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Bridging the pedagogical gap between school and university: a small-scale enquiry into 'academic preparedness'.

Academic biographies

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Abstract

The primary aim of this small-scale research project was to investigate whether there is a need to bridge the gap between transitions from school to university in terms of supporting new entrants to university courses with academic writing. Further to this aim was a desire to focus on the increased need in the university sector to consider student retention and progression, particularly from the first to the second year of degree courses. In 2008/9 "Academic Writing Sessions" were introduced within the authors' institution as a compulsory aspect of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree course for all first year undergraduates. It was hypothesised at the time that these sessions would influence the standard of student writing, the students' understanding of the process and, perhaps even contribute to their overall progress through the course of their degree. Evaluation of the project resulted in a number of key findings, which supported the view that the "Academic Writing Sessions" were effective and that these needed to be developed in the future with the possibility of them being integral to each year of the course rather than just at the start of the

first year. One further and important finding that emerged from the research was that assessment methods used in Higher Education do not always reflect the needs of the work place and of the students. The study also supported the view that university curricula should not be primarily skills-based but should encompass what is known as the "Academic Literacies Approach" as a means of bridging the pedagogical gap between school and university. In all, seven key themes emerged from the project, which offer strong support for views expressed within the wider literature. Since commencing the research, many improvements to practice have already occurred within the authors' institution and continue to impact on the B.Ed. degree programme.

Key words: Pedagogy, undergraduate study, academic writing

Introduction

To begin a course of Higher Education is for many students to begin a period of uncertainty and confusion. Whether the transition is from school or work, or even from a previous year of study in the same institution, students often only have the slightest idea of what to expect. (Ramsden, 1992: 126)

Each year in the United Kingdom (UK) students from a wide and diverse range of backgrounds arrive at universities to begin their Bachelor of Education degree, which will equip them to work as teachers. Many will have had a variety of previous educational experiences and not all will have the skills and knowledge base that is a prerequisite for writing academically and in the manner required at university level where critical reflection and coherence of argument are central to many written tasks. In reality, many of these "beginning" students may not have been required to write academically for many years, and in some cases, never at all. This reality takes on a greater status when we consider the growth in numbers taking degrees. In the thirty years between the mid sixties and the mid nineties the number of students taking degrees jumped to 800 percent. In the same period, staffing numbers in universities increased dramatically. Bamber (2002:435) has offered the following figures:

(numbers)... grew from 15,750 to 100,000 full-time teaching or research staff, and 24,600 part-time (Farnham, 1999, p.214)...Higher education(HE) changed from an elite to almost a mass education provision, catering for a third of school leavers in the United Kingdom overall, and 45% in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Farnham, 1999, p.214).

For many students, transition from school to university is typically viewed as moving from a structured sixth form either in a school or Further Education (FE) college studying 'GCE A' Levels, to traditional university courses where they are expected to 'read' for a degree. In the case of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree there is, unlike more academic degrees, more of an emphasis on "professional" and "practice" elements, which do not require rigorous academic writing. Significantly, however, many tutors who have entered university lecturing within the last decade, having themselves made the transition from school to university teaching, report that they cannot pinpoint any specific guidance or teaching on how to write academically. In reality, many "find their own way" through this. This article explores, through a case study of one department in a university, how new entrants to a degree course preparing them to be teachers, are inducted to write academically. This article offers an account of a small scale investigation into how new entrants to the B.Ed. degree were inducted to write academically in one department of a university.

Assessing intentions or outcomes: pedagogy or practice

Assessment

Designing an appropriate curriculum is at the core of effective teaching and learning in Higher Education (Light and Cox 2004: 70). Much recent research (Lavelle 1993, 1997, 2003; Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Turner 2001; Boscolo *et al* 2007) has focused upon the designing of different courses at university level with most studies

concluding that assessment, at the end of a module or unit, is crucial to our understanding of actual learning. Biggs (1999:43) has made the point thus, *"(assessment)...tells us how well students have learned what we intended them to learn, and at what level."* It appears imperative, therefore, when designing a curriculum, and the modules within this curriculum, that the outcomes, and their consequent assessment are given very careful consideration. In short, university tutors need to identify at the outset what they require of students in terms of their actual learning and to plan for this accordingly. This goes beyond the requirements made upon trainee teachers to meet the standards necessary to become a teacher (Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education, cited in (DFES, 2003). In the United Kingdom (UK) these Standards note that "assessment and giving feedback" is one of its six areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values. This emphasis reflects the importance that is given to the assessment process; a process, which arguably, is not nearly as well developed, or as helpful to students as it could be. Norton (2007:93) articulates the views of others and has commented on tutors who have previously worked in schools:

"...assessment is sometimes the last thing that we think about when designing our courses. We tend to think about the curriculum and what should be covered and only when that has been determined do we turn our attention to how we might assess what our students have learned."

