

The Impact of Academic Skills Support: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study concerns the impact of the academic writing support delivered for a core first year module which is taken as a part of an initial teacher training undergraduate programme at Edge Hill University. The assessment for this module requires students to write a children's story and then to reflect on the writing process. The reflection causes problems for many students and a common error is to reflect on the content of the story rather than on the process of writing it. In 2009-10 and 2010-11 the Learning Services Academic Skills Advisor who supports the Faculty of Education was asked to deliver a bespoke lecture, tailored to the reflective element of the assignment for this module. This was well received by the students and resulted in a significant improvement in the marks achieved compared to those awarded for the same module in 2008-09 when no bespoke support was provided. In 2010-11 the marks achieved were also compared with three other first year modules in which bespoke support was not given by the Academic Skills Advisor. Furthermore, the students were asked to answer three questionnaires concerning their perceptions about their academic writing and about the usefulness of the bespoke lecture, immediately before the lecture, shortly after the lecture delivery and after the students had received their mark and feedback. The questionnaires demonstrated that the students valued the input from the Academic Skills Advisor and the research as a whole suggested that the bespoke support had a positive impact. The partnership between the Academic Skills Advisor and the tutor was instrumental in the success of the support, since the tutor was able to contextualise the contents of the lecture during its delivery. This case study, therefore, reinforces the arguments of those who advocate an embedded and subject specific model of academic writing support.

KEYWORDS

Academic writing, academic literacies, support, impact.

Since the mid-1980s participation in Higher Education in the UK has increased, as the sector has moved from an elite system to one based on mass participation. By the mid-1980s the proportion of young people entering Higher Education was 15 per cent and this had increased to 32 per cent by the mid-1990s (Scott, 1995, cited in Ganobcsik-

Williams, 2006a and Ivanič and Lea, 2006). Many of the students who have undertaken undergraduate study over the last twenty years or so have come from groups which have not traditionally engaged with education at this level. This includes a greater number of working class, international and mature students and an increase in the number of students from other previously under represented cultural, religious and linguistic groups (Lillis, 1997; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Wingate, Andon and Cogo, 2011).

Over the same period a discourse has emerged in which undergraduate academic writing is seen as problematic (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006a; Ivanič and Lea, 2006; Lillis, 2001; Winch and Wells, 1995). Much of this discourse has taken place within the pages of the press (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004; Lillis and Turner, 2001) around a notion that there is a “literacy crisis” amongst the student population (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004). This discourse is part of a wider discussion around educational standards in general and the “crisis” in Higher Education has been linked to the rise in the non-traditional student population. Although direct evidence is not usually provided the correlation is implicitly argued, amounting to what has been labelled a “deficit model” (Lillis and Turner, 2001).

In their ground breaking paper, *student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach* (1998), Lea and Street argue that the teaching of academic writing skills in HE institutions can be as seen as lying within two models: a “study skills” approach and an “academic socialisation” model. The former is predicated on a notion of a skills deficit, in which the student is deemed to lack certain skills. Academic writing as seen as an activity which involves certain skills, which can be taught and which are separate from the curriculum. The skills that the student learns are, therefore, transferable between different curriculum areas and also between education and other areas of life. This approach is often concerned with the surface features of academic writing, such as grammar, spelling and punctuation, rather than issues around epistemology and the social construction of literacy (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006b; Ivanič and Lea, 2006; Lea and Street, 1998).

The “academic socialisation” model sees academic writing as something that the student learns by becoming absorbed in their discipline, its practices and epistemological constructs. Whilst this model is concerned with the student as a learner, it is a concept which is problematic as it sees the university as a homogenous unit with little difference between areas of the institution (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006b; Lea and Street, 1998).

Lea and Street (1998) advocate a third approach, the “academic literacies” model. This model sees academic writing as a socially constructed practice, which cannot be divorced from its institutional and disciplinary context in which students find “new ways of knowing” (1998, p. 158). Moreover, it recognises the relationships of power and authority that exist within the domain of student writing. It questions the notion that the student is lacking and needs to learn the ways of the university, the university is also seen to be in need of change in order to adapt to their changing student population

(Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006b; Lea and Street, 1998; Wingate, Andon and Cogo, 2011). It is a concept which offers a wider understanding of literacy, as Lea and Street explain:

This approach sees literacies as social practices... It views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation...[viewing] the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power. It sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines.

