

The Implications of Bringing Freshman Composition to a British University

Alex Baratta
University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

This paper discusses the results of a reflective case study involving academic writing within an undergraduate programme at a British university. Specifically, the study focuses on the positioning of the students' central claims within their essays – and subsequent essay structure – and how this differs from a specific structure often taught within the US Freshman Composition class. Coming from this teaching background in the US, I made the assumption that such pedagogy would be transferable when I began teaching academic writing in a UK university in 2003; however, from my experience students have tended to resist placing their central claims within the introduction and this study might therefore illustrate a potential pedagogic issue that US trained writing professionals could face if teaching academic writing in Britain. The analysis of 535 essays from all three years of the programme, in addition to questionnaires completed by staff, students, and members of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), help to shed light on the nature of the thesis statement in the British academic writing context.

Introduction

Given that there is no established model of a mandatory university-level writing class in British universities equivalent to the 'freshman composition' tradition in the US (see, for example, Mullin 2006), I decided to bring common aspects of US first-year writing instruction to my teaching of a group of British (first-year) undergraduates starting in 2003 when I began my current teaching position. One aspect of essay writing I taught British students was that their thesis statement within the introduction should incorporate their central claim. Composition textbooks in the US make it clear that a claim should indeed be the integral aspect of the thesis statement. According to Wyrick (2002: 33) 'a good thesis states the writer's clearly defined opinion on some subject. You must tell your reader what you think. Don't dodge the issue; present your opinion specifically and precisely'. Oshima and Hogue (2006: 67) further state that a thesis should not involve 'a simple announcement', a point with which Wyrick concurs, saying that a thesis should avoid being 'merely an announcement of your subject matter or a description of your intentions. State an attitude toward the subject' (2002: 237); Wyrick further declares that 'the single most serious error is the "so-what" thesis' (2002: 229) – that without a point to make.

It need not be the case, of course, that one's thesis statement consists solely of a claim to support (indeed, there are many contextual factors which affect the nature of the thesis statement and these will be discussed later). Likewise, US writing teachers may give students a degree of freedom in how they construct their essays, regardless of textbook advice. However, from my experiences as a student of academic writing in the US, in addition to a graduate course I took in 2001 which focused on preparing students for a career in teaching composition, my understanding – and subsequent teaching – has focused on a claim-based thesis statement. The following diagram captures the expected essay structure discussed in many US academic writing textbooks:

Intro – State one's claim
Body – Support one's claim
Conclusion – Restate one's claim

It was with the above framework in mind that I approached the teaching of academic writing in a British university. I based my instruction of this particular structure purely on what I had been taught, and taught myself, with the US academic writing context. Therefore, I took this structure for granted, regarding it as a 'common sense' way to present one's views. The programme I teach on is located within the School of Education and is part of the Humanities faculty, and it is largely devoted to the study of language and literacy within society (e.g. discussing one's literacy practices; investigating how language is used by the media). While many of the students' essays are not argumentative *per se*, it should be pointed out that their essays have consistently delivered a central claim in the conclusion, even though it had not been offered within the introduction. The consistent inclusion of a claim therefore suggests that its inclusion is not dictated by the essay's main rhetorical purpose.

However, despite my instruction with regard to the need for students to reveal their claims within their introductory thesis statements, I have, for the most part, noted instead the following construction since my teaching began:

Intro – State one's intentions regarding the subject
Body – Explore the subject
Conclusion – Arrive at one's claim

Based on the structure directly above, which I had not come across in US academic writing textbooks or writing classes, I decided to investigate the nature of British academic writing further. For research purposes, in 2010–2011 the academic essays from semesters one and two, from all three years of students on the undergraduate programme, were analysed regarding the nature of the thesis statement. Below are examples of the different types of positioning found. The samples derive from an essay assignment which asked students to discuss the 'product' and 'process' schools of writing and to take a position on these schools of thought. The samples illustrate the most, less, and least common uses of thesis statement structures:

Statement of intentions, claim in the conclusion (most common):

Introduction: In this essay, I will discuss the advantages and weaknesses of both schools of writing in order to gain an insight into which is more beneficial for an individual who is writing for academic purposes.

Conclusion:.....I believe that a balance of the two methods is the key to writing a coherent essay.

Opinion within a statement of intentions, claim re-stated in the conclusion (less common):

Introduction: My aim is to examine both schools' approaches by comparing, contrasting and evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of each, whilst proposing the process writing as the ideal professional way to achieve the realistic goal of creating the best possible product.

Conclusion: It would be fair to say now, that rereading, rewriting, reviewing, emphasis on creative processes and focusing on ideas themselves are some of the aspects that contribute to this process, thus resulting in improvement in the students' writing ability and producing more purposeful writing material.

