

Academic Writing as Embedded Skills Acquisition for Transition to Higher Education: An Example from a UK University Classics Department

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Abstract

This paper presents an intervention that was created in a United Kingdom university Classics department where approximately 60% of undergraduate students came from diverse educational backgrounds to study classical Greco-Roman culture, but had not studied it before at school/college. To equip these more than usually diverse 'transition' students with a skills base to aid both their academic progress and future employability, a team-taught mandatory module was designed for first term, first-year undergraduates, which embedded two workshops and an assessment exercise on academic writing with eight workshops on other skills, most of which are both discipline-specific and 'transferable'. The in-term assessments tested understanding of the skills taught, while a final exercise required students to reflect on their longer learning process over the term, evaluating development in their academic writing in the context of other discipline-specific skills. This module serves as a model for adoption both within academic departments and also at an institutional level for early stage academic writing training in a subject-related context, which can serve as a first step on a longer ladder of skills acquisition over the degree for enhancing both academic success and employability awareness.

Introduction: Context

This intervention, designed for 2013-14, sought to address the particularly diverse prior educational experiences, including academic writing, of the undergraduate student intake for the study of classical Greek and Roman culture in a UK university. This has become even more relevant since the institution in 2018 of the UK government's Office for Students, whose three key objectives seek parity of educational experience for 'all students from all backgrounds' (OFS 2018). In our institution this diversity took four forms.

First, unlike many academic subject areas in UK Higher Education institutions, departments that teach undergraduate degrees in Greek and Roman classical culture, history, or archaeology cannot require prior study of classical culture at school or college, as, following a recent tightening of the curriculum, it is not one of the stem subjects taught in UK schools (Roberts 2018). While some schools do teach A-level qualifications to post-16-year-olds in Classical Civilisation or in Latin or ancient Greek languages, this is not common. In recent years our department's intake, numbering approximately 75 students per year, has tended to include approximately 60% who have not formally studied anything about Greco-Roman culture in school or college. Our recruitment therefore has to be aimed at attracting applicants with prior study and interest in Arts subjects such as English Literature, History, Modern Languages, Music and Drama. Our college also recruits to a significant and growing number of joint honours degree programmes, where students study 50% each concurrently in two departments: for example, *English and Classical Studies*, *Classical Studies and Drama*, *Classical Studies and*

Philosophy, Ancient and Medieval History, and Classical Studies and various modern languages. In recent years we have found as many as 30% of our students register to take these joint programmes. Our students from the UK, therefore, come to us with widely different academic experience and skills.

Second, we attract UK students from so-called disadvantaged Widening Participation backgrounds, where they are perhaps the first in their family to go into Higher Education, and represent a range of different ethnicities and cultures. We find that our subject is also particularly attractive to mature students, who can be anything from 21 years old to the retired. The latter often come to study with us after many decades in the workplace, with a prior experience of education that is significantly distant and different. For many their degree study is therefore a chance to 'catch up' on a missed opportunity from their youth. Such students usually show an unusually strong commitment to and enthusiasm for learning, and they can have a wealth of experience of writing in work-related contexts, but can struggle with the level of academic writing expected today, which they may never have experienced.

Third, a significant proportion of our student intake in recent years has been a growing number of young people with learning difficulties and mental health issues, particularly stress-related. Government funding for academic support for such students has been recently removed, and Higher Education institutions are now expected to fund and provide support for all areas of their academic experience. Specialist support is needed for these students' academic writing across all disciplines, which is supplied by mentors in support service departments, such as our college's Disability and Dyslexia Service, while the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills works closely with academic departments to deliver support for a variety of different academic skills both within and alongside module teaching. The academic writing support of these different kinds of central academic support services, however can sometimes take the form of 'bolt-on' workshops or consultations, which lack the value of discipline-specific content (Wingate 2006; Wingate, Andon and Cogo 2011).

The final component is a number of students who have studied previously outside the UK, either within or outside the European Union. These students come with a significantly different experience and expectation of degree level study. In some countries within the European Union more stress is placed on oral expression and confidence, while academic writing plays a much less weighted role than in the UK system. Even if students have written academic 'essays' before, their style, register, and level of content and engagement with academic scholarship can vary greatly. These students therefore have to learn to write in quite a different and unfamiliar style, as well as coping with doing so perhaps for the first time in a second language.