(Lea and Street, 1998, p. 159)

Academic Literacies has become a dominant theory of academic writing in much of the literature in this area (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006b), although some have argued that there no clear guidelines in applying the theory to the practical application of the teaching of writing (Lillis, 2006; Wingate, Andon and Cogo, 2011).

Academic writing support in many universities in the UK is centred around a centralised study skills unit. It is, therefore, seen as a support function often as a part of library or student services (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004; Ivanić and Lea, 2006). Many researchers have argued that the teaching of academic writing is more effective if it is a part of the discipline. This approach embeds academic writing support within the literacy practices of each individual discipline (Ganocsik-Williams, 2004; Wingate et al, 2011).

At Edge Hill University academic writing support is situated within the Academic Support Division of Learning Services. Students can book one to one support in the library and a team of Academic Skills Advisors deliver group sessions at the behest of individual tutors. In 2009-10 and 2010-11 an opportunity arose for the Academic Skills Advisor for Education to work with a member of the academic staff to design and deliver a bespoke support session tailored to the requirements of the assessment for a particular module. ABC100 is a first year core module on an initial teacher training programme. The assessment for the module asks trainees to write a children's story and then to reflect on the writing process. This has caused problems for a number of trainees, in the past, and one of the most common errors has been in mistaking the reflection of the writing process for a reflection on the content of the story. In 2008-09 2% of trainees gained a first for this module, 18% a 2i, 31% a 2ii, 43% a third and 6% were referred.

In 2009-10 the Academic Skills Advisor in Learning Services was asked to deliver a bespoke session tailored to the requirements of Part B of the assessment, requiring a reflection on the writing process. This consisted of a lecture delivered to individual tutorial groups, lasting 40-45 minutes and with questions and answers. There was participation from the tutor throughout and this gave a subject focus to the session. The session was planned in order to 'make literacy requirements explicit' while at the same time ensuring that students' own 'voice' was apparent in their writing. This session was well received by trainees and the grade profile of the cohort showed a marked

improvement on the previous year. A total of 14% were awarded a first for the assessment, 32.5% a 2i, 27% a 2ii, 10% a third and 16% were referred.

Following the success of this support the session was delivered to the first year cohort in the 2010-11 academic year, in the same the format of the previous year. In an attempt to measure the impact of this session the trainees were asked to complete questionnaires about their perceived academic skills level at three distinct points during the assignment writing process; prior to the lecture, shortly afterwards and after they had received their mark/ feedback for the assessment. Furthermore, the grade profile of the cohort for this module was also compared to the profile for 3 other modules in order to ascertain whether there was any appreciable difference in the profile between the module that contained the tailored academic skills support and those modules that did not.

Immediately prior to the lecture trainees were asked about their confidence levels on a scale of one (high) to five (low) in relation to planning and structuring an assignment, writing an assignment and referencing. 31.9% reported feeling less confident in planning and structuring and writing an assignment, and 36.1% were not confident in their referencing. The highest confidence levels were reported for referencing (33%), followed by writing an assignment (28.7%) and planning and structuring an assignment (18.1%).

Nearly three quarters (74.5%) said that they had problems starting an assignment and over half (53.2%) did not understand what was expected of them when the assignment title asked them to critically evaluate or critically analyse. Over half the trainees (53.2%) reported that they were unable to link theoretical perspectives with personal reflection in their writing, although over half (55.3%) were aware of where to seek help with their academic writing. A number of questions asked where trainees sought help to improve their study skills. The most popular source was the internet (57.4%), although peer support (48.9%) and books (42.6%) were also well used. Finally, the trainees were asked whether they felt an academic writing workshop would be useful and 80.9% answered "yes".

Following the delivery of the bespoke academic skills session confidence levels, as reported by the trainees, rose. The percentage of those reporting that they felt confidence in planning and structuring an assignment increased to 75.9%. Trainees also reported high levels of confidence in breaking down the assignment in order to understand what they have to do (82.8%) and 34.5% found it easy to start writing part B of the assignment, with 48.3% finding this neither easy nor difficult. There was an increase in those who understand what is required when an assignment title asks for critical evaluation or critical analysis, to 93.1%, and 69% felt able to link theoretical perspectives to personal reflection in their writing. All the trainees who answered the question felt that the academic writing session had been helpful in the writing of this particular assignment.

The third questionnaire, which was distributed after the trainees had received their mark and feedback for the assessment, asked a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions. There were two quantitative questions: the first question asked trainees to consider the feedback from part B of the assignment and then to say whether they felt their academic writing had been assisted by the bespoke support session. The second question asked trainees to reflect on this session and then to say whether they had made use of any of the ideas or strategies outlined in the session. Over two thirds (70.9%) answered yes to both these questions.

