

PROCESS AND PRODUCT:**SUPPORTING ACADEMIC WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**Alison Farrell[†]Sharon Tighe-Mooney[†][†]NUI Maynooth, Maynooth**Abstract**

In academic year 2010-2011, the English Department and Centre for Teaching and Learning at National University of Ireland Maynooth collaborated to provide academic writing support for first year students. The sessions, which were workshops and large group lectures, were active and participative in nature, and designed with the sole purpose of helping students to improve their writing, regardless of the level from which they were beginning. The intervention was a response to a desire by staff at departmental level to help students to understand what was required with regards writing in university and to assist them to meet these requirements. In addition, the topic was raised during discussions at the Teaching and Learning Committee, and subsequently, was undertaken as a pilot/case study rather than as a research project. The implications of the intervention were gauged by analysing the written feedback on the process provided by students. This paper provides an opportunity to reflect on the various aspects of this exercise and to plan the future activity of academic writing support for students. In order to orientate the reader for the discussion to follow, the genesis for support for student writing in the wider context will be briefly described. In addition, the role of the key stakeholders involved in the motivation for the writing intervention will be explored.

Keywords: Academic writing, student writing, student support, writing stakeholders

URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[110\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[110])

Introduction

In academic year 2010-2011, the English Department and Centre for Teaching and Learning at National University of Ireland Maynooth collaborated to provide academic writing support for first year students. The sessions, which were workshops and large group lectures, were active and participative in nature, and designed with the sole purpose of helping students to improve their writing, regardless of the level from which they were beginning. The intervention was a response to a desire by staff at departmental level to help students to understand what was required with regards writing in university and to assist them to meet these requirements. In addition, the topic was raised during discussions at the Teaching and Learning Committee, and subsequently, was undertaken as a pilot/case study rather than as a research project. The implications of the intervention were gauged by analysing the written feedback on the process provided by students. This paper provides an opportunity to reflect on the various aspects of this exercise and to plan the future activity of academic writing support for students. In order to orientate the reader for the discussion to follow, the genesis for support for student writing in the wider context will be briefly described. In addition, the role of the key stakeholders involved in the motivation for the writing intervention will be explored.

Wider Context

Support for student writing in universities is not a new idea. Joan Mullin in her article 'Learning from – Not Duplicating – US Composition Theory and Practice' notes that in 1885, Harvard created a course called Composition A (Mullin, 2006: 169). In addition, Stephen M. North in 'The Idea of a Writing Center' remarks that writing centres or labs 'have been around in one form or another since at least the 1930s' (North, 436). However, it was not until the early

1990s, as recounted by Ganobcsik-Williams in 'Academic Writing in Higher Education: A Brief Overview', that Academic Writing emerged as a field for teaching and research in the UK higher education sector (Ganobcsik-Williams, 10). While, initially, Ireland and the United Kingdom generally failed to embrace the composition culture to the extent that it had become prevalent in the United States, recently there has been a noticeable shift, and the provision of writing support through dedicated programmes and centres is decidedly more conspicuous now than in the past. Multiple factors have contributed to this change. In NUI Maynooth's case, we suggest that the influence of three major stakeholders led to the initiation, albeit on a pilot basis, of a formal programme for writing at undergraduate level, specifically in the English Department in conjunction with the Centre for Teaching and Learning. The authors are aware that various writing support initiatives are happening on campus within other departments; however, for the purposes of this paper, we will restrict our comments and analysis to the work done in the English Department, in partnership with the Centre for Teaching and Learning.

The three key stakeholders who have had the most impact on the establishment of this programme are government/policy makers, teachers and those who support teaching and learning on campus, and students. We do not deny that there are other players, such as employers and university management; however, we will focus on the three stated stakeholders and their role in this particular process.

