Responding to the Writing Development Needs of Irish Higher Education Students: A Case Study[*]

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Abstract

In contrast to other countries, particularly the USA, systematic writing support for students at Irish higher education institutions has until recently been restricted to *ad hoc* interventions. However, there is now a growing awareness of the need to adopt a systematic approach to writing support for both undergraduate and postgraduate students and an increasing recognition of the value of such support in fostering metacognitive awareness among writers so that they not only produce better written texts but develop a greater consciousness of the processes leading to them (North 1984). The main aim of this paper is to report on a study that inquires into student and staff attitudes towards academic writing and into the specific writing-related needs of students at one Irish university, the University of Limerick (UL), in order to justify what we feel to be an appropriate response to a multiplicity of writing-related needs in the Irish context. The paper reports on the two main phases of the project, namely the research phase that would inform the response adopted by the University (2005-2007) and the action-response phase which outlines the course of action taken by the University to respond to the writing needs of its students (2007 to date), including collaboration with other institutions.

The primary research on which this paper reports highlights an awareness of the importance of writing skills for the development of students' academic and professional lives, yet it also draws attention to the lack of support for the development of student writing. Having investigated the many options available, this paper concludes that a formal writing centre has an important role to play in providing a coordinated and systematic approach to the development of writing. The creation of a writing centre is an expression of the recognition of the centrality of writing to teaching and learning at higher education and the importance of writing as a means of learning.

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1. Why writing matters

Writing is a central component of learning and assessment in all disciplines in higher education. Nurturing good writing enhances student learning and develops both their critical thinking and active problem-solving abilities (Bean 2001). Furthermore, writing is a skill that is not only valued in academia; good writing skills are very important for the enhancement of our students' personal and professional lives. The importance of the impact of writing skills on helping students reach their full potential at university and in their future professional lives is highlighted herein. The US recognises that "[w]riting today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many" (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges 2003), a reality reinforced in the UK by the Royal Literary Fund that acknowledges "[g]ood writing is the passport to achievement… yield[ing] more subtle and far-reaching advantages in relation to the health of the university as an institution, the vigour of society and the confidence of graduate employers" (Davies et al. 2006). Considering the context in which Ireland now evolves, the importance of the development of writing becomes apparent: "Knowledge, innovation, creativity and workforce skills are now the key success factors for Ireland's economic and social prosperity" (Hanafin 2005). A number of European Council, OECD, national and international studies have been conducted over the years to determine the role of education and, in particular, higher education in developing the skills graduates need to participate successfully and sustain themselves in a knowledge economy. Many of these studies include measures of the importance of writing skills to industry (Curry & Sherry 2004; Expert Group on Future Skills Needs 2007; PUII 2007; OECD 2004). Studies on transferable skills development began to appear, and recommendations were made to incorporate transferable skills and generic competences into the curricula, accentuating further the need for the development of writing in higher education institutions. This argument is even more apparent given the deteriorating economic climate that has evolved since the latter half of 2008.

In recent years, there has been a growing concern amongst academics about the writing competencies of students (Lillis & Turner 2001; Ganobcsik-Williams 2006, pp.xxii, xxiv-xxv n.6; Byrne 2007); faculty concerns at UL were no exception. Initially, *ad hoc* writing clinics and seminars were set up at UL in response to needs expressed anecdotally, for example, FYP (final year project) writing seminars for engineering and nursing students. However, over time, it became obvious that there was strong support for a university-wide initiative on writing. The efforts of those interested in developing a writing initiative culminated in the formation of an interdisciplinary group to work on developing a more systematic approach to writing pedagogy in the institution. The Writing Research Group started to investigate how to improve the quality of academic writing and the best way this could be achieved in this particular context. The structure of their response was informed by a number of factors, most notably a week-long consultation with visiting Professor Jim Henry of Virginia's George-Mason University, who led a series of workshops on writing and, with interested parties, explored how this university-wide support could be translated into a systematic, comprehensive approach to writing while addressing individual, disciplinary concerns. Other influential factors included consultation with focus groups; a student/staff audit of attitudes to writing, writing practices, and writing needs; and an evaluation of the responses adopted in institutions and countries where writing support and development is at a more advanced stage. In this paper, these factors will be considered, in particular the writing needs of students and the range of possible responses to these needs,