The idea of leaving decisions on assessment procedures as 'the last thing' is further addressed by Biggs (1999:43) who offers a useful structure to what might be included in a Higher Education curriculum:

- 1) Decide what kind of knowledge is to be involved.
- 2) Select the topics to teach.
- 3) The purpose for teaching the topic, and hence the level of knowledge desirable for students to acquire.

4) Putting the package of objectives together and relating them to assessment tasks so that the results can be reported as a final grade.

In the UK, students taking B.Ed. degrees are typically taught by university lecturers who have worked previously as teachers in primary and post primary schools. The experience of teaching, learning and assessment for many of these university lecturers when working in schools followed the following principle – decide upon assessment at the planning stage, and then share with the children: what they will learn, why they will be learning and how their learning will be of use and how it will be assessed (Geens, James, and MacBlain, 2009). This principle is not, however, always the case in Higher Education. Although it is clear that assessment is central to any curriculum, in that it informs the course designers how ‘well’ the students have achieved and then, perhaps, how the course has met the needs of the students, it can be argued that assessment should also be considered as the vehicle by which the students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the topic that they are studying. As such, it should be concurrent with curriculum planning. Indeed, Ramsden (1992:124) has suggested that, “...good teaching involves monitoring and improving the effectiveness of the curriculum, how it is taught, and how students are assessed.” Surely, then, this should feed into best practice in university teaching where tutors should be sharing the thinking behind assessment with the students and supporting, and facilitating, their success in this aspect of their learning.

If university tutors are to monitor and improve the effectiveness of the curriculum, then they should consider the skills which students need to have in order to participate in the assessment. For many university tutors, the experience of marking the written work of new entrants reveals that many struggle with academic writing. Perhaps this is not unexpected. Lillis and Turner (2001:58) comment:

That the student-writers should struggle with the conventions of an institution which is strange to them, is not surprising. However, this strangeness is compounded by the fact that such conventions are treated as if they were ‘common sense’ and communicated through wordings as if these were transparently meaningful.

Assuring quality

In her work researching the quality of undergraduate university writing, Lavelle (2003:92) found that although there were many “calls for writing across the curriculum” (Shaw, 1999; Zamel, 2000), Academic Writing Sessions were, on the whole, not adequately integrated into the curriculum. Although she did note that some universities offered support for academic writing in terms of composition, she also concluded that:

“Writing composition skills should be taught both in general and as specific to the discipline, and this instruction should be ongoing over the duration of the university years.”

This view takes on much greater significance when closer consideration is given to the range of “writing” experiences that students now undertaking B.Ed. degrees have had, prior to enrolling at university. The situation has, indeed, changed over the last two decades with students from a much greater diversity of backgrounds seeking entry to B.Ed. degrees. Scott (2005:298), for example, has drawn attention to the proposition that, in the past, university tutors have been able to expect a similar level of educational experience and academic practice from their “new entrants” whereas, in the past two decades, this has changed markedly with the present situation being that, “...our students now represent multifarious histories, expectations and responses...” The UK is not alone in this. A study in Italy by Boscolo *et al* (2007) concluded that academic writing was ‘particularly demanding’ for their undergraduates as they arrived at university from a range of school ‘types’. They found that schools placed a varying

importance on the place of academic writing so that whilst some students were well prepared, and proficient in writing for academia, others were not with some even being unaware of the importance of writing in a critical and reflective manner, and were more accustomed to writing descriptive reports as opposed to synthesising multiple sources.

Bridging the ‘pedagogical gap’ becomes more complex when one considers the differing levels of maturity of students and what effect this may have on their academic preparedness. Earwaker (1992:82) suggests, that although it may be deemed higher education’s task to “...bring about the academic and personal development of students, we have to acknowledge that growth towards maturity occurs spontaneously and takes place independently of higher education”. Many of these issues are encapsulated by Ramsden (1992:82) in his Student Learning in Context Model (see Figure 1.).