Government/Policy Makers

The call for 'generic' skills for students in higher education, a catch-all title which varies in description and content, has been gradually gaining momentum. Higher Education in Ireland has increasingly become more accountable to the taxpayer who, for the most part, still funds the sector. With the current economic situation, Higher Education is in unprecedented territory

and is viewed intermittently as squanderer of public funds or potential saviour from economic ruin, depending on one's point of view. That universities should be accountable is not an unreasonable expectation of a publicly funded endeavour, particularly in recessionary times. In addition, the university needs legislatively to fulfil its eleven commitments as stated in the Universities Act, 1997. Of particular interest to this case study are the following two objects; namely that a university should 'support and contribute to the realization of national economic and social development' and that it should 'educate, train and retrain higher level professional, technical and managerial personnel' (Objects 'f' and 'g', Universities Act, 1997). These objects are a clear statement that higher education should contribute to vocational development and the economy of the country. The university should, therefore, go some way to equipping its graduates with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to contribute to society. Moreover, the call for graduates to have generic skills, and that these generic skills should be of value to the individual, society and the national economy, is also significant. Successive reports have attempted, with some variation, to outline specifically what these generic skills might be. Most recently the 'National Strategy for Higher Education (2010)', known locally as the 'Hunt Report', noted as one of its 'Teaching and Learning' recommendations that 'Undergraduate and postgraduate education should explicitly address the generic skills required for effective engagement in society and in the workplace.' (Hunt, 8) Higher education and its skillful graduates are rolled out as a national necessity and the human foundation of economic recovery: as the National Strategy quite clearly states, 'To address the societal needs over the coming years, increased attention must be paid to core skills such as quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, communication skills, team-working skills and the effective use of information technology'. (24) This statement of education as key to national recovery is also explicit in the Government Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy:

'Missing out on the skills of literacy and numeracy or failing to develop these skills to the best of each person's capability is not just a loss for the individual: it is also an enormous loss for all of us in Irish society. Mastering the skills of literacy and numeracy brings with it many social, economic and health benefits for the individual and society as a whole.' (Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy, 9)

This document also records the ‘increasing demands for high levels of literacy and numeracy in all sectors of employment’ from employers in ‘business, industry and enterprise’ as well as ‘the importance of raising standards to the levels achieved in the highest performing countries in order to continue to grow our indigenous knowledge economy and continue to attract high-value jobs through inward investment’ – the so called ‘Smart Economy’ (9). The Irish government, thus, purports that graduates can and should contribute to the economy. One way of doing this is through generic skills and one such skill is the ability to communicate, both orally and in written forms.

Teachers And Those Who Support Teaching And Learning On Campus

A second key stakeholder in the drive for support for writing on campus is the teaching, and the teaching and learning support group: this group might also be described as the facilitators of learning within the university. They include teachers (lecturers, tutors and demonstrators), library staff, staff of student learning/support centres, staff from centres for teaching and learning, assistive technology centre staff, members of teaching and learning committees, and so on. The belief that students should be able to write well on leaving the university is widely held by this group and the authors of this paper concur. While some, albeit a minority, of this group disparage students’ writing efforts, lament the loss of standards, debate the emergence of grade inflation and the general ‘dumbing down’ of higher education, the vast majority of staff involved in teaching and learning are genuinely interested in students and their writing and how it might be improved. Facilitators of learning want their students to do well, to engage in and enjoy their studies and to leave university with good degrees, the capacity to contribute to society and to live successful personal and professional lives. Communication is a key part of this success and written skills an important subset. Fortunately, great strides have been made in the area of supporting writing in universities and many of these advances have emerged

from the work of dedicated staff as well as genuine commitment from academic departments in terms of time and resources. The evidence of these efforts can be seen in the national and international networks in this area; the writing centres and learner support units; the scholarship; published research and initiatives on this topic, and the work of individuals as well as individual departments in small local one-off interventions, pilot projects and more sustained long-term commitments to writing at all levels. All of these approaches serve to provide a community of practice in the area of writing at university which is vibrant, welcoming, collaborative and thriving.