There were three qualitative questions:

- Please provide brief comments about which aspects of your assignment writing you feel have been influenced

The most common answers to this question concerned how to structure the assignment, and the second most popular answer related to writing the introduction and conclusion.

- Could you identify which particular aspects you found most useful?

As with the first qualitative question the top two responses concerned the structure and writing the introduction and conclusion.

- Could you briefly identify which aspects of academic skills might benefit you in your assignment writing?

The most popular answers were referencing and having an academic skills session earlier in the year.

The grading profile for ABC100 for the years 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 is shown below:

Academic Year	1st	2i	2ii	3rd	Refer
2008-09	2%	18%	31%	43%	6%
2009-10	14%	32.5%	27%	10%	16%
2010-11	13.2%	32.2%	30.6%	14.9%	9.1%

Comparing 2010-11 results with those for 2009-10, it can be seen that there was a slightly higher percentage of Firsts and 2i's (14% and 32.5%), a higher level of 2ii's and Thirds (27% and 10% in 2009-10) but a lower rate of refers (16% in 2009-10). The results for 2010-11 compare favourably with those for 2008-09, where 20% gained a First or a 2i and 43% were awarded a Third.

The 2010-11 grading profile of ABC100 is shown below together with the profiles for DEF200, GHI300 and JKL400.

Module	1st	2i	2ii	3rd	Refer
ABC100	13.2%	32.2%	30.6%	14.9%	9.1%
DEF200	3.3%	17.5%	47.5%	26.7%	5.0%
GHI300	3.3%	42.5%	29.2%	14.2%	10.8%
JKL400	7.5%	26.7%	35.8%	18.3%	11.7%

It would be logical to expect that the academic skills learned during the course of ABC100 would be transferrable to other modules. However, in comparing the grading profile of ABC100 with those for the other three modules, the most notable feature is that ABC100 had a significantly higher proportion of Firsts awarded (13.2% against 7.5% for JKL400 and 3.3% for DEF200 and GHI300). Only GHI300 had a higher proportion of 2i's (42.5% versus 32.2%) and a lower rate of Thirds awarded (14.2% against 14.9%). The proportion of trainees who were awarded a First or a 2i for ABC100 compares well with the other modules: 45.4% were awarded grades at these levels for ABC100, 45.8% for GHI300, 34.2% for JKL400 and 20.8% for DEF200. In absolute terms the number of trainees awarded a First or a 2i for ABC100 and GHI300 were the same. The only difference between these two modules is that when the assignment for GHI300 was marked there was one less trainee on the course, which increased the percentages for these grades.

Conclusion

From the above it is clear that the trainees benefited from the academic skills session. There was an increase in confidence in planning and structuring, and writing an assignment and in the percentage of trainees who found it easy to begin the assignment. There was greater awareness of the meaning of the terms critical evaluation and critical analysis and more trainees reported an ability to link theory with personal reflection. The majority of trainees found the session useful, felt that their academic writing had been influenced by the session and had used ideas and strategies discussed during the delivery. Overall, it could be argued that from the perspective of many of the trainees the support had a beneficial impact.

In looking at the grading profile the results for 2010-11 compare well with those for 2009-10 and represent a dramatic improvement from those in 2008-09. The 2010-11 results for the ABC100 module stand out when compared with the results for DEF200 and JKL400 and they also stand up well in comparison with those for GHI300. The ABC100 results show a significant increase in the number of Firsts awarded when compared with the other three modules. A direct correlation between the delivery of the bespoke support session and the improvement in the results for the module is difficult to conclusively establish. However, it could be argued that there is enough evidence to maintain that the academic skills session was a factor in the improvement in the grades awarded for this module and in the positive comparison with the other three modules. It is suggested that the session had a positive impact on this group of trainees, not only from their own perception, but also from a more objective point of view. The session, therefore, had a real part to play in the improvement in the marks for the ABC100 module. The key to the success of this support, it could be argued, was the close co-

operation of the Academic Skills Advisor and the tutor. The participation of the tutor allowed the support session to be given a subject focus and represents a model which is neither generic nor tutor delivered. The concentration on the assessment, a reflective piece of work, enabled students to find their own individual meaning in their writing. The bespoke session will be delivered again in 2011-12 and it is expected that this will have an equally positive impact on the trainees and their academic skills development.

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