Ramsden’s model demonstrates the influencing factors on learning and outcome which university tutors need to take

into consideration when planning a curriculum to support academic writing. This is especially fundamental when bridging the gap between school, or previous educational experience, and university. Ramsden (1992) presents the idea that students’ orientation to learning and studying will also have an effect on their approach to a task and the consequent outcome. A student’s previous educational experience will have encouraged them to acquire deep or surface approaches to learning which they will bring with them to university (Ramsden,1991a). He describes how a student, accomplished in using deep approaches to learning, will have an intrinsic interest in the task at hand, therefore, providing “...fertile ground for attempts to impose meaning and structure.” (1992: 64) whilst a surface approach will lead to frustration with the student having to “...resort to strategies requiring the minimum of interaction with the task”. This is of particular importance when addressing academic writing practices. The more recent work of Lavelle (2003), considered alongside some of her previous work (Lavelle 1993, 1997; Lavelle and

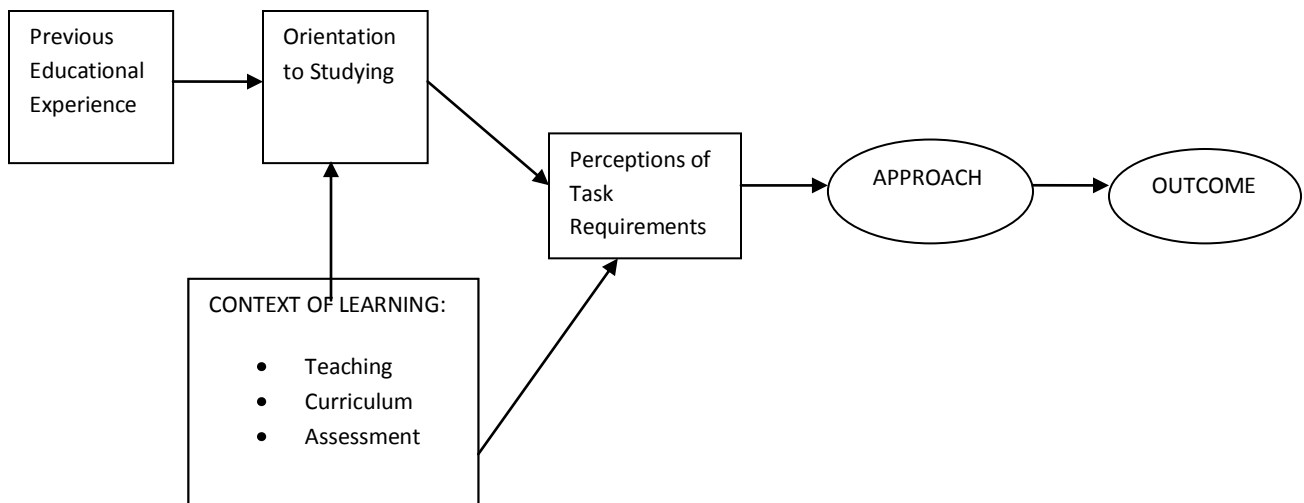


Figure 1: Student Learning in Context Model – Ramsden (1992:82)

Guarino, 2001), also comments upon deep and surface approaches having considered the quality of undergraduates' university writing:

Deep writing outcomes would reflect hierarchical organisation, personalisation or self-referencing, concern for audience, and integration. Surface writing outcomes would include linear organisation, lack of personalisation or personal involvement, little audience concern or a low degree of integration, and much superfluous or tangential material (Lavelle 2003: 89).

Surely, then, it is the responsibility of university tutors to ensure that they design learning contexts that quickly encourage and develop these deep approaches to learning and writing. Such a position is supported by Marton *et al* (1997) cited in Lea and Street (1998:2) who suggest that it is the role of the university tutor to:

...induct students into a new 'culture', that of the academy. [Tutors should focus]... on student orientation to learning and interpretation of learning tasks, through conceptualisation, for instance, of a distinction between 'deep', 'surface' and 'strategic' approaches to learning.

If tutors do not induct their students into deep approaches to learning and writing, then it can be argued that they are, in effect, limiting their students' experience and possible future success whilst studying at university.

In their study of student writing, Lea and Street (1998:1) discuss an '*Academic Literacies*' approach to learning in higher education which has been developed from the area of 'new literacy studies' (Street, 1984; Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995). This is a practical approach to learning the conventions of academia focussing on student reading and writing within disciplines whilst taking "...account of the cultural and contextual component of writing and reading practices." They state that "...educational research into student writing in higher education has fallen into three main perspectives or models: 'study skills'; 'academic socialisation'; and '*Academic Literacies*'." They

believe that each perspective encapsulates the other and that, in teaching and in research:

...addressing specific skills issues around student writing... takes on entirely different meanings if the context is solely that of study skills, if the process is seen as part of academic socialisation, or if it is viewed more broadly as an aspect of the whole institutional and epistemological context.