Students

The final stakeholder in the writing initiative under discussion is the student. North outlines what he believed then to be 'arguably the two most powerful contemporary perspectives on teaching writing: first, that writing is most usefully viewed as a process; and second, that writing curricula need to be student-centered.' (North, 438) Concurring with this view, the authors of this paper, who come from a student-centred philosophy of learning, suggest that all interventions in writing at university should be mindful of the process nature of writing as well as being learner or writer-centred. The writer, not the text, is at the heart of the process and as a result, the supports put in place are aimed at helping the writer to become better at the process of writing, rather than to improve one piece of work at any given moment. As educators we are concerned with facilitating the students in their learning in higher education, and writing is part of that learning.

While many students do not articulate a desire to be better writers at the beginning of their undergraduate programmes, they often express a desire to 'pass' or 'to do well'. It should be noted that for first years, these wishes are frequently secondary to 'making friends', which is the primary concern for most students entering university. The writing programme that was developed in this initiative was designed to merge students' desires of getting to know their

fellow classmates, as well as helping students to progress from their varying starting points. The former was incorporated by virtue of the fact that the writing programme, for the first five weeks, was workshop in style, active, and involved much small group work; the latter, by devoting the first workshop to demystifying the route to getting an A in essay writing. As a result of analysing a sample essay in which a grade A had been awarded, students devised their own criteria as to why an essay might get a good grade. Paraphrased below are some of the criteria students identified regarding how to get an A in an essay:

- the essay answers the question;
- clear structure;
- excellent ideas and thorough knowledge of the book and supporting texts;
- a well-developed and strongly supported argument throughout, which demonstrates strong analytical skills;
- writing style and presentation: confident, clear, concise, fluent writing using appropriate language and literary terms; no writing errors – correct grammar and punctuation.

These criteria are essentially a student-friendly version of the NUI Maynooth, English Department's grade descriptor for an A, which notes characteristics such as 'a thoroughly original answer ... must demonstrate a thorough knowledge and exceptional command of material ... fluently written ... no errors in presentation ...' and so on. Both lists were posted on the writing programme's Moodle site and students were reminded of them throughout the programme, not with a view to hammering home how to get an A in one piece of writing, but rather to encourage the students to begin to consider what constitutes good academic writing and to prompt them to become critical of their own writing.

This Project

As noted in the 'Wider Context' section of this paper, the issue of writing generally and academic writing in particular, is a growing concern in Higher Education in Ireland. In NUI Maynooth this concern was articulated by staff at department level and raised during discussions at the University's Teaching and Learning Committee. Following from a peer tutoring programme co-ordinated by the English Department for its students in academic year 2009-2010, a desire to provide a structured academic writing element for all first year students of the Department was articulated. In summary, the aim was to develop and deliver a course in academic writing for all first year undergraduate students of the English Department: the specific topic to be covered was 'Essay Writing'. The project built on the discipline-specific writing seminars offered as part of a semester one module, and the material presented in the writing course linked directly with another English first year module. The course was designed by the project partners in semester one and delivered in semester two. Course delivery included small group tutorials and large group lectures, both active and participative in nature. Every effort was made to create a friendly, supportive atmosphere in the workshops and lectures.

Project Delivery Details and Implementation

The writing workshops were provided before mid-term, on a weekly basis for five weeks, for all first years taking English. After mid-term one lecture/large group seminar per week, for three weeks, was provided. Each workshop and seminar was fifty minutes in length. The workshops followed a similar format each week with key features recurring every week alongside specific one-off topics. The recurring workshop features were: literary terms (developing a glossary of these); self-assessment punctuation quizzes; and freewriting exercises. The workshop topics

