences used in the essay.

There is no indication in the rest of the report that the student felt undermined or insulted by the recommendation from the lecturer. The discourse does, however, summon up issues of power and privilege. Another set of comments pertaining to peer feedback bring to the fore similar issues of power in relation to language more overtly. An English first language student wrote, about her encounter with her peer:

> I did not enjoy this part of the assignment. I find conflict situations very hard to deal with, and I worried that my feedback would antagonise my colleague, even though I tried to be diplomatic. I have been very lucky in my schooling, and in the fact that I am innately good at both spoken and written English.

The idea of power relations and privilege could suggest that individuals consciously might want to put others down. But this is not so, as issues of power are inherent in the academy (Mann 2008), most notably in relation to language and academic literacy which are pervasive in all teaching and learning situations (Janks 2010). Interactions around writing and language question students' sense of competence, their sense of self, and thus provoke strongly emotional reactions as Rai (2012) points out. The comment in a reflective report by a student who sees herself as a competent lecturer and academic, but who received a low mark for her

first assignment, is honest and perceptive about how her encounter with her peer affected her:

> I had given little attention to who my partners were as I did not think it had any bearing on the process. There was virtually no anxiety as I felt fairly confident I would do well and also that feedback would in no way be a judgment on my person. This perspective changed considerably when I received the marked assignment with a performance far below what I expected. I was surprised at having misjudged my capability and became self-conscious about making anyone else privy to it. I wondered how my partners' view of me would change in the light of my performance. It was a new experience, rarely in the past having been other than consistently an above average to excellent student. It gave me a glimpse of what it meant to have one's sense of self-worth wrapped around one's doing rather than in one's being and where the intersection and or separation between the two lay.

These words echo the views of social realist Margaret Archer (2000), who describes the role of emotions in providing a commentary on our concerns. Significant concerns which provide a spur to our actions, especially amongst professionals, are self worth and performative achievement. It is in pursuing our concerns that we exercise agency, according to Archer. Burgess and Ivanič (2010: 242) draw our attention to the manner in which what they call 'socially available possibilities for selfhood' help shape a writer's identity. These comprise elements of a writer's biography as well as their current interaction. The writer draws on these resources to act, in order to develop as a writer (van Rensburg 2011). This implies that the interaction around writing, including the overt and covert messages about the writer's ability and value, will influence the steps the writer takes to develop.

Conclusion

This action research study provides an exploratory foray into the issue of ICL as it pertains to post graduate students studying health science education research. In this instance the provision of feedback on students' academic writing in English from a variety of sources was found to be beneficial by the students. Although the students reported learning about feedback in general and about their own writing style, there is no guarantee that they will indeed apply what they learnt in the future, especially if prevailing conditions in the programme or their professional lives militate against this. One cannot control for a student's working or home life, but this does suggest attention to what is within the purview of the team: thus a programme-wide approach to the fostering of students' language and writing ability. An interesting development arising out of this action research study in relation to the aim that it should encourage scholarly debate about academic literacy in the Programme Committee, is that the researcher on this project gave a presentation on an earlier draft of this article to the Committee. This led to a workshop on feedback and academic literacy for the Committee, and a decision in principle that attention to academic literacy is the responsibility of all the lecturers on the programme. It also lends credence to the importance of a scholarly, research-based approach as a means of effecting ICL in the classroom.

The study further demonstrates that integrating language matters into the mainstream curriculum, is messy and complex. The study has shed light on the interrelatedness of issues of form and function, where language and form are not the sole purview of the lecturer as disciplinary specialist, the peer or the Writing Lab consultant, although the latter appears to focus on language more extensively. Perhaps, as Turner (2011) writes, the very concept of 'generic v. discipline-specific' is not a useful one. The study suggests that a more useful distinction might be to do with not *who*, but *how* the lecturer, peer and consultant support the student's language development, what interactional strategies they might use and how much time they might deploy for this purpose. The study points to the need to sensitise all role players: students, lecturers as disciplinary experts and language specialists, about the roles they are most suited to play in advancing students' academic writing; and to sensitise students about what to expect from their lecturers and Writing Lab consultants. Aspects of this training that require attention would include what kind of messages and what forms of

interaction encourage an agentic writerly identity amongst students? It might also be useful to consider how best to take into account the power and privilege that interact with language in an academic setting, and how to advance the needs of all students without trampling on the identities of some.

Acknowledgements

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