

‘What am I Expecting and Why?’ How can Lecturers in Higher Education Begin to Address Writing Development for their Students?

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Abstract

This paper reports on a small-scale study in a post-1992 UK University that set out to explore how lecturers were approaching the challenge of developing first year undergraduates’ writing. It approached lecturers’ everyday writing practices from the perspective of literacy as social practice (Barton 2007, Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 1999, Gee 1996 and Street 1984). Data collection focussed on the different ways the participating lecturers had tried to support students writing development as well as the extent to which they felt responsible for developing writing as part of their specific subject teaching. This study concludes that it may be beneficial for higher education institutions to provide opportunities for lecturers to develop their own academic writing identities in higher education, as well as supporting them to work more effectively as writing developers within their subject specialisms, or collaboratively with specialist writing development staff.

Introduction

There is a huge body of research, both in the USA and the UK, into writing development in higher education over the last twenty years, which includes movements such as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing In the Disciplines (WID). Both WAC and WID support the idea that teaching subject specialisms and writing development together, as part of an integrated learning experience, is more effective than separate provision (Allan and Clarke 2007, Anson 2006, Ganobcsik-Williams 2006, Thaiss and Myers-Zawacki 2006 and Wingate 2006). New Literacy Studies theorists like Street (1984 and 2003) and Gee (1996) argue that it is important that higher education students engage with writing development as part of wider discussions concerning the purpose of their writing in education, their audience, and how they use their writing to express ideas and understanding. This paper, whilst supporting the basic premise that students do undoubtedly benefit from such a holistic and embedded approach to writing development, suggests that there are institutional issues to be addressed about how prepared and supported lecturers in British universities are for being fully in charge of developing students’ writing or even working collaboratively with specialist writing-developers (Hansen 2007). There is plenty of evidence that writing development (for lecturers themselves or for their work with students) has not traditionally been viewed as an important aspect of lecturers’ professional development (Biggs and Tang 2007 and Ramsden 2003).

Another potential obstacle to the embedded approach is the common criticism voiced by subject lecturers that writing developers often pay too much attention to technical writing and take a 'skills' approach which results in them undervaluing the importance of subject knowledge (Jenkins and Ward 1995). The writing developer may also have no knowledge of a lecturer’s assumptions about the way the written assignment should be organised and written. It may also be difficult for non-subject specific writing developers to fully appreciate the various demands that different subjects and disciplinary traditions make on students’ writing across degree programmes.

The Setting

This research is based on a small case study carried out in a post-1992 UK university.¹ The participating lecturers are all based in the School of Education and teach full-time undergraduates and part-time Foundation degree students studying for B.A degrees in single honours Early Childhood Studies, Special Needs in Education (SNIS) programmes or jointly with Education Studies. The modules taught on the degree are assessed by a variety of written assignments including essays, individually negotiated projects, reports and reflective writing, including learning journals and blogs. The students are predominately female and enter higher education with a wide variety of previous academic, vocational and professional qualifications including A Levels, Access, BTEC, and GNVQs; they therefore have an equally wide range of learning and writing experiences.

The Research Design

The study corresponded to criteria for interpretative, qualitative research as it was conducted in a 'natural' work-based setting and focussed on aspects of the participants' everyday activities as lecturers in higher education (Denzin and Lincoln 2005 and Lincoln and Guba 1995). The data produced was socially situated and produced primarily through the participants' accounts of their attempts to support students writing within their subject specialist teaching. Eleven lecturers teaching across a range of core modules on the degree programme were interviewed. (Core modules are compulsory modules taken by all first year students and are designed to give students an introduction to broad subject areas on the degree, for example, special needs education). The participating lecturers had a variety of professional backgrounds and teaching experiences including nursing, social work, youth work, and teaching in further, secondary and primary education prior to working as lecturers in higher education. Seven lecturers were interviewed and four responded via email to the same interview questions, as they were unable to make an interview. (See Appendix 1 for the list of questions that all participants were asked). The responses were coded into broad themes (which correspond to the sub-headings used in this paper). Discourse analysis was used as a form of inductive enquiry to explore the ways in which the participating lecturers situated themselves as writers and writing developers within the research setting. Taken as a whole, the body of data collected reflects Hakim's view that whilst case studies take people as their central unit of account, they are not primarily concerned with individuals as such, but with any patterns or trends in behaviour and perceptions that emerge through study of the data (2003).