Rationale

As Director of Teaching and Learning in my department, while we conducted a review of our degree programme structure and curriculum in 2012-13, I decided that it was time to address actively our increasingly diverse student intake and their varying skills in academic writing. This was particularly important in our discipline, where academic writing is the 'key assessment tool' (Lillis 2001: 20). I also wanted to design a module that would contribute more actively to students' awareness of their skills and their ability to articulate these for their employability. I set myself a series of questions:

- 1) How could we help such a student intake, with widely diverse educational backgrounds and experience of academic writing, transition to a shared and effective Higher Education learning experience?
- 2) How could we equip students with a range of skills that would be beneficial both for their academic development as well as for their future employability?
- 3) For some years we had seen a growing lack of confidence among students in their academic writing. More and more had asked individually for support from their tutors, which we had willingly provided. We had run optional 'bolt-on' academic writing workshops, but those who attended were usually those who were already quite competent and wanted to improve. Those students who were weaker in academic

writing, and who needed the support more tended not to attend and often not to ask for support. So how could we offer this support to a larger number of students, ensuring that the weaker students were included and engaged, and do so with efficiency of resource (e.g. staff time, teaching space)?

- 4) How could we respond to the anxiety we had seen in student feedback about academic performance by showcasing more explicitly what was expected of them in their writing, with reference to our existing range of marking criteria for different kinds of written exercises?
- 5) Finally, how could we provide this training and support through embedding it, with a formal summative follow-up assessment, as part of a credit-bearing discipline-specific medium that the students would find relevant to their wider degree study?

Module Design: Inspiration and Integration

My proposed solution to this problem was inspired by several influences.

Firstly, within my College I drew on a range of good peer practice examples from other academic departments and those suggested by academic and administrative staff within my own department, as well as feedback from current students through both our active Student-Staff Committee/Course Representative system and individual face-to-face meetings with Personal Tutees in their second and third years of study, and from selected recent alumni via email. The latter were especially helpful in suggesting writing skills awareness, whose acquisition would be beneficial in the world of work after graduation. They particularly mentioned the importance of learning to summarise and to write within a low word count.

Secondly, my module design was also informed by several different strands of current pedagogy.

- 1) I wanted to avoid the impression that this training in academic writing was a 'bolt on', so, as encouraged by, for example, Gibbs (1994), Wingate (2006), and Wingate, Andon and Cogo (2011), and in line with Sloan and Porter's (2010) Contextualisation, Embedding, Mapping (CEM) model, I designed the academic workshops' content and follow-up assessment to be discipline-specific, 'embedded', in that the writing support forms part of the module's wider development of academic and transferable skills and carries formal credit, and mapped onto the students' assessment timetable, and I entitled the module *Studying Classical Antiquity* to avoid the term 'study skills', which can make content appear less immediately relevant to students (Drummond, Nixon and Wiltshire 1998).
- 2) I was keen to apply to an arts and humanities discipline theory and practical examples which had been documented as successful in scientific disciplinary contexts, such as those concerning explicit explanation and decoding of rubrics and marking criteria in developing students' academic writing skills found in Greenberg (2015), Koshy (2009), and Jones et al. (2017).
- 3) I wanted to exploit the benefits of the use of exemplars of student work, which students mark using the department's marking criteria. For example, Orsmond, Merry and Reiling (1996 and 2002) illustrate how deconstructing rubrics and using examples of writing for student analysis helped first-year students to internalise marking criteria and to deepen their understanding of subject standards.
- 4) I also wanted to increase student awareness of the meaning and the practical benefits to them in terms of their academic performance across our diverse classical sub-disciplines, including understanding how and why marking criteria are used, so my module design complemented scholarship that demonstrates how to explain marking criteria/rubrics: for example, Bell, Mladenovic and Price (2013) (who show first year students' desire for assessment guidance and exemplars), Jones et al. (2017) (whose range of interventions included deconstructing the rubric and use of exemplars), O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2004) (who show the value of students' own practice experience in marking alongside written criteria) and Rust, Price and O'Donovan (2003)

(who show the lasting usefulness of students' understanding criteria which can be transferable across similar contexts).

Module Design: Structure

The module was initially designed:

- 1) To be mandatory for students on our single honours degree programmes, and optional but encouraged for those on joint degree programmes. This would ensure that the maximum number of students, both academically strong and weak, could receive the same training and practical experience.
- 2) To run in the first term of their university study, so that it prepared them early for their assessments.
- 3) To be delivered through ten weekly, two-hour workshops.
- 4) For workshops to be led by a team of four different staff members to showcase different teaching styles, especially those of staff not otherwise teaching the students in first year.
- 5) That some workshops be co-led by College support service staff to illustrate integration of and collaboration between academic and support services (Etherington 2008).