Opinion-driven thesis statement, claim re-stated in the conclusion (least common):

Introduction: The process school is a more interactive form of teaching which allows continual feedback during the writing process, thus enabling students to submit pieces of work that are to the best of their academic ability.

Conclusion: I personally feel that the process school of writing is the school that is more appropriate in further developing students' writing abilities.

To further investigate the subject of thesis statements, students and staff on the programme were sent questionnaires via e-mail, one which allowed staff to offer their views on what constitutes a good thesis statement and one that asked the students what they had been taught, if anything, about the thesis statement prior to university. Moreover, a British lecturer was asked in a follow-up interview to expand on her beliefs regarding the nature of the thesis statement. Finally, members of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) were also asked to provide their views regarding what makes for a good thesis statement; their responses have provided some additional contextual depth.

The Nature of Students' Claims in British and American Academic Writing

In terms of the overall US academic writing context, Wolfe suggests that 'the *explicitly thesis driven assignment* is, perhaps, the workhorse of academic argumentation. In disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts, students are frequently called upon to write essays developing and supporting a central thesis (which is) a central claim that the author is trying to advance' (2011: 196, original emphasis). Furthermore, Bonnett (2001: 3) declares that 'the ability to argue [...] is the core attribute of all forms of advanced level education', speaking of the overall British academic writing context. These two citations suggest that broadly speaking, academic writing *in toto* involves argument and persuasion, which need not be tied to argumentative essays as such and/or those found solely within the (US) writing class. British researchers Elander *et al.* (2006: 81) further claim that 'argument is arguably the defining feature of the essay'.

Moreover, the overall purpose of the student's essay (i.e. whether that be argumentation, exposition, description, or narration) does not determine whether or not an opinion should be offered within the thesis statement, as already suggested. Wyrick (2002: 189) regards expository essays, for example, as the author's way of essentially stating 'here are the facts *as I see them*' (original emphasis), with Smith (1995: 112) stating that 'a student writes a descriptive essay [...] to express his [sic] view of the real world'. Hesse (1986: 111) further states that narrative essays are also 'a form of persuasion.' Indeed, Neman (1995: 44) declares that 'the obviously persuasive paper is just a more blatant example of what *all* good expository writing actually is' (original emphasis). Therefore, it is suggested that, to an extent, the forwarding of one's claims is a common aspect of academic writing in general, and can be found across disciplines and various essay genres.

In terms of how thesis statements are constructed within discipline-specific academic writing, a study by Wolfe (2011) analysed 265 essays from a variety of academic disciplines and subject areas in the US. While Wolfe does not explicitly mention the positioning of students' arguments, his aforementioned quotation suggests that students' thesis statements are the starting point within the essay ('students are frequently called upon to write essays developing and supporting a central thesis'). It is suggested that given the need to support a central thesis, it is probable that the thesis should be the starting point in the introduction; otherwise, there would be no argument to defend and support. Wolfe goes on to say that 'undergraduates in fields as diverse as business and engineering [...] (are) taught to produce sound and persuasive decision-based arguments' (2011: 197). Wolfe states, however, that the nature of students' arguments differs somewhat based on disciplinary conventions. For example, Wolfe discusses a central claim based on one's reading of a text as standard within Literature; policy proposals as common within the Social Sciences; overarching claims based on one's reading of events as the preferred form within History.

Speaking specifically of the US university general first-year writing class, however, Kastely addresses the practice of beginning an essay with one's claim, saying that in this manner, 'argument is not a mode of inquiry but a way of presenting conclusions that have been discovered prior to the argument' (1999: 227); Kastely implies that this practice is premature, if not in placement *per se* then in being indicative of not having further considered one's stance. Indeed, Kastely claims that in this way students' arguments 'operate only as guises from which to attack opponents and defend positions' (1999: 222); 'the serious engagement with alternative positions is limited to figuring out responses to counter gaps in one's support' (1999: 223); and 'alternative positions never emerge in their difference as making serious demands that the arguer rethink his or her position' (1999: 223). These latter two points reflect an aspect of US writing classes, in which students have been traditionally taught to discuss the opposing side to one's claim generally as a means solely to refute it. A surprising discovery for myself came in my class in Britain in my first semester of teaching. When instructing the students to argue either for or against the character of Mr. Keating from the film *Dead Poets Society*, a student asked why only one side must be argued. This was not something that had ever been questioned by my writing students in the US, however.