The Need for Writing Development

Over half the lecturers in the study expressed degrees of uncertainty about their ability to fulfil what they perceived to be a need to develop their students' writing. For example, one lecturer when asked how they could ensure effective writing development for their students replied 'You tell me!' and several others talked about themselves in terms that suggested they felt like novice writing developers: 'I don't think we do as a whole guide them into the way in which we expect academic writing styles to be' (Lecturer Y).

This kind of ambivalence about lecturer responsibilities for developing writing appears to be common among lecturers in higher education and is picked up in studies by Lea and Stierer (2000), Lea and Street (1998) and Barnett and Di Napoli (2007).

An earlier research project carried out with students from the same degree programme used in this study revealed that the students themselves felt they had a number of difficulties with academic writing. These ranged from issues experienced by specific groups of students (such as the lack of confidence evinced by mature Foundation Degree students, who had often not been in formal education for many years); to the technical linguistic problems experienced by overseas students who had English as a second language. More generally, many other students saw themselves as weak in

¹ Post-1992 universities commonly refers to those institutions (such as former polytechnics and colleges of higher education) that in 1992 were granted university status.

spelling, punctuation and grammar, felt that they struggled with referencing, and had difficulties utilising wider reading effectively.

There was a consensus amongst the lecturers in this study that reflected this earlier data from their students, that is, they all agreed that there was a need to offer writing development. This they felt should include paying attention to spelling, punctuation and grammar, as well as ensuring that students could structure and organise their assignments and incorporate wider reading into them effectively. There was, however, less agreement about how they felt that they could, or if they did, effectively support their students' writing. Research by Newell-Jones, Osbourne and Massey (2005) also explored staff and student perceptions around literacy developments and reported back on the use of writing development activities in higher education degree programmes. Interestingly half of the teaching staff in their study felt that teaching writing skills was not part of their role and wanted students' writing development to be dealt with through external additional support provision. In this study, whilst the majority (9 out of 11) lecturers in this study appreciated the opportunity to refer students to external writing support, they also felt some responsibility for addressing writing development issues within their own teaching sessions. Not surprisingly, like Newell-Jones, Osbourne and Massey (2005), these lecturers tended to be quite proactive in their support of all students (not just those struggling with their writing) and keen to incorporate the use of process-led, unassessed writing activities and formative feedback on their students writing, as discussed in more detail below.

Creating Writing Development Strategies

All but two of the lecturers agreed that they did try to offer students some kind of subject-specialist related writing-development activities during their delivery of core modules. The question 'Do you currently use any strategies to develop your first year students' writing skills?' produced a range of responses that described embedded writing development activities delivered as part of the core modules in the setting. These included peer feedback on students written work; referencing quizzes and practice; use of online activities such as building a wiki, participating in an online forum and accessing study skills support websites; peer reviewing an assignment; modelling effective writing practices; discussions about writing; producing microthemes (short unassessed writing on a specific theme); using double entry journals; controlled conditions writing activities and free writing. Of these, only two, the modelling of writing for a specific assignment and using online resources, were used extensively by six of the lecturers. Microthemes, peer review, double entry journals and free writing were used more intermittently and only by certain lecturers. Formative assignments, which required students to produce a variety of short pieces of writing, were another means used by all lecturers in the study to develop students' writing. For example, 'As preparation for the first summative assignment students do a number of short formative pieces of writing on selected skills and subject areas' (Lecturer P).