were as follows: (1) 'How an essay is graded', (2) 'Analysing your essay title and scoping your essay', (3) 'Reading and writing', (4) 'Drawing up an essay plan – structuring your essay' and (5) 'Drafting, reviewing and submitting your essay'. At the end of the workshops students were asked to complete a feedback form in class; for the purposes of this paper we will call this 'Feedback 1'. Students were asked to respond to the following statements: (a) What elements of the writing workshops were most useful? (b) What elements were least helpful? (c) What topics would you like to have seen addressed that were not included? (d) What are your key concerns regarding writing essays in an exam situation? (e) Any other comments? Based on the results of the feedback to questions (c) and (d), the post mid-term three lectures concentrated on the following topics: (1) 'Referencing', (2) 'Writing essays in exams: memory, idea generation, planning under pressure' and (3) 'Writing essays in exams: time management and exam strategies, structure, crafting an argument, and proofing in an exam'. Feedback was sought again after the lectures, hereafter called 'Feedback 2'.

Feedback and Findings

Feedback 1

The response to the writing support initiative was overwhelmingly positive. Out of a total of 400 students taking English in first year, 144 responded to the first survey. In 'Feedback 1', 86% remarked on the usefulness of the workshops on the whole, and 28% added that they found all the material helpful. While the sections on essay structuring, planning and title analysis were listed as most helpful, 43% and 63% respectively, a surprising 28% were appreciative of the section dealing with the explanation of literary terms. This was an interesting finding for the authors as at times students did not appear enamoured with these exercises, and engagement in the on-line glossary development (a spin off from the workshops) was virtually nonexistent.

In light of this particular feedback, it is suggested that spending time on the basic literary terms or critical language associated with specific disciplines could be a useful exercise for academic departments to adopt.

The most divisive remarks were attributed to the punctuation and grammar sections of the workshops. This is an area where there is broad mixed ability in the first year cohort, with some students all but insulted by the suggestion of this level of instruction and others identifying this as one of the most useful elements of the initiative. One way of addressing this variance, could be to offer an online self-assessment of skills to students: this would draw attention to the importance of grammar/punctuation, allow students to assess their skills and highlight any need for assistance if necessary. This could then be followed by a series of online exercises or optional workshop for students who felt they would benefit from support of this nature.

Finally, as the key concerns noted by students with regards content that had not been covered in the workshops included essay writing during examinations, time management and referencing, these topics were addressed in subsequent lectures.

Feedback 2

Comments and feedback were also provided by students at the end of the lectures, and the responses, 'Feedback 2', were streamlined under the headings of what students found (a) most useful, (b) least useful, (c) whether they preferred workshops or seminars, and (d) what they would change.

Out of 104 respondents to this survey, almost 88% noted that the practical tips for tackling an examination paper was the most useful topic covered. Only 12.5% mentioned skills such as proof reading, constructing a thesis statement or study skills as being useful. Regarding their preference for the workshops versus the lectures, there was a fairly even split with half of the group wanting workshops, and the other half, lectures. Notably, the students, when answering this question, responded to the content of the workshops/lectures as opposed to the format, delivery or atmosphere in either setting. The majority of the 57.5% of students, who expressed a preference for the lectures, noted that it was the relevance of the material to the upcoming summer examinations that dictated their answering 'lecture' to this question. While the content of the lectures was deemed more relevant, those who preferred the workshops, 38%, noted that it was the intimacy of these sessions that they liked as well as the possibility they presented for addressing specific questions. In addition, workshops facilitated a means for the tutor to highlight the progress students were making as their understanding of academic writing expanded. However, students did not like being 'put on the spot' or singled out in workshops. A combination of both workshops and lectures, therefore, as occurred in this programme, is probably desirable.

Regarding suggesting changes to the lectures, just under half the respondents remarked that they would not change anything about the content. However changes which were suggested included a call for examples used in the workshops to be more relevant to course material, rather than generic; there was also a request for more classes and an appeal that the writing programme be provided in semester one, as opposed to semester two. The request for more classes may reflect the students' recognition of the necessity of establishing good writing practices from the beginning of their studies. From an institutional perspective, this appeal from participants suggests the importance of building a positive approach to writing in university as soon as the student sets foot on a third-level campus.

