

CETL Briefing Papers: Embedding Writing Skills.

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Aims of the Initiative

This initiative was introduced as part of a wider set of SEd retention and progression initiatives. The over arching aim of the SEd initiatives was to improve and consolidate progression. The specific aim of this initiative was to improve and develop writing skills to aid progression of SEd first year undergraduates and. It is also aimed to help students improve their grades.

Description of the Initiative

This case study seeks to explore the ways in which undergraduate students, particularly in their first year, can be encouraged to use personal experiences to inform their learning in HE. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which tutors can create opportunities to use the personal experiences of students in order to facilitate access to HE discourses such as critical reflection and academic writing and reading. The case study will use examples from current practice to show how the process of validating students' experiences both within and outside HE can be an important stage in establishing student confidence and ownership of ideas leading ultimately to real engagement with ideas and developments in academic writing. This approach necessitates a move away from the individualistic acquisition of knowledge towards a 'pedagogy of mutuality' (Bruner) and raises questions about how HE legitimises and prioritises different learning discourses.

In recent years students have been entering higher education with a diverse range of writing experiences; especially where students come through non-traditional or vocational routes which require different kinds of writing to many higher education courses (Lillis and Turner, 2001). For the last three years a team of researchers at a School of Education in a large, urban, post 1992 University have been working on a CETL (Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning) research project which focuses on developing secure writing identities in first year Early Years students. Although still a work in progress, it is clear from the data so far collected that the project has provided some suggestions about how lecturers can embed writing activities into subject-specific modules. At the same time the importance of writing development to the whole learning process has been positively highlighted for staff and students alike.

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

- 149 first year students participated in the initial writing sample which was used to diagnose common errors
- Using the simple feedback criteria that went to students:
- 32 students went into the '*generally sound*' column – this meant there were very few errors in the initial piece of writing. (The most common error in this category was misuse of /or missing apostrophes). This group included 2 Dutch students and at least 2 second year part-time students that I could identify.
- 20 students went into the '*should seek support from the Learning Centre before handing work in*' column– this means there was a significant technical

error rate frequently impeding understanding. Of this group 4 were identified as having EAL, 2 as Creole transfer and 2 as self-identified dyslexic, there may, however, be more students with one or more of these literacy difficulties.

97 went into the middle category which indicated that students *should 'proof read their work carefully before handing it in'*. At least one self-identified dyslexic student and several EAL students were included here. This category covered students who evidenced a range of consistent technical errors but whose work was not difficult to read.

- A sample of students was taken from a module that employed a seen exam as its final summative assignment.
- The production of the writing for the summative was therefore the same as that produced for the initial diagnosis.
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- The production of the writing for the summative was therefore the same as that produced for the initial diagnosis.
- Those students who achieved a high assessment for their initial diagnosis generally got a higher grade of B11 or above for their final summative.
- This was above the average for the module as a whole.
- Diagnosis had a wider span of final summative marks ranging from the low Ds up to the top C grades.
- However no student in medium range of diagnostic assessment achieved higher than C10.
- The wide range of summative marks in this category was not surprising as these students had the greatest variation of technical errors.

Policy Implications

Stakeholders:

- University requires a more proactive and systematic approach to writing support. This should include a strong steer from senior management to progress this. This is important to the widening participation agenda, as it helps support all students and enhance their literacy skills set.
- It is important to embed academic writing skills into subject specialism.
- Embedding academic writing skills into the curriculum should also include a diagnostic approach, in order to pick up difficulties early in students' academic careers. This requires a loop to identify difficulties, to provide writing support interventions and feedback.

Sector

- Care should be taken to ensure that academic writing skills should not be approached from a deficit model. Academic writing skills are important to all students and improvements can be made across the range of skills set.

Business Case

- Opportunity: The School of Education are forging ahead with developments in this area. Firstly this is being approached through a proactive, systematic approach to personal tutoring, which provides more support for staff to support students holistically. A large part of the support students will receive will focus on developing their academic and writing skills.
- Risk analysis: In the currently funding climate, it is important to ensure that students achieve and complete. As a result of the widening participation agenda the University of Wolverhampton educates students from a variety of educational

backgrounds. Typically the Institution does not attract students with high level of English and writing skills. Consequently it is important to make this part of their learning experience to aid their achievement. Specifically this helps students who are in the D band to achieve better grades and may impact on graduating grades, however longitudinal research is required to establish this.

- Threats: Work loads and time. Lecturers feel unsupported as a writing developer. They also report that they find difficulty in ensuring they cover the subject curriculum and find it a 'stretch' to also cover writing skills. As a result they prioritise expertise in the taught field. This is also complicated by the Learning Works Programme. The process of learning vs product of subject becomes an important debate. However, blended learning can be used to help embed writing skills and group work is also a counter to this. Lecturers comment that finding time to mark, fitting writing skills into lectures with the curriculum and having no support for as they try to do this, makes academic writing skills more difficult for them to embed.
- Resource implications: Investments need to be made so that the organisation can provide an atmosphere that supports and trains staff to work with academic writing skills.

Expert Contacts

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