Another lecturer felt it was important to ensure that throughout core modules there should be opportunities for students to produce unassessed writing:

I think the more they can engage in [unassessed] practical writing tasks the better because they will then make gradual progress, rather than us saying "here is the assignment, go away and do it' (Lecturer M).

Three lecturers outlined quite complex strategies for supporting their students' writing approach such as the one described below:

I have made some changes to my level one module and I am going to use a staged assignment where they will submit four separate small pieces of writing including a microtheme, a double entry journal and an action plan. These will all be counted towards their final grade but only the final piece of writing (that is quite short) will be assessed against the assessment criteria. I hope that this will allow the students to start handing in assessed work early and getting feedback and support on their writing (Lecturer L).

In addition to writing activities delivered throughout the module, all the lecturers offered all students one-to-one support and small group tutorials towards the end of the module, to support their production of a final written summative assignment.

Fitting it all in!

Embedded activities such as those described above, whilst seen as an effective way of delivering writing development by the majority of lecturers in the study, were not without their problems. On a practical level, some lecturers were worried about how making time for embedded writing development activities and feeding back on writing for formative and unassessed writing tasks, might actually be managed within existing workloads. As one lecturer stated, 'It would be useful to have [...] more formative submissions and workshops, though the semester structure and end of semester submission structure [...] inhibit this' (Lecturer N).

The need to make space for writing development activities and ensure that they were timed to complement assessment preparation is an often unacknowledged aspect of syllabus design that the embedded writing development model needs to factor in. This concern often manifested itself for lecturers in terms of discussions about the relationship or balance between subject content and writing development. As one participant put it: 'How much of the subject area do you take out to fit in the writing activities?' (Lecturer A).

This was coupled with a general feeling that subject-specific content had to come first, as in the following quote:

The modules are quite rightly based around the subjects that the learning outcomes focus on, and so whether there is room in those modules to start developing writing skills is a very important question [...] (Lecturer Y).

Clearly the need to fulfil tight teaching timetables and meet the demands of formal assessment regimes cannot be underestimated. In addition, the challenges of meeting the writing needs of large groups (average teaching groups in the setting are around 35+), can potentially generate a lot of extra work for lecturers, such as the need to give feedback on unassessed work. Interestingly some lecturers in the setting have begun to address this problem by using group blogs, where students are encouraged to read and comment on each others' contributions rather than simply relying on the tutor to do so.

These practical concerns reflect Murray and Kirton's (2006) research, which demonstrated how it is often difficult for university lecturers to undertake work on writing development as well as fulfilling their entire subject specialist teaching, research and administrative duties.

Writing as Process not Product

Exactly how to frame the delivery of embedded writing development activities, alongside subject specific content, arose as a predominately pedagogic issue in the study. Several of the participants debated how important they felt it was to reposition writing for students as a process rather than just allowing it to be seen purely as the end product of assessment. This idea is echoed in the quote below, which was typical of a number made by participants on this subject:

We may need to drop some of the (subject specific) content so that we can spend more time on process [but] we need to teach process so that we can signpost independent learning [...] (Lecturer L).

The belief that students' subject understanding may improve through a process-led, interactive approach to writing in higher education echoes the findings of others working in the field of academic literacies (Fairclough 2001, Lea and Street 1998 and Lillis 2001). Ivanič in particular, discusses in her research, how process-led writing development activities can act as an effective bridge between students' understanding their subject and their ability able to write successfully about it (1998). Indeed she argues in some of her most recent work that writing essentially 'mediates' learning (2004). Two

lecturers were explicit about their awareness of this dialectic between students' understanding of subject specialist knowledge and how they could be taught to express, or in Ivanič's terms, 'mediate' that knowledge effectively in their writing: 'We need to do more work on analysis and process rather than just cover the subject' (Lecturer M) and 'We need to try to show the processes of producing academic writing as part of the subject specific content of the module' (Lecturer T).