It is true that post-process theories of composition have widened US-based approaches to teaching writing. Breuch (2002: 105) discusses one key aspect of this theory as involving a 'more situated and contextual approach to writing'. This statement reflects a central post-process belief, referring to the need for the writing context to be considered more widely, in the sense that what and *how* one writes is based on the standards for good writing within the community in which one is writing; one's essays, then, can be seen as contributing to the rhetorical norms of a given academic community. The relation

this has with the thesis statement is that students might consider the specific nature of this key sentence within different disciplines. Patton (2004: 3) points to the need for discipline-specific writing instruction, as without ‘concrete, context-specific’ examples, we have ‘overly general advice, which is often the case in freshman composition’. Though Patton does state the need for essays overall to have an explicit thesis – usually, the last sentence in the introduction – her statement nonetheless points to the current practice of otherwise moving beyond one size fits all writing instruction. Indeed, Sosnoski (1991: 210) asserts that post-process classrooms ‘do not have to follow a single blueprint and should change according to the situation’.

In terms of the British academic writing context, results of previous research are presented below in Table 1, as a means to provide some contextual information with regard to how British students, from a variety of disciplines, structure their essays.

Table 1 Research Results for British Academic Writing

| Researcher(s) | Nature of Study | Relevant comments regarding positioning of claim and/or overall essay structure |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Kusel (1992) | Analysis of fifty undergraduate essays from five disciplines | Thirty-two essay introductions outlined the essay’s purposes or aims, involving ‘a short and explicit declaration of intentions’ (page 463); Kusel states that ‘indicating the purpose or aims of the topic was commonly chosen throughout (i.e. within the introduction paragraphs of the essays analysed as a whole), but revealing the outcome this early in the essay was not popular, perhaps because students would want to play this as a final card’ (page 463). |
| Read, Francis and Robson (2001) | Analysis of eighty-seven undergraduate essays from History students from four different London universities. | ‘Academic conventions such as the need to evaluate a variety of views before coming to a conclusion (i.e. one’s claim), or the need to reference other people’s ideas, are unproblematically seen as ‘common sense’ knowledge’ (page 388). |
| McCune (2004) | Discussion of the essay writing process with first-year Psychology students in Scotland. | McCune declares that competence in terms of writing conclusions involves ‘developing an opinion [...] from the evidence included in the essay’ (page 265). McCune regards the most competent essay conclusions as being those which draw conclusions (i.e. claims) from evidence – essentially, reaching an overall opinion based on having first discussed and debated the different theories and arguments within the literature in the essay’s body. |

Collectively, the research above suggests that delaying one’s claim until the conclusion, with the introduction the slot to merely present one’s aims, is common. Both US and British educators would agree that students must ‘evaluate a variety of views before coming to a conclusion’ (Read, Francis and Robson 2001: 388). The difference appears to be that in the US freshman composition context at least, the student’s claim is the starting point. However, perhaps the seemingly British preference for a delayed thesis statement might be a means to explore and discuss the literature within the essay’s body first in order to make this process of having arrived at one’s viewpoint more transparent. In other words, by merely stating one’s intentions in the introduction, the body is left free to not so much support a claim, but to *find a claim* by discussing various viewpoints and exploring the process of discovery, with the conclusion (i.e. the concluding paragraph) then being the logical slot for the ‘arrived-at’ claim to be made clear to the reader.

Table 2 presents information regarding essay writing for undergraduate students in Britain, as found on both study skills websites from various disciplines and websites which are more generic in nature (i.e. not deriving from a specific discipline):

Table 2 Writing Advice on British Study Skills Websites

| Study skills website | Advice offered to students regarding essay construction |
|--|---|
| Words Worth Reading Ltd (n.d.) www.wordsworthreading.co.uk/images/essay-structure.doc | The introduction should 'state the intention of the essay' |
| Bishop, Bohan and Dawydiak (2012) University of Glasgow http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~paul/tutorials/essay/essstruct.htm | 'The introduction should [...] give a picture of what is going to be said within the essay' |
| Oxbridge Essays (n.d.) http://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/how-to-structure-an-essay-608/ | The introduction 'clearly sets out the aims of what you are about to write [...] state what the essay will try to achieve' and the conclusion should 'draw a final decision or judgement about the issues you have been discussing' |
| The University of Manchester, Faculty of Humanities Study Skills Website (n.d.) http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/essentials/writing | The essay's introduction tells 'the reader what the essay is about' |
| Waylink English (n.d.) http://www.waylink-english.co.uk/?page=61150 | The introduction 'will probably be a statement of intent' and the thesis statement 'will not express your own opinion' |

Again, the suggested structure appears to be to withhold one's claim until the conclusion, with the introduction serving to present one's aims. However one interprets 'aim', US composition textbooks exhort students to *avoid* solely announcing their aims as the thesis statement and essentially, 'getting to the point' instead. Likewise, teaching students to offer their intentions/aims as the central part of their introductions is not suggestive of the need for an opinion and is quite different from US composition textbooks at least, which avoid such a description of the function of the thesis statement.