Therefore, it is imperative to consider each of these perspectives as integral when constructing a means by which we support students beginning academic writing. Sutton (2009:2), however, has suggested, that the process is more complicated than might, at first hand, be thought:

Acquiring academic literacy, just like any other form of literacy, means that students acquire a new way of knowing the world and making sense of their experience and themselves. Thus, academic literacy has epistemological and ontological dimensions. Learning to read and write within an academic context, therefore, involves a complex set of psychosocial processes. Therefore, the problems experienced by students trying to acquire academic literacy are not simply construed as a skills deficit or a failure to acculturate adequately to academic norms and practices. Such problems are construed as emerging from "the gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretation" (Street 2004:15), and from the institutional power relations within which feedback is imbricated. As Lea and Street (1998: 3) argue, the *Academic Literacies* approach "views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of discourse and power.

One issue alluded to previously in this study was the 'transparency' of the curriculum and language used when working with students at the start of their university education. It is true that as lecturers who have experienced our own university careers we (the authors) have, on occasions, found the curriculum and language in our own institution to be anything but transparent. It is little wonder then, that students who have not had any

experience of academia may find it difficult to understand what is expected of them when writing an essay. Lillis and Turner (2001:58), concur with this view as they found, "...terminology widely used by tutors and/or guidelines to name academic writing conventions raised more questions than answers." Additionally, they build upon research by Hounsell (1987) and Norton (1990) by quoting Lea and Street (1998) who interviewed lecturers about academic writing. These interviews illuminated that:

...whilst lecturers foregrounded notions of *argument* and *structure* as key elements to successful writing, they were unable to specify exactly what they meant by those terms. (58)

This is a concern both to ourselves as lecturers, who have had to 'learn' the terminology of academia in order to support the students, and the students who are having to 'grapple' with the current expectations of Academic Literacies. Who is to say who has the 'best' or most 'correct' understanding of this language? How can the language or curriculum be presented as transparent if there is not a shared, common understanding of the terminology? Lea and Street (1998:1) go some way in answering these questions:

...in order to understand the nature of academic learning, it is important to investigate the understandings of both academic staff and students about their own literacy practices, without making prior assumptions as to which practices are either appropriate or effective.

A further and perhaps more concerning proposition is that students new to university are prevented from taking risks, from seeking to engage with their tutors who they see from the outset as "experts" not to be questioned. This point is particularly poignant when we consider those students who are engaged in training to become teachers and who will be charged with the development of young minds later on in their professional careers. Fisher (2009:2) puts the case succinctly:

For student teachers to be empowered to move from absolutist beliefs to challenge the 'experts', we need to create a 'risk-taking' environment; a student who does not feel able to engage in this way at university is unlikely to create such conditions in their own classroom.

This clearly raises the issue of staff development within institutions to ensure a shared understanding of the skills we wish the students to acquire and how best this might be achieved.

The Project

The project came about following an initial study focussing on the transition of a university lecturer from teaching in a primary classroom to teaching in Higher Education. This project illuminated concerns that students at university were perhaps not supported adequately enough in their learning or assessment at university which was the opposite practice to that promoted to students entering their own primary teaching careers. It was concluded that perhaps adult learners needed to be supported in their learning as children are in the primary school, otherwise they may be set up to fail. The primary aim of the project was to investigate whether there was a need to bridge the gap between transitions from school to university in terms of supporting new entrants to university courses with academic writing. The project also focused upon the increased emphasis within the university sector to consider student retention and progression, particularly from the first to the second year of degree courses. In 2008/9 "Academic Writing Sessions" were introduced within the authors' institution as a compulsory aspect of the B.Ed. degree course for all first year undergraduates. It was hypothesised at the time that these sessions would influence the standard of student writing, the students' understanding of the process and, perhaps even contribute to their overall progress through the course of their degree. Evaluation of the project resulted in a number of key findings, which supported the view that the "Academic Writing Sessions" were effective and that these

needed to be developed in the future with the possibility of them being integral to each year of the course rather than just at the start of the first year. One further and important finding that emerged from the research was that assessment methods used in Higher Education do not always reflect the needs of the work place and of the students. The study also supported the view that university curricula should not be primarily skills-based but should encompass what is known as the “Academic Literacies Approach” as a means of bridging the pedagogical gap between school and university. In all, seven key themes emerged from the project, which offer strong support for views expressed within the wider literature. Since commencing the research, improvements to practice have already occurred within the authors’ institution and continue to do so.