This kind of approach strengthens the case made by Ivanič and Lea that there is a case to be made for writing as an actual heuristic of the higher education learning experience, which is as important as any subject specific content (Ivanič and Lea 2006). It is an approach, however, that requires considerable confidence and expertise from lecturers.

The Language and Terminology of Writing Development

There was a lack of consistency when lecturers talked about the need for students to produce what they considered to be an appropriate academic style of writing. Seven lecturers in the study expressed concern about students using informal or conversational styles of writing in their assignments. This was characterised most often, according to the data, by students' use of slang and informal phrases, abbreviations and a failure to use the passive voice. The underlying complexity of what these lecturers believed constituted an appropriate academic style in students' writing was reflected in the variety of terms they used to describe what characteristics of appropriate academic writing were. These included 'cautious', 'objective', 'right', 'academic', 'appropriate', 'complex' and 'sophisticated'. The essential vagueness of these terms is all that really connects them and they are very typical of the kinds of terms used by lecturers in other studies about students' writing in higher education (Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000).

The data suggested that there is a case to be made for allowing a more open and dialogic relationship about writing and writing development to exist between lecturers and students, especially around the values and assumptions underpinning the production of written assignments. For example, if students are encouraged to share drafts of their written work with each other and the lecturer, they will necessarily engage in conversations about the purpose of the writing and their feelings about the writing process they are engaged in, as detailed in the work of Walker and Warhurst (2000).

An emphasis on discussing and debating writing for academic purposes could throw into relief the confusion and uncertainty about popular terms used in assessment criteria such as 'analyse', 'synthesise' and 'evaluate' which several lecturers in the study admitted they often used in assignment briefs, assessment criteria and feedback to characterise what they were looking for in written assignments. As Lecturer J memorably put it, 'Are we consistent [when we use these terms]?' and as another states,

I think it's about making what we want explicit, because what we want is quite often very transparent. I think we do owe it to the students to be absolutely explicit about what we are expecting regarding their writing (Lecturer B).

Not only did some of the lecturers say that they did not really know what other lecturers were asking students to produce in their written assessment, they also recognised that they were often not clear enough themselves about how they wanted students to conceptualise the writing process: 'I don't know if craft is the right word so I'm trying to think of something to replace that, I think skill doesn't capture it either [...]' (Lecturer K).

Lillis and Turner write, '[the] terminology widely used by tutors and/or in guidelines to name academic writing conventions raised more questions than answers' (2001: 59). They showed how lecturers, like those participating in this study, highlighted issues such as 'argument' and 'structure' as crucial aspects of effective academic writing in their feedback to students and yet when questioned about what they actually meant by such terms, they were often unable to explain what they meant (2001): 'I think students have difficulty in understanding analysis and I don't think we as lecturers explain it properly' (Lecturer R).

Moreover, it was clear very early on in the study that writing and writing development in the setting was not just perceived to be about participants identifying a set of writing 'skills' that they felt their first year students should have or that they had a responsibility to teach. For example, concerns were frequently expressed about students' poor referencing that went beyond the conviction that students' just needed 'to learn to reference'. Participants wondered if students really understood what referencing was for and were often unsure how to work with students to establish or contest the usefulness of different secondary sources. Seven lecturers mentioned how first year students were often very unfamiliar with why they had to reference secondary sources when writing in higher education. This raised other, more complex issues connected to referencing, not least the issue (raised by three of the lecturers) that first year students often had very naïve views about theory and knowledge and consequently tended to be very uncritical when using wider reading: 'There is a lack of reflection on what they have read which means they are not able to relate quotes to their own ideas' (Lecturer L).

The inability of students to synthesise secondary material critically, was an area that many of the lecturers felt frustrated with: 'Quotes are slapped in so links are not made' (Lecturer D). Wider reading was not just about what students were being asked to read, it was also how they were reading and for what purpose, 'I think some students have difficulty with new literature. It's like going back to basics' (Lecturer J). There was also a sense that higher education demanded different ways of reading from students' previous educational settings, '(They) need to read with more focus' (Lecturer L).