Interestingly, however, an additional British study skills website, from the University of Manchester, does suggest that beyond the statement of intentions for one's introduction, students may also use expressions such as *In this paper I argue that...* and *This paper attempts to show that...* (Morley 2011). The essay-writing advice on this website, however, was the exception. This might be explained by the fact the website from the University of Manchester cited in Table 2 (and others) derives from a specific faculty and the one above (Morley 2011) does not. It is argued that a faculty-based website would have the input of several faculty members, all of whom have certain expectations of essay writing based on more specific knowledge of writing. However, the other website has been written more as a 'generic' study guide and therefore, it attempts to incorporate additional constructions such as those used regarding one's claims, thus trying to be more comprehensive for students overall. Indeed, the website claims that it 'is a general resource for academic writers' (Morley 2011). Interestingly, the website is also designed primarily for non-native English speakers, who may have

been exposed to more claims-based thesis statements as a result of the freshman composition model and perhaps this can also explain the inclusion of a claims-based thesis statement, albeit one contained within a statement of intentions. A final point to make is that the writer of the website responded with me by e-mail regarding this matter, explaining that 'most of my postgraduate education took place in Australia. There, the influence of US academic styles is much greater than here (Britain). Also Phrasebank is an international resource getting about 25.000 hits per month from all over the world, with many from the US and Australia' (Morley 2012).

Constructions such as these (i.e. *In this paper I argue...*) suggest that the student's central claim might therefore be permissible in the introduction, but that it needs to be contained with a statement of intentions. Perhaps the conflicting information offered to students on study skills sites regarding the offering, or not, of an opinion is based on how 'opinion' is interpreted. If the student's opinion is regarded as merely being his or her personal feelings on a matter prior to having conducted research, then clearly such an opinion is not valid, at least not for academic writing. If the opinion is based on having first investigated the subject, then the implication is that it is a supported opinion and not just the student's subjective feelings. Perhaps this is why the language used in conjunction with one's claim involves expressions such as *I argue that*; this would imply an argument in a more academic sense: the discussion of one's views in relation to the relevant literature. Nonetheless, in US writing classes, such expressions are not part of textbook instruction and arguably, might be regarded as 'wordy' and a form of unnecessary hedging.

Methods

The methodological approach to the analysis I undertook of British undergraduate student essays was that of a reflective case study of my teaching experiences on a British undergraduate programme. The intention was to investigate how much students did or did not position themselves from the start of their essays, based, partly at least, on freshman composition inspired instruction and also based on what they had been taught prior to university. From here, it can be seen how much, if at all, the results are suggestive of those of previous studies of British academic writing with regard to placement of claims and essay structure.

In order to access students' essays for the project, I explained my study to all three years' cohorts and all students gave me permission to access their essays for analytical purposes. Of the entire 2010/2011 cohort, 18 students further agreed to allow me to use samples of their essays for potential inclusion in an article and they also agreed to complete a questionnaire which was sent to them by e-mail and which asked them to discuss their pre-university academic writing instruction. These 18 students were each given a participant information sheet which again made clear the details of my research and what it would involve. The final step involved these students and me signing a consent form, which acted as evidence of their willingness to potentially have material from their essays, as well as their questionnaire responses, printed in my research articles. Though 18 students volunteered for this part of the project thus allowing me to use their essay samples, only five of them responded to the questionnaire. In total, 535 essays were analysed, comprising work from years one to three of the 2010/2011 academic year. Most essays were 1,500–2,000 words in length, although some were up to 3,000 words. Furthermore, EATAW members, who are involved in teaching and supporting writing in Europe, the UK, the US, and elsewhere, were also asked for their views on what they believed a thesis statement should accomplish.

The results section outlines the responses received from staff, students and EATAW members, which collectively point to defining the thesis statement and its function, and discussing what (students) had been taught in this regard prior to beginning university.