Although the first year students obviously wanted to complete the assignments to the best of their ability by taking “ways of knowing” (Baker *et al*, 1995) and of “writing from one course into another” (Lea and Street, 1998:6), this was not always successful as the expectations for this particular course at this particular institution were different to what they had experienced before. One possible explanation for this is offered by Wankowski (1991:62) who suggests that this “pedagogical gap in transition from school to university” could be due to the structure of the courses the students had been engaged in previously. He asserts, “academic over-compliance, rigidity in learning styles and undue dependence on routines and teachers...” in sixth forms can sometimes be the cause of a loss of competence on entering university when suddenly “the student who was trained to depend on others has to learn how to learn by himself.” (1991: 63). Light and Cox (2004:79) advance this argument noting, “...the balance between giving support... and encouraging independence” is a precarious one. They suggest:

Support from teachers (and fellow participants) needs to be matched by

challenging tasks, the opportunity to take risks with new ways of working and the opportunity to rethink many of the assumptions which have served well in the past...

Methodology

It was recognized from the outset that evaluation of something as complex as an exploration of the gap between transitions from school to university in terms of supporting new entrants with their academic writing, with its huge number of variables was a difficult task. To this end the authors chose to adopt a philosophical position whereby data that was gained would be seen as a means by which further hypotheses could be derived; these could, in turn, act as focal points for future analysis and direction, which would inform our own practice as well as that of colleagues in our own institution and elsewhere. At the centre of our thinking were the following four questions:

- How are new entrants to university courses supported in the development of their academic writing?
- Are the challenges associated with academic writing experienced by new entrants a contributory factor in retention rates?
- Are the difficulties associated with academic writing that are experienced by some new entrants a contributory factor to their poor progress?
- Was the introduction of “Academic Writing Sessions” introduced in the authors’ institution in 2008-9 of any real value in terms of developing the students’ understanding of the process by which they were examined?

Through triangulation of the students’ work, questionnaires from staff, and sources from the literature it was hoped to establish if and how the Academic Writing Sessions were successful and to explore how an analysis of these could inform future practice and, in doing so, to,

"...ensure validity and reliability..." of subsequent findings (Sharp, 2009: 46).

Participants

Five student participants were chosen from a selection of marked assignments for the first year module 'Learning for the 21st Century'. This module involved the students in reflecting upon themselves as learners, the rationale being that they would then project their thinking onto their future School Based practice with children. Assessment for this module took two forms; completion of a Learning Journal, which facilitated the students in tracking their own progress during the first year of their degree and a 1000 word rationale accompanying their Learning Journal. A sample of these Learning Journals was used for the purposes of this study, with the correct permissions being obtained from each student. The participants were chosen as their writing reflected the impact of the Academic Writing Sessions.

Data Sources

Data were gathered primarily through personal accounts completed by five students. Questionnaires were also given to fourteen university college tutors, three of whom taught the students on the 'Learning for the 21st Century' module whilst the others taught across the B.Ed. course.

Findings and Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative evidence, led to the identification of seven overarching themes apparent in all collected data. Closer analysis offered support for key findings referred to within the literature and go some way to explaining the focus of enquiry central to this study. Themes that emerged were:

- 1) Bringing past educational experiences to university writing;

- 2) How the Academic Writing workshops were useful to the students and impacted on their practice;
- 3) Deep, surface and strategic approaches to learning and writing;
- 4) The notion that students know best how they learn and how tutors can support them;
- 5) How ongoing support for Academic Writing would be beneficial to the learning process;
- 6) How differentiated sessions may help them improve upon specific areas within their writing;
- 7) How the process of becoming a proficient writer/student may also be linked to a growing maturity.

Each theme will now be analysed through triangulation of student and staff data and linked to relevant research referred to in the wider literature.

Theme 1. Bringing past educational experiences to university writing

Four out of five students noted how their past educational experiences had had a bearing on their university writing. For example, Student A describes how, before starting university, she completed a Diploma in Childcare and Education before becoming a nanny for two and a half years. She notes how what she learnt during this practical experience was much greater than what was learnt in sixth form and relates this to the university experience. Whilst she recognises the importance of lectures and seminars at university as 'vital' to her becoming a teacher, she feels the practical element of the course will be when she learns most.