Discussion of findings from Feedback 1 and Feedback 2

Timing, relevance and motivation

Phyllis Creme and Mary R. Lea in *Writing at University: a guide for students*, suggest that 'the key to becoming a successful writer at university level is understanding what is required and what is involved in the process of completing assignments' (Creme and Lea, 2). The workshops in this programme began with an exploration of 'How to get an A' in an essay assignment. This starting point was deliberate and was chosen for two specific reasons. Firstly, students are interested in assessment; beginning with assessment taps into the key motivations that most people have for learning, namely either needing to learn or wanting to learn (Race, *passim*). Secondly, the criteria that both the students and the English Department outlined about good writing are imminently sound, indicative of good writing and, with some effort and practice, achievable. The authors believe that this starting point and the focus on helping students to engage with writing and to develop their own writing tools and strategies are the main reasons for the success of the programme and the largely positive feedback from students. The students saw the material as relevant and timely; they had an essay to complete in semester two and the material provided in the programme helped to scaffold their writing for that purpose. Similarly, after mid-term they were preparing for an exam and the programme lecture material focused on writing in exams.

As noted previously, a recurring comment by students was that the workshops might have been more useful if provided in semester one. For timetabling purposes that was not possible in academic year 2010-2011. However, had it been an option, the authors are ambivalent about whether it would have been a good idea or not to schedule this material at that point. Given that needing and wanting are such important motivational factors, the authors wonder if the majority of students need or want to learn about essay writing in semester one when they are making the significant transition from second to third level. Additionally, and drawing from a 'whole – part – whole' approach, it can be argued that sometimes it is better to allow students

to try something fully, like writing an essay or doing an exam, and then to break it down to constituent parts and processes, only to build it back up to allow for improvements in the second attempt – the deconstructed material making all the more sense because of the initial ‘whole’ experience.

Product and Process

Feedback on the workshops and the lectures emphasised the students’ interest in getting results. Undergraduate cohorts, particularly those fresh from second level and the Leaving Certificate regime, are strategic learners. Having worked out how to get the points to get to college, for many, the next step is to work out how to get the grades to get out of college relatively successfully. The authors do not in any way blame the students for this approach – it is a by-product of the system. However, if the only goal in attending university is to emerge from it largely unscathed and unchanged, then this singularity of focus ought to be questioned. This ‘deliverable’ approach is unsettling for the authors and however successful it may appear on the surface, we are wary of subscribing to an outputs model typical of product-driven writing support. Were we to respond in an uncritical manner to the feedback from the programme lectures then we would almost invariably end up promoting writing which has succumbed to, what Rowena Murray and Sarah Moore in *The Handbook of Academic Writing: A Fresh Approach*, call, ‘the managerialist processes with which corporate values have been implemented’; that is, the preoccupation with writing as a means to an end rather than the idea that ‘writing can be satisfying and pleasurable in its own right’ (Murray and Moore, xi). We are keenly aware of the difficulties of helping students to achieve in terms of ‘product’, as well as facilitating their learning and their development as writers, i.e. process. Thankfully, these two elements need not be diametrically opposed: academic writing need not be a continuous hurdle throughout the education process that inspires purely negative connotations. Rather writing can be, as Creme and Lea write, ‘an inherently creative process in which knowledge

and ideas are not just shared or transmitted, but generated' (Creame and Lea, 132). Moreover, they tell their student readers that 'writing for your studies and learning for your studies are so integrally related that they cannot be separated from each other' (1).