Results

I begin with the responses from EATAW members, thus providing a broad starting point. Some suggested that a thesis statement involves a 'claim' or 'position'; 'claims that we wish to defend' and 'expressing hypotheses', thus tying in with a need to state one's claims from the start. Other responses, however, suggest the importance of discipline-specific conventions, such as 'the IMRAD

approach (is) common in Chemistry (see Swales, 1990)'; the 'problem-solution approach (is) common in Engineering;' and a thesis can be 'experimental with or without control groups (Life sciences, physics, medicine are exemplars)'. These responses support the research of Wolfe (2011) and do not necessarily suggest the prohibition of a personal opinion, but a different *kind* of positioning; the problem-solving approach is cited by Wolfe, for example, as the offering of one's opinion as the solution. Further responses involved 'asking questions that we wish to answer (suggestive of Swales', 2004 CARS model - Create-a-Research-Space)'; 'identifying problems that we seek to solve (with the solutions/recommended actions generally placed in the conclusion)'; and 'research papers rely on a research question format'. Discipline-specific writing can of course influence how one constructs a thesis statement or even if it is referred to as such and therefore, the results from EATAW members do provide more contextual information and go beyond the thesis statement which requires students to present their claims in the introduction. Though a subject for another paper, might the rather generic advice given in many composition textbooks regarding the claim-based thesis statement therefore be *too* generic, despite the philosophies of the post-process movement? Nonetheless, the results from EATAW do suggest that implicit or explicit, and whether it is the starting point or ending point, a central claim is an integral aspect of an academic essay. To help illustrate this, for example, the answering of research questions as mentioned above would necessitate one's central claim(s) to be an integral aspect of the answers, based on having conducted research in the first instance.

Regarding the responses to my questionnaire of programme staff, only four out of twelve responded. Of these four (all of whom are British), three showed a preference for the British model, with one stating that he would be 'a bit concerned' if the starting point were the student's claim. However, the response of a fourth lecturer reveals a difference from all others. The lecturer, Anna (a pseudonym), states that 'the British model merely asks (students) to use the intro to list what the assignment will cover, which is not an argument [...] I like the students to state what their argument will be within the introduction'. The lecturer's preference for this structure, however, is not entirely suggestive of the literature regarding British academic writing patterns.

When I asked in interview if she could expand on her rationale for this preferred structure, the response was quite telling. Anna told me that 'in published journal papers – we expect to see the main argument or main contribution to knowledge stated clearly near the beginning of the paper. Our students are apprentices in this genre and so should follow the same rules' (Anna 2012). This belief may also reflect the trend to present one's views in this manner based on influence from the need to write, and publish in English, within a globalized context (Lillis and Curry 2010). Though not all would perhaps agree that undergraduate students' writing is representative of professional journal articles, Anna's comment does refer, albeit broadly, to the need to consider *who* one is writing for. As Purves (1986: 39) comments, each discipline is 'a rhetorical community, which is to say a field with certain norms, expectations and conventions with respect to writing', and this is an implicit aspect of post-process theory. The writing norms that are more in keeping with Humanities academic writing are referred to in a study by Nesi and Gardner (2006), who investigated the academic writing from twenty departments at three British universities. They state that 'writers in the humanities tried to convince their readers of interpretations they had arrived at through personal insight' (2002: 2); this is certainly true of the writing of my British students. Nesi and Gardner say nothing, however, with regard to the positioning of the students' arguments within their essays.

Anna also explained to me that her beliefs about positioning are communicated to students in class. Not only does she tell students to present their claims in the introduction, she tells them *how* to do so. Specifically, she told me that she suggests students 'use a sentence which starts with "*In this assignment/essay, I will argue.../ This paper will argue.../I will argue that*". I believe this makes them think more about how the essay can be used to support their position' (Anna 2012). Anna declared that such expressions were a means to hedge one's views on the matter and not appear overly confident. In this way, her approach to teaching writing remains suggestive of a more indirect manner to reveal one's views in academic writing and in keeping with the information presented on a previous study skills website (Morley 2012).

Though my study did not quantify the number of specific linguistic expressions used in students' introductions, I found that the following phrases were commonly used to signal the writer's intentions: *I will be investigating...; The aim of this assignment/research project is...; My objective is to...; I aim to discuss...* Again, statements of intention functioning as thesis statements were not regarded by myself as entirely appropriate based on the fact they can lead to the 'so-what thesis' mentioned

earlier, itself discussed within US writing textbooks and a part of instruction. Such statements merely begged the question ‘what is your claim on the matter?’ and they are arguably not reflective of the academic writing instruction in the US upon which I was drawing as a teacher of writing. In terms of claims offered within a statement of intentions, however, as Anna teaches, then the following expressions were commonly noted in the study: *I will argue that...; I will put forward the argument that...; I shall be arguing that...; I am going to argue that....* Such constructions in US writing classes might be seen as redundant, however, and this was my reasoning for not advocating such a construction with my students, regarding a ‘straightforward’ claim as being more confident instead.