"I have realised I learn best when actually physically doing something rather than learning about it. For example, I studied a Diploma in Childcare and Education and learnt about many aspects of looking after children and then became a nanny... Looking back I learnt far more from looking after the children than I did whilst at sixth form, although it formed the basis of what I

needed to know in order to carry out my job successfully... I predict that whilst the lectures and seminars during this course will be vital in me becoming a teacher, I know that the school experience will be when I learn the most."

The importance placed by some students on 'physically doing something rather than learning about it' was investigated by Hamley (2006) in an earlier study where she considered kinaesthetic and physical approaches to the school day as having a bearing on motivation, attitude and consequent attainment. This again reflects the need to share good practice between school and university.

Student E, journal entry 10, discusses how, when given time to reflect and perhaps digest information, she is able to see how the theory she is learning in university can be applied to experience on teaching placement. This almost adds another layer to the theme; bringing school to university then, conversely, university to school.

"Now that I have understood some of my learning patterns from the past I am starting to see how my learning even in the first few months of university has been changing, my first example is using extracts from my 'Reflective Logs' from placement... I started off simply describing the events of the day, and not really linking this to any university gained knowledge or practice, and have gradually moved on to elaborate on what I have seen in the classroom and surmise reasons behind the practice and how it links in with teaching styles and learning theories which I have read and studied, making better links between school and university."

Student B comments upon how her experience of sixth form did not prepare her for having to write a reference list at university. This is supported by Baker *et al* (1995) describing how students take 'ways of knowing' from one institution or course to another. If these 'ways of knowing' did not exist in prior experience, it is up to the present experience to teach this new way of knowing.

Student B goes on to detail how the Academic Writing Sessions supported her in doing this, therefore going some way in bridging the pedagogical gap between school and university. Indeed, student B believes that she has "...gotten past the barrier of writing for university".

"I have become more confident when completing assignments... After starting university I have found the transition from A-Level academic style of writing to university style of writing quite difficult... There is help for academic writing, which I will definitely be using from now on..."

Tutor 3 also commented on this theme by noting that "...some students may have taken A-levels which have not required essay writing." Tutor 6 also concurred with this point by suggesting that:

"Some, perhaps the majority of students need support to adapt to the different requirements for academic writing necessary to achieve well at university. These skills are sometimes not within the students' experience during studying prior to the course. It is therefore an important skill that we should help them to develop."

Such a view offers support for the argument that students would benefit significantly from undertaking an "Academic Literacies" approach, thus focussing on the 'study skills' and 'academic socialisation', ensuring that students are not only inducted into the 'study skills' aspect of academic writing but are able to experience the process as a whole (Lea and Street, 1998: 2).

Tutors 12 and 13, also identified this need to experience the process as a whole in addition to developing their 'study skills'.

"If academic writing (and its quality) is such a large part of the overall course and the determinant of their degree mark, then I think these sessions should be continued as how else can we expect students to improve/build upon their academic writing skills unless we teach them."

"I would like to see them as part of an on-going, developmental approach to critical reading and writing."

Tutor 11 succinctly highlights the idea of supporting the students through the whole process by commenting:

"Coming to Uni is an exciting experience, yet daunting too. I am not sure that as tutors we have always recognised the importance of taking them from where they are and moving them forward in terms of readiness for academic study."

Theme 2. How the Academic Writing workshops were useful to the students and impacted on their practice

This second theme has been addressed succinctly in the staff questionnaires with question 5: "In your opinion, have you noticed any difference in the work produced by the B.Ed. 1 cohort this year in comparison to previous years?" Nine of the respondents answered 'yes'. The 'yes' respondents noted how the common improvements were the depth of wider reading and referencing, how the standard of writing was higher at an earlier stage in the course and that the students' awareness of criticality was stronger and more pronounced than in previous years. Two tutors answered 'no', and put this down to the students' lack of reading, in the worse examples, and poor Literacy skills such as spelling and punctuation. Overall, then, this suggests that the Academic Writing Sessions have had a positive impact on the students' work. It would be interesting here to be able to look at the mark profile of all the students and to track this alongside those students who attended the sessions and those who did not as those tutors who taught on the Academic Writing Sessions noted how there were many non-attendees. Perhaps this has something to do with student maturity and the fact that they may not have realised the value of attending these sessions at the start of their course.

Theme 3. Deep, surface and strategic approaches to learning and writing

Student D clearly hinted at her deep approach to learning and writing at university in her detailed annotations of her self-assessment form submitted with her assignment. This illustrated a deep and intrinsically motivated approach to academic learning and writing but it is fascinating to note the differing approaches these five students take to their writing, be it deep, surface or strategic.