Writing then is frequently learning – it is equally process and product, not necessarily more one than the other. As John Bean states in *Engaging Ideas, The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*: 'Fortunately, the writing process itself provides one of the best ways to help students learn the active, dialogic thinking skills valued in academic life.' (Bean, 20) The challenge then is to create an awareness in students of the need for both process and product and to value both the path and the destination. It is important to produce good writing; it is also important to write well. The student feedback on this programme focused very much on the product phase of thinking about academic writing and it incorporated positive responses to the functional 'how to' elements of the programme, which is probably to be expected of these students and their learning strategies. However, feedback on the 'writing as process' elements of the programme was not nearly as conspicuous. A good example of this in our findings is the number of times that freewriting was noted as a useful part of the workshops; of the 144 respondents that completed the survey, only twenty noted that the freewriting tasks, which were done for five minutes in each session, were useful – this represents a meagre 14%. The authors do not believe that this is because the freewriting exercises were considered inferior to other material presented in the workshops; rather that the exercises did not seem to be as immediately useful to the students as the more functional aspects of the programme. This finding, when mapped against Peter Elbow's advice, quoted in Bean, to 'Think of writing then not as a way to transmit a message but a way to grow and cook a message' (15), suggests that one of the major challenges associated with supporting writing on campus is to develop the writer rather than fixing the text. Both are important but the authors agree with Stephen North's view that in a writing centre, and it can be added in a writing programme, 'the object is to make sure that the writers and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction' (North, 438). This is

a continuing challenge, but the cultural shift which is called for here may have its foundations in first year writing. The positive feedback from the intervention under discussion may be the beginning of support from students of the idea of writing as a craft that can be mastered and built upon, as well as a reinforcement of the importance of introducing the principles of good writing at undergraduate level.

Finally, the authors would like to point out that despite professing the programme to be learner-centred, we were not in a position to carry out any attitudinal survey regarding writing with the group. Nor did we elicit any literacy histories from the students. This, in our view, was a missed opportunity, for ourselves, the English Department and the students themselves, and it is something that we hope to include in future programmes. According to the authors' admittedly limited information (we are only beginning to research writing across campus), there is very little regular work carried out about students' writing dispositions. We believe this to be a gap in our knowledge and one we are anxious to rectify in future studies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper we presented the origins, implementation and findings of an academic writing programme devised and delivered by the English Department and the Centre for Teaching and Learning at NUI Maynooth. Our material is presented here as a case study and essentially draws on the feedback which was received from students who participated in the programme. It should be noted, although it is outside the scope of this paper, that tutors were also asked for their feedback throughout and at the end of the programme. The overall positive feedback from students to both workshops and seminars suggests that the Department of English and the Centre for Teaching and Learning have responded well to undergraduate needs in relation to writing. From an undergraduate perspective it appears that the intervention has been successful at building confidence and skill into the writing process. In that regard, the experiment reflects Murray and Moore's conviction that 'by installing supportive principles of

writing into academic environments, all members of the learning community stand to benefit' (Murray and Moore, 131-2).

In light of the findings presented here, the authors propose the following recommendations and conclusions:

- that writing programmes of this nature are useful and should be continued
- that the model of a central learning support working in collaboration with an academic department works well – there is scope for this model to be replicated, at least in the context of NUI Maynooth
- that, from a student perspective, timing, relevance and motivation are key factors in the success of writing programmes
- that, from a student perspective, discipline specific as opposed to generic material is preferable
- that certain elements of writing support, for example, help with grammar and punctuation, are better provided by assessment followed by workshops for students needing this service.
- that, from a provider perspective, both process and product are important and that the message that writing is part of the learning process rather than just a product of learning, should be conveyed and demonstrated to students, beginning in first year
- that students like a mixture of large and small group teaching settings, and that because they like both and find both effective for different reasons, ideally academic writing support should be provided in both tutorials and lectures
- that in future research, students' attitudes to writing and their literacy histories is sought.

The final comment from the authors is about enjoyment. Both authors enjoyed working with the students and there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the writing initiative from students. Currently we continue to revisit and revise the programme in consultation with the English Department with a view to delivering further writing support to first year English students.

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