In terms of the degree programme on which I teach, it is the case that only two lecturers have spoken in favour of the claim-based structure: I, based purely on my experiences as a student and teacher of freshman composition, and Anna, who sees this as a way to develop writing skills which are used by professional researchers. Outside of the writing class I provide, and the instructions provided by Anna, I confirmed that no other instruction is given by lecturers on this programme in how to write. This suggests that students’ knowledge of academic writing is also heavily influenced by what was taught in high school and/or college. Table 3 offers insights into what the students had been taught in this regard, based on their questionnaire responses:

Table 3 Students’ Pre-University Writing Instruction

| Student | Nature of thesis statement/essay structure |
|---------------|---|
| Student One | ‘Statement of intent "signposting" assignment ("The purpose of this assignment is...").’ |
| Student Two | ‘Statement of intentions in the introduction, with the opinion in the conclusion.’ |
| Student Three | ‘We were never informed to include even a statement of intention, with the introduction merely providing the reader with definitions and a brief outline of the theories to be explored.’ |
| Student Four | ‘My conclusion normally summarised my key findings. I have never really been asked for an opinion or argument in an essay.’ |
| Student Five | ‘Studying History at A Level, I used to only conclude with my argument; I try to define what areas I intend to focus on to give an indication of the scope of what my argument will cover (and by the same token what it might not intend to cover) [...] The conclusion should recap key points or findings from your argument.’ |

While the low number of student questionnaire responses is not sufficient to make broader generalisations about the content of pre-university writing instruction in Britain, the responses do suggest that the offering of one’s opinion within the introductory thesis statement is not the norm; this in turn suggests that to teach students to provide their central opinion in their introductions may in fact seem quite alien to them. However, it appears to be the case for some at least that a statement of what the essay will cover was deemed appropriate for the introduction of their essays, with the conclusion the logical place to provide their claim. Moreover, two students stated that the conclusion provided their ‘key findings’. This statement suggests that, having analysed the data, one’s claim is then provided based on an interpretation of the findings.

Table 4 offers the results of the quantitative data collected for this study, based on determining four specific structures within students’ essays from the total of 535 essays which were analysed. It should be pointed out that student numbers are lower in year three than in the first two years because third year students choose their course units from a variety of options. Therefore, some are more heavily subscribed than others. Next to the title of each course unit is a number in a bracket, which corresponds to the year in which the course is delivered.

Table 4 Results of the Analysis of Students' Essay Structure

| Course Unit Title | No thesis statement of any kind: background information in the introduction, claim in the conclusion | A statement of intentions in the introduction, with the claim in the conclusion | The offering of a claim in the introduction which is then restated in the conclusion | The offering of a claim as <i>part of one's intentions</i> ; restated in the conclusion |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| Introduction to Academic Writing, Essay 1 Draft 1 (1) | 7 | 5 | 8 | 0 |
| Introduction to Academic Writing, Essay 1 Draft 2 (1) | 6 | 9 | 10 | 6 |
| Introduction to Academic Writing, Essay 2 Draft 1 (1) | 1 | 1 | 10 | 2 |
| Introduction to Academic Writing, Essay 2 Draft 2 (1) | 2 | 2 | 21 | 6 |
| Group Processes (1) | 9 | 20 | 2 | 2 |
| Reading Processes (1) | 1 | 8 | 11 | 16 |
| An Introduction to Grammar (1) | 2 | 7 | 10 | 7 |
| Exploring Social Justice in Education (1) | 0 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Literacy in Society (1) | 3 | 16 | 7 | 15 |
| Research Methods (2) | 0 | 36 | 0 | 5 |
| Words and Context (2) | 1 | 23 | 0 | 1 |
| Conducting Fieldwork (2) | 0 | 34 | 0 | 0 |
| Literacy and Social Development (2) | 3 | 9 | 11 | 13 |
| Special Educational Needs (3) | 1 | 12 | 2 | 1 |
| Classroom Communication and Learning (3) | 2 | 11 | 1 | 5 |
| Discourse and Narrative Analysis, Part I (3) | 6 | 11 | 2 | 1 |
| Discourse and Narrative Analysis, Part II (3) | 3 | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| Participatory Photography (3) | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| Helping Children with Reading Difficulties (3) | 0 | 4 | 2 | 0 |
| Bilingualism (3) | 4 | 17 | 0 | 2 |
| Acquisition of Literacy (3) | 4 | 9 | 1 | 4 |
| Reading Film (3) | 1 | 16 | 2 | 12 |
| Totals | 56 | 274 | 104 | 101 |

Clearly, based on the results, the dominant pattern of students' writing consists of providing a statement of intentions as the thesis statement, exploring the subject in the body, and then offering one's claim in the conclusion. However, the number of essays which offer the students' claim as the thesis statement, whether part of a statement of intentions or not, is also quite considerable. Based on this finding, we must consider the extent to which the writing instruction students have received on the

programme is a contributing factor with regard to providing their claims in the introduction. For year one students in particular, it is argued that the instruction in academic writing (offered in semester one) contributes heavily to this particular model. Within this academic writing course (which I teach), students have to write two assessed essays, both of which are two-draft. This means that students are reminded up to four times in essay feedback of the need to present their claims in the introduction. In addition, the Reading Processes course is taught by Anna; this can help to explain the higher number of students' essays for this course which display this structure.