Drawing upon the work of Biggs' (1999) and Lavelle (2003) who have researched these approaches it became clear that it is not always appreciated to what extent such approaches had impacted upon students' engagement with the Academic Writing Sessions or indeed the consequent outcomes of completing their assignments.

Student B's journal entries are illuminating when read together. She details how the Academic Writing Sessions have influenced her work and how she "...look(s) forward to improving" in the future as her learning progresses but then discusses how the result (mark) she will get remains an "...anxious thought." This suggests that although this student may use deep approaches to learning and writing, she is extrinsically motivated by the thought of the 'mark' to be received as a result of her work. It can be argued, however, that no student, at any level, can honestly say that they are not extrinsically motivated by doing well. Even on receiving a disappointing mark, student E attempted to use this to motivate herself to do better next time by commenting as follows:

"...I could learn from it and use it as a driving force behind my endeavours for my next essay attempt!"

Perhaps this is demonstrating a more surface or even strategic approach to writing. As such, surely it would be imperative for tutors to take note of this and perhaps guide and monitor her progress. As noted previously by Ramsden (1992), any such surface approach will lead to frustration, resulting in the student having to, "...resort to

strategies requiring the minimum of interaction with the task.” This can only limit their learning. In considering future Academic Writing workshops, one of the tutors involved in teaching the sessions during the study would like to see:

“...students to draw up their own action plans re academic work, to be reviewed regularly by them following assignment hand back, noting points for development etc...and (to) be discussed in personal tutorials too.”

This leads succinctly to theme 4 and the consideration of consulting students about their own learning.

Theme 4. The notion that students know best how they learn and how tutors can support them

Reading the journal entries of each student demonstrates that they either already had a clear understanding of how they learn best or that the tasks designed to encourage them to reflect on their learning as part of the ‘Learning for the 21st Century’ module illuminated this for them. Hence, it seems imperative that we consult the students to see what support they would like with their academic reading and writing practices in the future as their needs may vary. This consultation would have a positive effect on the students’ self-esteem when considering their own learning, consequently raising motivation and attainment (Hamley, 2004). This links with Lea and Street’s study (1998) where they highlight the importance of consulting both students and tutors when considering the teaching of “*Academic Literacies*”.

This view is reinforced by Tutor 6 who, when asked to note any further observations useful to the study, commented that,

“...tutors should explore the students’ ideas about this subject.”

This brings the argument back to the idea of transparency of curriculum and language used and how imperative this

is to the process of being effective in improving the quality of student academic writing (Lillis and Turner, 2001).

The following two themes, “How ongoing support for Academic Writing would be beneficial to the learning process” (Theme 5) and “How differentiated sessions may help them improve upon specific areas within their writing” (Theme 6) are inherently linked and reflect the conclusions made by a number of tutors.

Academic writing within the B.Ed. programme can be for different purposes; reflection, critical analysis, critical explanation and so on, and it could be argued that each type of writing, whilst requiring different skills sets coupled with supporting practice in school, can also be viewed as leading to the dissertation writing process and, as such, should be seen as a developmental process with students requiring support at different stages. This is reflected in the staff questionnaires when tutors state how Academic Writing support should be ongoing and not just something that occurs as a ‘one off’ at the start of the first year of the B.Ed. degree.

Much of the literature considered discusses how students entering higher education now come from a variety of diverse backgrounds and educational experiences (Ramsden, 1992; Lea and Street, 1998; Scott, 2005), how higher education should bring about the academic and personal development of a student (Earwaker, 1992), and how there are differing areas of academic writing to be addressed throughout the duration of this process (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Lavelle, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that if universities are to support students from the point of transition, then this should be offered as continuous support through to the completion of the B.Ed. degree. This is furthered by student B who says: “*I should look for more guidance...so that my academic writing style becomes more prominent and confident,*” and student A who notes a lack of confidence in academic writing. Perhaps differentiated

sessions in small groups would aid both of these students in their academic writing careers.

Many tutors also asserted the importance of differentiation and related it back to primary school practice (Tutors 4, 6, 7, 10, 12 and 13). Tutors 7 and 13 more specifically highlighted how students receiving marks below 50% would need support different to that required of those above 50%; a key point to be taken to following practice.