Expectations around referencing and reading appear, as the quotes above show, to be an important aspect of the ways in which lecturers negotiated and re-negotiated relationships with students about their writing and the whole issue of writing development in higher education.

Lecturers Working Together (or not)

There was some excellent writing development practice in the setting as the following quote shows. It describes a process-led writing activity designed by one of the lecturers in the study to encourage students to analyse how an effective piece of writing comes into being.

I get them to look at A, C and E essays in terms of content and writing skills. Re the latter, I get them to identify and articulate in groups in their own words what constitutes good writing skills based on their analysis of the essays, hoping that the transparency that emerges will feed through into their essay writing (Lecturer B).

This amount of detail in planning and implementing writing development within a subject based session was unusual in the setting and it was perhaps unfortunate that lecturers did not know more about each other's writing development strategies. I don't know what other people are doing with their students around writing (Lecturer J).

This lack of information could be because there were few opportunities to team-teach, as seminars groups were generally large (35+), which had implications for rooming two groups together. It was clear however, that co-teaching around writing development across seminar groups could be a useful way of helping less experienced staff gain confidence and share ideas through working with obviously practiced colleagues like the one quoted above.

Creating Writing Identities

The whole process of developing writing was, it increasingly became apparent, inextricably bound up with lecturers wanting students to develop their sense of themselves as students through their writing, a process that many lecturers were engaged in themselves. One lecturer spoke of wanting to hear a student's 'personal voice coming through their writing' and another, to the student's needed to 'stamp their own identity on their work'. This interest in students' developing positive writing identities reflects another aspect of Ivanič's work, as she is convinced that secure writing identities are integral to a student's ability to develop an argument and express ideas effectively (1998).

The study suggests that lecturers' are also concerned about and interested in developing their own writing identities. The lack of professional and institutional opportunities or encouragement to do so may help explain the complexity and lack of clarity around their role as writing developers (Lea and Stierer 2000). If, as the data showed, lecturers were not always consistent about what constitutes an appropriate academic writing style in their own writing then how could they begin to articulate what they expected from students' writing? This question made me consider that lecturers, as part of their professional development, might find it helpful to discuss what academic writing meant to them, to perhaps even explicitly acknowledge that they were not sure what it was, or consider, as Lillis and Turner suggest, that writing and writing development could not be reduced in any simple operational sense for them or their students (2001). This suggests those lecturers' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and their own development as writers could be a fruitful area for further research in this area.

I started out in this research looking at how lecturers supported their students' writing but I ended by realising that so much of what they do with students around writing development depends in a general sense on their own history as writers and in a particular sense their writing identities in the academy. My research suggests those lecturers' perceptions and assumptions of student writing and writing development practices reveals no more than the tip of a very large pedagogic iceberg. Beneath what individual lecturers do, or say they do, or think they do, seems to lie a whole mass of contradictory, unarticulated perceptions and expectations about writing in higher education and the own experiences of it. The research appeared to provide an opportunity for some of the participating lecturers to reflect not only on their students' writing but their own approaches to and struggles with academic writing: 'I am still finding out what journals want' (Lecturer D).

There was some evidence to suggest that participating lecturers in the study had begun to develop a more explicitly metacognitive, situated understanding of their own responses to students' writing.

[Writing for my Ed D] we have assignments coming up and that was really informative to engage in that because it makes me sympathise with the students; this whole thing of 'am I getting the level right?' [...] It's so nerve wracking writing an assignment and each time the night before I have thought it's just rubbish, I have been working on this for ages but it could just be way off because I don't really know and that has been very informative for me as a lecturer thinking I need to avoid doing that to students and to be as open as I can about what we're expecting and why we're asking them to do things in particular (Lecturer C).