A possible reason for the comparative lack of an opinion-driven thesis statement (with or without a statement of intentions) for the Group Processes and Research Methods essays is due to the fact that students begin writing the former essay quite early, before instruction is given with regard to the thesis statement and constructing introductions. As Research Methods is a course offered in semester two, it could be that by this time, perhaps students are already reverting back to a style of thesis statement with which they feel more comfortable, and as I do not teach this course, students are not reminded (yet again) to construct the US style of thesis statement.

Though Literacy in Society is also delivered in semester two, I teach this course (with Anna); thus students were again told by myself to provide their opinion within the introduction prior to writing their essay. The fact that many students for this course provide opinions as the thesis within a statement of intentions, however, is interesting, given that this is not a specific structure I have ever taught, or encouraged, though Anna does teach this construction of course. Providing an opinion within a statement of intentions might also be partly based on pre-university education, in which a statement of intentions (albeit without an opinion) might be the norm in introductions. Therefore, when students are instructed to provide an opinion they perhaps feel more comfortable doing so within a statement of intentions; a 'hybrid' style of thesis statement, as it were, reflecting a kind of hedging on the student's part, which Anna did state was the purpose.

For the remaining essays within years two and three, students for the most part exhibit a statement of intentions as their thesis. It could be that the students, whose writing instruction was up to two years prior to these particular essays being written, are perhaps again defaulting to a familiar style of thesis statement even more so (based on pre-university instruction). One exception, however, is for the year two Literacy and Social Development essay, which clearly demonstrates a majority of students providing their viewpoints in the introduction (regardless as to whether the opinion stands alone or is contained within a statement of intentions). This might be partly due to the fact that three students from this course brought their essays in progress to me for analysis, specifically asking for help with regard to how to get started. One of the three students who sought my help admitted to sharing my recommendations regarding the thesis statement with other students in the class. Given the programme's relatively small size – usually around thirty-five students – it may not have proven difficult for this shared information to be taken on board by most of the other students in the class.

The year three Reading Film course also displays a substantial number of essays which do reveal the students' opinions from the start; this is another course I teach and once again, I ensured a discussion of how to construct the essay, as a reminder to students. This involved discussing the need to state one's opinion within the introduction, again based on my US-mindset regarding the nature of thesis statements; once again, however, we see that most students who did offer their opinion chose to do so within a statement of intentions.

From the results overall, however, it appears that withholding a claim regarding the subject matter until the conclusion is most common. While it has also been seen that the students do construct thesis statements in which a claim is embedded, the opinions are often contained with statements of intention simultaneously, mentioned by Anna as a means to not appear too assertive. That is to say, should students have felt apprehensive about presenting their claim in the introduction, especially if a statement of intentions has previously been standard for them, then perhaps this particular construction was deemed to be a 'happy medium' and could also be regarded as a kind of 'academic modesty'.

Conclusion

My experiences within US writing classes cannot be said to mirror those of other US students and academics, but my pedagogic practice of teaching British students to reveal their claims within their thesis statements, based directly on these experiences, has been met with resistance by students. Based on the literature regarding British academic writing practice, both generic and discipline-specific, however, it is suggested that the students' preference for withholding claims until the conclusion is perhaps to be somewhat expected. Therefore, on a purely pedagogical level, US-trained writing teachers who come to Britain may indeed have to be prepared for essays in which students' claims overall are generally not presented from the start; this is a lesson that I have learned and my academic writing instruction has therefore changed to instead allow students to present their intentions – with or without an opinion – in their introductions. My original mindset regarding the US model was based on my own personal experiences as both student and teacher of freshman composition; in retrospect however, I concede that perhaps this subsequently led to internalising this structure to the point it became for me the 'right' way. My initial assumption, however, was that this model was uniform within both the US *and* the British writing context, based on the larger consideration of the *Anglo-American* model of writing.