Theme 7. How the process of becoming a proficient writer/student may also be linked to a growing maturity

This theme is underpinned by the work of Earwaker (1992) who has discussed how the induction of students into academia often occurs in tandem with the process of maturation experienced by many, perhaps younger, students. In the final paragraph of her reflective essay student C states:

“Over the past few months, I feel like something has changed. My approach to university has become far more positive, as a person I feel healthier and happier, in general life seems to be going well. Whether it be something to do with “growing up”, experiencing what each one of us do in our early twenties or whether it be due to the massive influence this module has had on every part of my learning, I’m not sure.”

This insight into student C’s thoughts demonstrates the process of induction into academia as occurring concurrently with the process of maturation and is something that we, as course designers, need to take into account. Student D expands on this maturation process further by suggesting that:

“It is almost as if becoming an adult, and becoming more independent has opened up a whole new world of knowledge that I was unaware of before.”

Eliciting evidence for this theme from the staff questionnaires has proved more elusive. Tutors have only

alluded to the idea of competency in Academic Writing occurring alongside a growth into maturity. Three out of the four tutors who taught the sessions commented on poor attendance by some students. Tutor 11 noted that this could have been an “attitudinal thing” which could have been attributed to a possible lack in maturity or understanding as to why these sessions were important. When talking about the need to have differentiated groups, Tutor 7 asserts:

“However it is of course complicated by the huge variation in effort applied to the early assignments by different students. Some bright ones party too much and hand in weak assignments that do not really reflect their abilities or needs.”

So, perhaps it is necessary that we consider a multiplicity of factors when planning differentiated sessions to support students in academic reading and writing in the future. Other areas for consideration which were noted by tutors were:

- To consider the structure of the sessions i.e. were whole cohort lectures followed by sessions the best method for teaching?
- How groups would have benefitted from being smaller in size.
- How students benefitted from the support of the tutors and by working with their peers.

Conclusions

The original aim of this research project was to investigate whether there was a need to bridge the gap between transitions from school to university and to explore further the increasingly important focus in universities of the need to consider student retention and progression, particularly from the first year of the degree into the second. At the heart of the project was the evaluation of “Academic Writing Sessions” introduced in 2008-9 as a compulsory aspect of the course in terms of their potential positive

influence on the standard of student writing, the students' understanding of the assessment process by which they were examined, and the extent to which these sessions might support their progress throughout the course of their degree.

The key findings of the research strongly indicated that the "Academic Writing Sessions" were deemed to be effective by both students and staff and needed to be developed in the future with the possibility of these sessions becoming integral to each year of the course rather than just at the start of the first year.

Seven key themes were elicited from the research, which provided support for the broader literature. Although numbered, these themes are not intended to be hierarchical. Each theme needs to be considered concurrently in order for a comprehensive level of support to be provided for the students in induction to academic reading and writing. It is evident that although these themes can impact on the curriculum design, there are still many areas related to our enquiry which need further research. For example, it would be useful to track student progress across each year group measuring the impact of each differentiated session on student progress. It would be interesting to link this specifically to the project looking at retention and progression of students and to see if ongoing Academic support could be part of that retention. Through further reading, it has been suggested that the assessment methods used in Higher Education perhaps do not reflect the needs of the work place. With that in mind, perhaps it is time to look at the assessment methods employed and look to how these could embody the skills required in the workplace whilst still demonstrating academic rigour.

Looking towards the 2009-10 academic year, many improvements to practice have already occurred without conscious intervention of our research, but through tutor discussion. The sessions are now focussed on "Academic

Reading and Writing" rather than just writing. The idea of supporting the students with their writing has been included in a further first year module where the students will complete a short piece of work, engage in self-assessment of their work and receive formative, one-to-one feedback from a marking tutor before going away to complete their work before final submission. The students should then draw upon this support to help move their development forward. Other improvements include:

- An introduction to using electronic resources and journal articles in the first term of the first year rather than leaving it until the second year. This should encourage the students to engage in much wider reading to support their critical analysis and writing.
- One of the authors, and another tutor will be collating feedback forms from three assignments the students will be completing in the Autumn term and designing differentiated workshops for the Spring term to support the highlighted needs accordingly.
- The department will be undergoing an INSET session on marking and moderation, hopefully including the themes noted in our research.

In summary, university tutors need to think more carefully when approaching the teaching and support of students engaging in academic writing processes. Alongside this key theme, there are also other fundamental debates which feed into designing an effective curriculum supporting students engaging in academic practices. The data gained from this study would strongly support the view that university curricula should move from being essentially skills-based to encompassing an "Academic Literacies" approach for only then can universities effectively begin to bridge the pedagogical gap between school and university.

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