The detailed workshop design is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Module Structure

Week	Session Topic(s)	Key Learning Outcomes
One	Getting the most out of lectures/seminars; Oral Presentation and Group Work Training. (Module leader)	Understanding of different teaching methods for diverse content; ability to recognise and design different kinds of oral presentation; students to make new friends with a shared learning task to work on a small group presentation for the next week.
Two	Delivery of small group oral presentations and audience oral feedback. (Module leader)	Ability to work effectively to deliver a short group oral presentation; awareness of issues involved in giving peer feedback (tact, diplomacy etc.).
Three	Academic Writing at University level. (Module leader) Follow-up assessment on academic writing (20%)	Awareness of UK 'university level' writing expectations; active use of marking criteria to aid/internalise understanding.
Four	Academic Honesty and Avoiding Plagiarism (co-led with staff from College Centre for the Development of Academic Skills) Follow-up quizzes on academic writing and academic honesty	Awareness of what plagiarism is; why it matters; how to avoid it; how to adopt the department's recognised academic referencing style.
Five	How to work with translations. (Staff member 2)	Awareness of different kinds of translation styles/intended use/reader for primary evidence for classical study.

Six	How to study a language. (Staff member 2)	Awareness of ways to approach language learning, especially Latin and ancient Greek.
Seven	The importance of chronology. (Staff member 3)	Awareness of dating methods; problems of dating for ancient historical study.
Eight	Working with material culture. (Staff member 3) Follow-up assessment on material culture (20%)	Awareness of how to approach various kinds of material cultural evidence for classical study.
Nine	Applying modern critical theory. (Staff member 4)	Awareness of how modern critical theories can be applied to classical literature.
Ten	Studying classical reception. (Staff member 4) Follow-up assessment over vacation: reflection on skills development (60%)	Awareness of how the study of modern media “versions” of classical culture can contribute to our understanding both of the past and contemporary culture; to prepare for second/third year projects/dissertations.

The teaching team stressed in our communications to students and in the module literature online that we were not teaching data towards a specific, narrow, discipline-related assessment, such as an examination, but instead wider skills, particularly ways of approaching and problems involved in thinking about evidence that would be shared across many different sub-disciplines within the study of classical culture and also with other ‘sister’ departments within joint degree programmes. We knew that students might find this kind of course initially challenging, as it would be unfamiliar for the sessions not to be as exam-focused as they might have been in school/college. There was also an emphasis on the additional embedded development of employability skills awareness right from the start of their degree study, and on the key role that writing skills awareness could play in achieving successful graduate employment.

Academic writing at university level was deliberately designed to be one of the first skills that we would focus upon, in weeks Three and Four, so that we could minimise student anxiety and give direction before they started work on their first academic writing assignments within the department, whose submission deadlines were also carefully timetabled to take place after the writing workshops. This was therefore an example of the ‘Mapping’ recommended in Sloan and Porter (2010).

I shall now describe how the academic writing teaching was delivered.

In Week Three I started by asking students what they thought was meant by the concept of ‘academic writing at university level’. From previous years’ discussion with students in their first year of study, I knew that many UK-educated students arrive at university confident that they already know ‘how to write essays’ as they had already achieved A or A* grades in their A-level qualifications. This is indeed a phenomenon that others have seen shared in students from other educational environments (e.g. Magogwe, Ramoroka and Mogana-Monyepi 2015 working at the University of Botswana). The workshop discussion reveals to them the difference between the kinds of writing in which they have been engaged previously and what they will now be expected to produce (especially academic and creative writing). Over the past three years of running this module, student oral and written feedback identified two key differences:

- 1) The development of a confident, individual ‘voice’, rather than simply repeating what a teacher had taught them in class. As one student remarked with surprise, ‘You mean that I am allowed to say “I”?’

- 2) The active research into, use of, and engagement with academic scholarship. It is no longer sufficient to repeat the content of perhaps only a couple of books given to them by their teachers. They were instead to use reading lists to locate more resources themselves, and to start giving critical judgment.

Following this discussion, I asked the students to identify, to discuss with their neighbour, and to write down what qualities in academic writing they thought would produce a First-Class mark. They therefore had to reflect on their prior experience, from whatever context that might be, and on what we had just discussed, moderating and developing their understanding both orally and in writing. I then asked them to tell me their ideas, which were written on the board to consolidate learning. Next, I showed the department's essay marking criteria in a series of PowerPoint slides, indicating where the students were right in their suggestions. This built confidence and the students' own realisation of learning. I went through the criteria carefully, highlighting in red on the slide key concepts and explaining terminology. We then moved through the class criteria from First Class through Bare Pass to Fail. I recommended that the students kept these criteria near to hand or easily accessible on their laptops or other electronic devices when they were working on their draft essay assignments. I also took the opportunity to inform them that we have specific marking criteria for various kinds of written exercise, in particular seen or unseen translations into English from an ancient language, as many students of ancient languages may be unfamiliar with the use of such explicit criteria for these kinds of academic writing.