It is premature to suggest that the results of one academic programme can speak for academic writing conventions in Britain overall; arguably, however, the results might suggest a preference in Britain for a different kind of positioning. Future research is needed to determine if indeed the British model is a reality, however, and if so, is it based within a broader British context (based on notions such as British understatement, perhaps)? It is suggested, however, that the results here are not necessarily reflective of just one academic programme, certainly when they are considered in conjunction with the previous literature investigating British academic writing, the students' responses regarding pre-university writing instruction and advice on British study skills websites. Given that the literature derives from several academic disciplines, there is perhaps some leeway to suggest that withholding one's claims until the end might be more reflective of British academic writing in general. This paper has therefore made a start in providing some broader insights regarding British academic writing in general and how this has the potential to differ from a practice within the US writing class, or at least that advocated in US academic writing textbooks.

References

- Anna (2012) *How British students construct their thesis statements*. [interview by A. Baratta] The University of Manchester, 7th May 2012.
- Bishop, P., Bohan, J. and Dawydiak, E. (2012) *Essay Writing Guide*. [online] available from <<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~paul/tutorials/essay/essstruct.htm/>> [4 March 2012]
- Bonnett, A. (2001) *How to Argue: A Student's Guide*. Essex, United Kingdom: Pearson Education
- Brech, L. (2002) 'Post-Process 'Pedagogy': A Philosophical Exercise'. *Journal of Advanced Composition* 22 (1), 119-150
- Elander, J., Harrington, K., Norton, L., Robinson, H. and Reddy, P. (2006) 'Complex Skills and Academic Writing: A Review of Evidence about the Types of Learning Required to Meet Core Assessment Criteria'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 31 (1), 71-90
- Hesse, D. (1986) *The Story in the Essay*. PhD thesis, University of Iowa
- Kastely, J. (1999) 'From Formalism to Inquiry'. *College English* 62 (2), 222-241
- Kusel, P. (1992) 'Rhetorical Approaches to the Study and Composition of Academic Essays'. *System* 20 (2), 457–469
- Lillis, T. and Curry, M.J. (2010) *Academic Writing in a Global Context: The Politics and Practices of Publishing in English*. London: Routledge
- McCune, V. (2004) 'Development of First-Year Students' Conceptions of Essay Writing'. *Higher Education* 47 (3), 257-282
- Morley, J. (2011) *Academic Phrasebank – Writing Introductions*. [online] available from <<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/introductions.htm>> [3 March 2012]
- Morley, J. (2012) *Study skills website* [email] to Baratta, A. [11 December 2012]
- Mullin, J. (2006) 'Learning From - Not Duplicating - US Composition Theory and Practice', in Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (ed.) *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education: Theories, Practices, and Models*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 167-179
- Neman, B. (1995) *Teaching Students to Write*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Nesi, H. and Gardner, S. (2006) *Variation in Disciplinary Culture: University Tutors' Views on Assessed Writing Tasks*. CELTE, University of Warwick.
- Oshima, A. and Hogue, A. (2006) *Writing Academic English*. White Plains, New York: Pearson Education
- Oxbridge Essays (n.d.) *Essays Writing – How to Structure an Essay*. [online] available from <<http://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/how-to-structure-an-essay-608/>> [5 March 2012]
- Patton, M. (2004) *Situated Writing Lessons: Putting Writing Advice in Disciplinary Context. The Writing Instructor*. [online] available from <<http://writinginstructor.com/>> [13 June 2012]
- Purves, A. (1986) 'Rhetorical Communities: The International Student and Basic Writing'. *Journal of Basic Writing* 5 (1), 38-51
- Read, B. and Francis, B. (2001) 'Playing Safe: Undergraduate Essay Writing and the Presentation of the Student Voice'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 22 (3),

387-399

Smith, M. (1995) *Teaching College Writing*. London: Allyn & Bacon

Sosnoski, J. (1991) 'Postmodern Teachers in Their Postmodern Classrooms: Socrates Begone!', in Patricia Harkin and John Schilb (eds.) *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*. New York: MLA, 198-219

Swales, J. (1990) *Genre Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Swales, J. (2004) *Research Genres: Explorations and Applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

The University of Manchester, Faculty of Humanities Study Skills Website. (n.d.) [online] available from <<http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/essentials/writing/>> [1 March 2012]

Waylink English (n.d.) *The Introduction and Thesis Statement*. [online] available from <http://www.waylink-english.co.uk/?page=61150/> [3 March 2012]

Wolfe, C. (2011) 'Argumentation across the Curriculum.' *Written Communication* 28 (2), 193-219

Words Worth Reading Ltd. (n.d.) *How to Structure the Ideal Essay*. [online] available from www.wordsworthreading.co.uk/images/essay-structure.doc/ [1 March 2012]

Wyrick, J. (2002) *Steps to Writing Well*. Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt College Publishers