

CETL Briefing Papers: Writing Matters

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Aims of the Initiative

For the last three years a team of researchers based in Wolverhampton University's School of Education have been working on a research project which focuses on developing secure writing identities in first year Early Years students. The Early Childhood Studies degree is vocationally based and underpinned with relevant academic theory. Many of the students are qualified, experienced practitioners who entered higher education because workforce development initiatives in early years' educare have encouraged them to study for a degree. Others have worked with children either in a voluntary capacity or in placement or as employment. Many continue to work in early childhood settings whilst completing their degrees. For this reason their entry into higher education often represents a shift from the utilisation of largely practical knowledge in the workplace to a primarily theoretical knowledge base operating in academia. This shift may account for the fact that many students report experiencing anxiety and difficulty around academic writing, especially in their first year.

Description of the Initiative

The main theoretical approach used in this project drew on the New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement (Street 1996). NLS does not treat literacy as one self-evident set of skills which allows people to engage in reading and writing. Rather it argues that people use many literacies (different kinds of reading and writing) in their everyday lives (Barton and Hamilton 1998). These literacies are shaped by their context and purpose. For the sample population of first year Early Years (EY) students, writing was shaped by the expectations and values that inform what constitutes learning within their subject-specialism at university level. Its purpose, meanwhile, was primarily driven by the need to assess that knowledge transfer had taken place.

To try and tease out these purposes, expectations and values the research team began by identifying which writing tasks EY students were being asked to complete on their first year core modules. In line with an NLS approach the team were determined to relocate writing development away from a technicist, skills-based model that focussed on spelling, grammar and punctuation, towards the concept that any writing can only be understood in terms of its context (Lea & Street 2006).

The next stage of the project involved collecting and analysing evidence of students' writing through an initial writing task in order that common writing problems could be identified. First year core tutors were also interviewed to elicit their opinions on what writing development they thought was needed by first years for their module and how best it might be delivered. These interviews revealed that whilst there were problems with some students' grammar, spelling, punctuation and referencing, there was a general, more widespread inability to synthesise course reading effectively and express a clear understanding of concepts and theories in their summative writing. It was clear that writing development support needed to be proactively offered on the programme, but not only to those students obviously needing support, but to all students so that they might improve their performance across the range.

Earlier research by the team on this cohort had revealed that the majority of the students preferred an embedded approach to developing their study skills and confidence in writing Allan & Clarke (2006). This led to a decision by the teaching team to replace the stand alone module study skills module that had previously been offered to all first year students, so that study and skills and writing development could be delivered as an integral part of all first year core modules. The research team worked, with subject specific tutors, to produce writing development activities that reflected the subject matter of the first year core module. These include the use of microthemes, which are short written pieces on a given subject, free writing, double entry journals, peer review activities, note-taking and learning action groups.

Experienced cumulatively, the activities are designed to introduce students to opportunities to practice different kinds of writing and receive structured feedback on how they can improve their writing. These acts of writing are often followed up in class by discussions about writing in higher education, what it actually involves and why written assignments are designed in particular ways. Many of the activities were linked into formative tasks which in turn fed directly into summative assignments.

By restructuring students' experiences of writing as a process of practice, feedback and discussion the team aimed to provide students with some practical scaffolding and reassurance about their writing before they handed in their first piece of assessed work. The activities were also intended to create a greater awareness in staff and students around what was the purpose of each written assignment. Lastly, exposure to the range of activities was intended to deepen students' grasp of what was actually involved in the production of written summatives so that issues such as using secondary sources as evidence, synthesising and analysing a range of theories and expressing a personal point of view had been discussed and debated as part of the whole learning experience (Wall 2006).

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

This work was evaluated for its impact on students and staff in two ways. Initially, the research team worked collaboratively with colleagues teaching on the first year core modules to implement the embedded activities and provide on-going feedback as to their usefulness. One hoped for outcome to this embedded approach was that tutors and students might begin to see writing as not just the final 'product' of their pedagogy or learning (as represented by the production of a summative assignment that would pass assignment criteria) but more as an on-going process which mediated knowledge transfer. Early informal feedback suggests that this may be taking place.

A range of evaluation and feedback tools have been used as part of the project. In addition to formal evaluation instruments, focus groups and research fieldnotes, post-its have been used to provide an immediate response. As the following typical quotes show many of the students made perceptive comments about how the completing a microtheme had helped them to articulate ideas through their writing:

"(it) helped me look at things and put them into my own way of thinking."

The use of the double entry journals encouraged some students in *"the development of a more academic style of writing,"* providing *"different way(s) of recording information"*.

There were also many instances of students talking reflectively about the process of writing as activities helped them to

“identify the difficulties of developing reasoned arguments.”

Tutors feedback agreed that double entry journals, free writing and unassessed writing activities had created valuable opportunities for students to produce reflective and critical writing as part of their work on a module as

“(They) helped (students) to process information rather than reiterate (what they had read).”

Some tutors also suggested that writing development activities had encouraged students to make useful links between their reading and writing. As one tutor wrote;

“...by encouraging them to explore the real focus or meaning of what they read... put(ing) students in a position to avoid being descriptive or anecdotal”.