To follow up on this and to check understanding, I distributed paper copies of two exemplars of student writing, which I had composed myself, but drawing on common student weaknesses to illustrate First Class and Lower Second Class academic writing in our discipline. The students were asked to read the exemplars and to discuss in pairs into which class band they would mark each exemplar, using the marking criteria, which are also distributed in hard copy for ease of reference. In this way students gained experiential learning through using marking criteria terminology actively which would help them better to understand their own tutor feedback later. We then went through these as a group in the workshop. Usually most of the students correctly guessed the class, which visibly raised their confidence, but any confusion or disagreement produced beneficial reflection and further discussion.

The final part of the workshop was devoted to describing their take-away assessment exercise, which I had constructed to follow on from the workshop practice. This comprised two parts, which were based on one scholarly journal article on our subject. The article had been carefully chosen to be relevant to classical culture in its content and was written by a respected scholar in the field, but it was also chosen to illustrate strengths and weaknesses for the students to recognise and evaluate.

- 1) The first part of the take-away assessment exercise was to write a summary of the content of the article in up to 500 words. This was designed to help the students to practise basic summary technique, on which they were given some printed guidelines. I explained that this exercise would be of use not only for summarising scholars' interpretations in their degree coursework, but also as a key skill for later employment, as it is one of those writing skills especially highlighted by recent alumni as frequently used in a variety of careers. Marking criteria for the exercise focused on expression, understanding of content, clarity of communication of the content, and reference to key scholars and ancient evidence.
- 2) The second part was, using the marking criteria for reference, to write evaluative feedback on the article under the six headings that our department coursework feedback report forms use: Use and relevance of evidence; Argument; Organisation and structure; Evidence of breadth of reading; Grammar, spelling and expression; and Presentation. Word count: max. 500 words. I asked the students to include discussion of specific strengths and weaknesses using marking criteria terminology, and to include constructive suggestions for improvement. Marking criteria for the exercise rewarded clarity of expression, understanding of a range of strengths and weaknesses, organisation of feedback into the appropriate feedback categories, correct use of marking criteria terminology, and use of specific, referenced examples.

Week Four was devoted to presentations from a member of staff from the College's Centre for the Development of Academic Skills on Academic Honesty and Avoiding Plagiarism. As follow up to this workshop, students were also asked to complete two online quizzes: (i) a Faculty Academic Writing Quiz, which tests levels of English expression and referencing according to Faculty-approved academic referencing styles, and which must be passed for progression into their second year of study; (ii) a College quiz on Avoiding Plagiarism. These gained a 90% completion and pass rate in the first run, and similar rates in subsequent runs.

The final assessment exercise for the module, submitted after their winter vacation, required student reflection on academic development during their first term, across all their modules, with credit being given in the exercise marking criteria for specific examples of problems or achievements in five areas, which are often the focus for employment applications and interviews: Time Management; Team Work; Academic Writing and Research; Problem Solving; and Widening Perspectives (how they have seen links between their different modules). Other workshops in the module contribute to these areas, including an initial formative task which involves small team group work with the delivery of a group oral presentation on a topic allocated by the module leader. The execution of this task in turn develops team work, problem solving and time management skills. Academic Writing was therefore deliberately integrated alongside the other areas for reflection and would be discussed with reference to their discipline-specific experience.

Both exercises received often extensive individual written feedback, and opportunities were given for students to visit me to receive more detailed feedback.

Student Response and Module Development

The section in this final module assessment on 'Academic Writing and Research' produced reflection by every student, academically weak and strong, on their academic writing skills development since the start of the academic year. These exercises showcased how rapidly the students, despite their differing prior educational experiences, had taken on board a shared raft of new ways of thinking about and executing academic writing. They also evidenced explicitly a significant growth in student self-confidence about their ability to express themselves successfully in academic writing, and an awareness of the essential role of ongoing development and process in writing as a craft. This feedback has played a significant role in my module development over the past three years.

The written feedback from the 50 students in the first run highlighted increased awareness of certain elements included in the module design. I list these below with a few examples taken from the 'Academic Writing and Research' section of the final assessment. Students' work is submitted anonymously and permission was gained from the group as a whole by the module leader to use their feedback for module development and research.

- 1) The importance of structure and of creating a plan.