This more metacognitive approach included more awareness of how and why students' writing operates in particular ways within higher education settings, such as those suggested by Ivanič and Lea (2006). As one lecturer stated:

I now try [with students] to say that writing will help you work out what you think so don't just think of it as a horrible task at the end of learning and that it is part of the learning and it will help you work out what you think, although do students get that? Some do [...] (Lecturer L).

There was also an acknowledgement of the influence of their own writing histories and how they intersected with the higher education expectations and assumptions around writing and writing development for students and themselves (Reay 2004): 'They [the students] and we [the lecturers] are all bound by conventions and by structures and the real difficulty then is the style [of academic writing]' (Lecturer D) and

I think [I] must have been influenced by being a Primary School teacher [...] being fussy about 'oh write a sentence and do your punctuations and write in paragraphs' and going on about those things to 6 year olds [...] I'm sure that's had an influence but I think I had to think it through since working in HE [Higher Education] about what is the purpose of writing [...] because it would be really pathetic if what I thought was important above all else was it being nicely presented and no spelling mistakes (Lecturer C).

Perhaps writing development in higher education needs to begin from the position of asking questions that encourage lecturers and students to consider their own writing identities and practices in this way, precisely in order to make the values and assumptions underpinning those processes visible so

that they can be examined and possibly challenged as a way forward towards more innovative embedded writing development activities.

Lecturers' Own Writing Development

As I have discussed above, many of the lecturers in this study identified a lack of knowledge/confidence about how to develop students' writing. Despite this there is no university or school-wide commitment in the research setting aimed at developing a coherent and systematic writing developer/development programme for staff. This is the case in many higher education institutions where support around writing development remains predominately bolt on and piecemeal for the students and lecturers (Doloughan 2001).

The variance in confidence and awareness between different lecturers teaching on the core modules covered by this study suggests there should be more opportunities for lecturers to discuss their values and expectations about students' writing and writing development, as well as the content and purpose of the written assignments that they are setting for assessment. All the lecturers in the study expressed a clear desire to be better supported in writing development both in terms of staff development and curriculum design. Most mentioned that they needed more training or would prefer to co-teach with experienced, confident or trained specialist writing staff to develop writing and/or offer extra writing support sessions for students. In their work on professional development for higher education lecturers, Lea and Stierer (2000) agree that many lecturers would benefit from professional programmes designed to support them as writing developers, just as so much research suggests that students would benefit from a more coherent approach to specifically developing their writing (Wingate 2006).

It is clear that an embedded approach to the embedded delivery of writing development in higher education represents a massive challenge to lecturers, as there has been no real tradition of lecturers operating in this way (Zukas and Malcolm 1999). Not least there needs to be an institutional acknowledgment, in professional development terms that lecturers' writing identities are increasingly complex and hybridised (Barnett and Di Napoli 2007). It may be that creating opportunities for discussing writing practices and development between managers, lecturers and students can begin to change some of the accepted pedagogic culture around writing and writing development extant in many higher education institutions.

This study suggests that lecturers, as much as students, are often contending with what Lillis refers to as the 'institutional practice of mystery' that surrounds writing in higher education (2001: 53). That is, that they too struggle with the confusion and ambiguity surrounding conventions and expectations around writing in higher education, which, as this study has suggested, must affect their ability to develop students' writing effectively. It is clear that more proactive institutional support is needed so that lecturers, just as much as students, can begin to be helped to develop more confident writing identities and a clearer, possibly more critical, understanding of the historical and cultural values and assumptions underpinning writing in the academy.

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Appendix

All participants were asked the following questions:

1. What kinds of writing practices/skills do you think first year students needed?
2. What writing skills do you think students most commonly lack during their first year?
3. Do you currently use any strategies to develop your first year students' writing skills?
4. How successful have they been?
5. What problems do you experience around developing writing skills as part of the module(s) you teach?
6. What do you think your role could or should be in developing first year students' writing?