In terms of developing reading, all the tutors felt that focusing on writing created space for students to self-consciously consider how and for what reason they were reading. This resulted they felt, in students, reading “purposefully” and “being able to identify weaknesses” in their own reading practices. This was also reflected in students’ feedback that often made connections between reading and the embedded writing activities.

Secondly, a participatory action research approach was implemented. Context-specific; it only involved students in the first year of their degree and it looked to the future; any change resulting from the project were to feed in to subsequent iterations of the modules. This study started by concentrating on minor changes to pedagogic practice in the research setting, which participating individuals could manage and control. However, the long-term aim is that such small changes may eventually lead to more extensive patterns of change around our curriculum design and delivery.

The researchers worked with eight fellow module lecturers to deliver both subject specialist content and embedded writing development activities. In this respect the project helped us to realise the transformative potential of action research. The double-entry journal activities were carried out as part of everyday practice because one of the main reasons for undertaking the research was to improve our understanding of what we were trying to get the students to learn and how we went about teaching them (Mejia 2001). In the researchers’ role as insider, researcher-practitioners, an in-depth knowledge of the students was enjoyed; the curriculum that they were following and the written assessment tasks that they would ultimately undertake. The researchers were therefore able to tailor the development of writing interventions to students’ learning needs. This last step was particularly challenging considering the increasing diversity of students on our programme. Whilst there may be conflicts of interest related to the triple role of lecturer, colleague and researcher, for example, the issue of students’ or colleagues’ willingness to give honest answers.

This project sought to explore if the use of DEJs could help establish some degree of meta-cognition around the process of producing writing for education purposes, which would support students beyond their first year. The reflective feedback with students seems to suggest that it had begun this process.

With regard to reflective and critical writing skills, there were many instances of students talking reflectively about the process of writing as the double entry journal had helped them to Identify the difficulties of developing reasoned arguments and

aided student's ability to discuss and compare a range of opinions on any given subject.

Using DEJs across the course in different modules provided students' with opportunities to develop analytical skills such as transferring knowledge, understanding different arguments and experimenting with linking different points of view and arguments in their own writing. Knowledge and understanding of the issues and subjects covered by the use of DEJs appeared to be improved. Often student and lecturer classroom discussion and reflection about the activity focussed on the importance of challenging theories rather than taking them at face value. Overall lecturers and students felt that DEJs reinforced what had been taught in lectures and this accentuated the importance of research and reading around the subject. As well as engaging students with a wide range of often difficult reading material DEJs helped support students to actively use a range of reading to support their own arguments and to read them more critically.

In terms of developing more confidence and competence in their writing generally DEJs appeared to give students' a greater awareness of the role writing plays in articulating and presenting one's ideas within a written assignment.

Many students also mentioned how chunking, or breaking down materials for the DEJs had helped when it came to organising or structuring their ideas for summative assessments. It also focussed attention on what were the most useful quotes to use in their work. As such DEJs were often taken up by students as a useful starting point or planning tool for summative assessments, as the following response identifies;

When commenting on the usefulness of this writing activity, students frequently stated that although the DEJ had been initially challenging, the process of doing it and any subsequent feedback or discussion had been helpful.

In general, lecturers found the DEJs reasonably straightforward to deliver although it was felt that the sooner and more often they could be used with students, the more useful and effective they became. In particular tutors valued the DEJs as a tool for expanding students' awareness of what was expected of them in terms of reading and writing as undergraduates. The activity raised issues for lecturers not only about what students read but how they read, highlighting the process-led focus of the DEJ activity.

Reported disadvantages of using DEJs revealed that it was important to explain exactly how they worked and to think about when they were introduced to students.

It was also important that enough time was allowed for the activity to be carried out. Several students found the experience 'rushed' and the environment 'too noisy to concentrate'.

However the majority of lecturer views suggested that double entry journals are useful but very time consuming but in the long run, useful and effective

Clearly it is important to recognise that DEJs, like any learning activity may not be the best way of working for everyone. The need for a diverse range of learning activities echoed the aims of the project as a whole. These acknowledged from the start that students have different learning preferences. Whilst staff and students became accustomed to the different interventions, it was identified that the use of DEJs could

become time consuming and occasionally, despite support and discussion, some students experienced difficulty in interpreting quotes/information for the task.

Overall the student and lecturer feedback on DEJs suggested that our students were beginning to understand that when writing for academic purposes they were engaged in a process of making meaning, in order that understanding and knowledge transfer could take place.

DEJs, along with other interventions, helped lecturers introduce, though their subject specific material, the idea that students' understanding will often evolve and change as they interact with different sources of information and ideas. The importance of reflection, again aided by the use of DEJs was crucial to this growing understanding. Lastly, DEJs were shown, in this study, to have encouraged students to experiment with developing their writing before embarking on their all important summative assignment writing.

Policy Implications

Stakeholders

- Effective teaching leads to greater learning and enhanced learning experience

Business Case

- Effective teaching leads to greater learning and enhanced learning experience. Further this leads progression, greater retention and ultimately to graduation.

Expert Contacts and Links

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