'after receiving the advice from tutors and the Studying Antiquity workshop on writing I realized that an efficient, well thought out plan is key to my writing style [...] for this piece of work which I am currently writing, I divided out the five main sections and listed what I believed to be the main points [...] I have come to realise that writing a well thought out plan for a piece of work that you may have plenty of time to write may involve even re-drafting several plans.'

- 2) The choice of vocabulary and academic style.

'my style has changed drastically, the way I phrase my sentences is vastly different to how they were structured before I started university, which allows my essays to flow more eloquently and coherently'.

3) The importance of relevance and focus upon the set question/topic.

'I feel I should work on [...] the relevance of the content that I put into my essays. I have noticed that at times I tend to go off on a tangent, touching on subjects that aren't as relevant, filling up the word count and not leaving myself space to write about the views and arguments that are actually relevant.'

'I found that I had to be very strict with myself in only including references that actually answered my question – and to reject all the, albeit extremely interesting, irrelevant material.'

4) How to engage actively with scholarship.

'I have learnt how to form my own opinion [...] and have begun to improve my ability to (when reasonable) disagree with prominent scholars [...] having the capability to distinguish between accurate components of an argument and criticize the points I disagree with has allowed the complexity and originality of my own points to progress massively.'

5) How academic writing at university level is different from their previous experience.

'my essay writing has changed in myriad ways since arriving at university [...] I write about the points of my essay in more depth, analysing as much as I can and looking for different perspectives to address rather than just brushing over each point quickly.'

'I see this as a huge improvement and personal achievement.'

6) Expectations as illustrated through the marking criteria.

'my marks and feedback and the criteria have shown me how the marks I was given were decided on and show me where to improve next time.'

However, the written feedback also showed areas where the module could be improved, such as requests for more explicit support about how to locate and engage with appropriate academic scholarship, and more practical advice on academic referencing.

In response, for the second run I strengthened the section on engaging with scholarship by bringing in our College subject specialist Library Liaison Officer to co-lead the session in Week Four to offer tailored advice on these areas. The student feedback in their final assessment from this run explicitly commented on how these particular developments had been helpful in writing coursework. I therefore kept these in place for the third run.

It is difficult to quantify the direct impact the training has had on students' academic writing performance, but my colleagues and Visiting External Examiners have noted to me that, since the module started, student written work exhibits fewer flaws in the areas of structure and referencing. In addition, in 2017, first-year student representatives at the Departmental Staff-Student Committee explicitly commended the support which the module had given them on academic writing. In this respect this module therefore meets its planned learning outcomes. It should also be noted that the number of student registrations increased to 55 in the second and 60 in the third run, showing the increasing popularity of the module as an option.

This module is under constant review. In response to student feedback from the final assessment from the third run, and after one-to-one discussion with Personal Tutees in second and third year, who took the module in their first year, and as part of ongoing development across years of study recommended by Wingate (2006), I offered a follow-up workshop on academic writing, aimed at second-year students, as the level of their academic writing is expected 'to step up a gear', again using constructed exemplars of academic writing, which students evaluate using the marking criteria. I have also adopted the same method for a re-designed workshop for third-year students on writing dissertations.

In 2016 this module was peer reviewed and recognised at College level as an example of innovation and good practice, and was awarded a Team Teaching Excellence Prize Commendation. It has also now been used by colleagues in three other academic departments within the College as inspiration for the development of their own first-year embedded skills and academic writing modules.

Conclusions

This intervention aimed to address student diversity and prior experience of academic writing for the study of classical culture at university level. Academic writing training was embedded within the credit-bearing mandatory module in two of a series of ten subject-specific workshops. Workshops comprised tutor-led training and student experiential learning, in particular through the active use of marking criteria to evaluate student work exemplars in both discussion and writing. Two of the three summative credit-bearing assessment exercises treated academic writing. Student and tutor evaluations were positive and resulted in increased student registrations and noted improvements in the quality of students' writing.

The positive lessons learnt from the module, supplemented by the model case studies of integrating such subject-specific academic writing support within wider strategic teaching and learning policies, as outlined for example in Sloan and Porter (2010) and Wingate, Andon and Cogo (2012), have now been adopted by the module leader, as Departmental Director of Teaching and Learning, as inspiration for the first step in a new, explicit Departmental skills acquisition ladder, which develops step-by-step across the years of study. The ladder develops both academic skills and employability skills awareness, in line with new 2018 College-wide integrated Careers Aspiration and Teaching and Learning Strategies. The module leader has also now promoted this strategically, in their additional role as Associate Dean (Education) for their Faculty, as an example of good practice for wider adoption across academic departments within the Faculty and indeed the College as a whole.

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