before outlining the action taken to respond in a way that would be appropriate to both the Irish and institutional contexts.
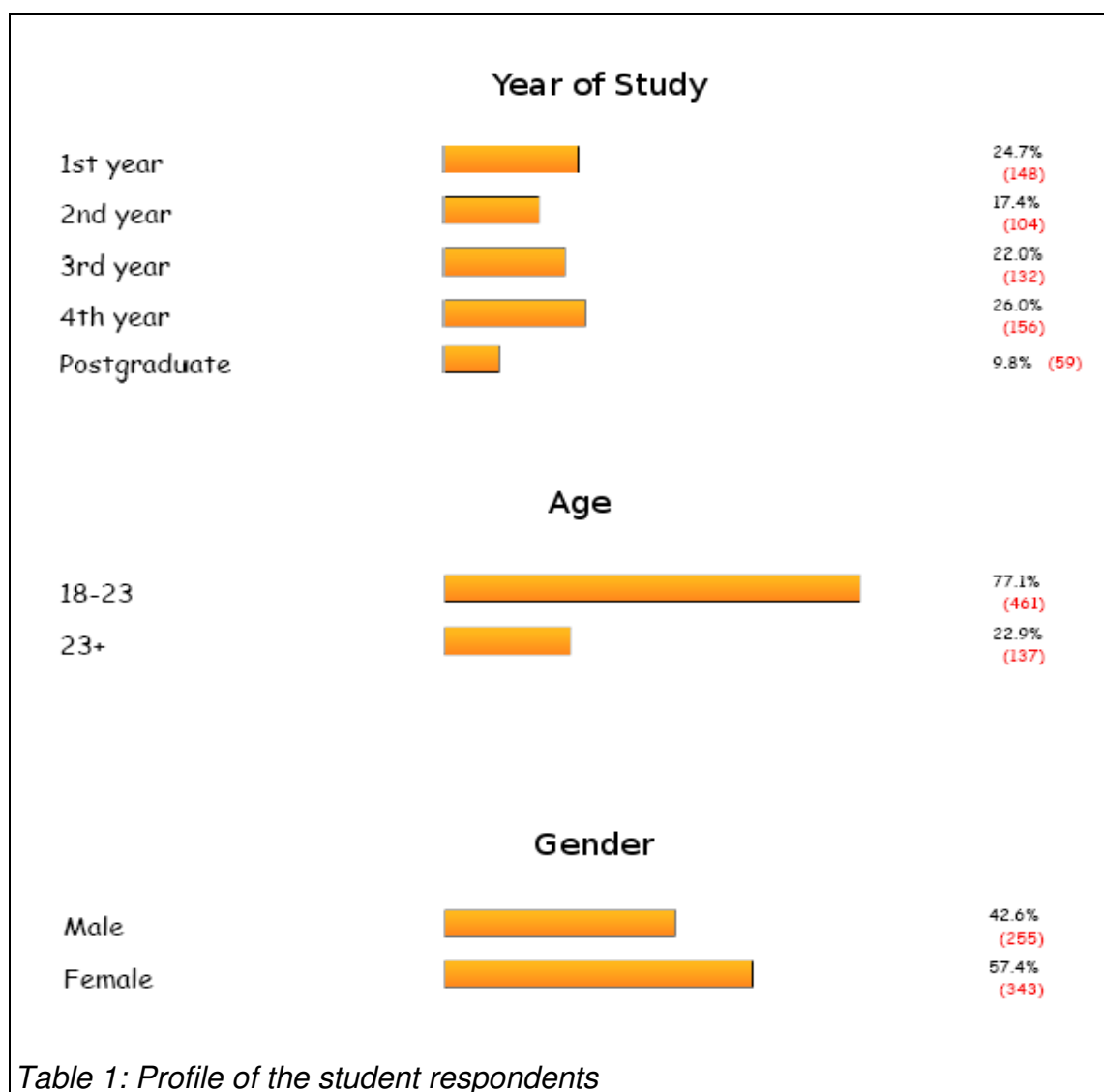
2. Determining the writing needs of students at the University of Limerick

2.1 Methodology

In order to accommodate the writing needs of students at UL and to formulate a response of how best to meet their needs, two online surveys were carried out. Initially, a staff audit was conducted in May 2005 in order to gather information on existing writing activities at UL and to involve staff in the development of student writing. All staff were invited by e-mail to complete the online survey. A total of 99 individuals responded to the staff questionnaire. There were representatives from all faculties and a wide range of writing genres associated with each discipline. Groups representing particular sections of the student population such as the Mature Student Office and the Access Office also took the time to complete the survey. In the questionnaire, respondents identified their involvement in any writing activities designed to develop students' writing, giving details of the writing activity, the target group, whether it was specific to the discipline, and whether or not they referred students to online resources and tools to support the development of their writing. In addition, respondents identified their views on the writing needs of students, in particular, whether they felt there was a need to support their students' writing, where the areas of greatest need were, whether a direct intervention was needed and, if so, what form the intervention should take in order to best assist students.

The staff survey was followed by a more detailed student analysis in May 2006 in order to identify students' attitudes towards writing and establish students' ideas about their own writing-related needs. Combinations of closed and open-ended questions were posed in order to access both quantitative and qualitative data. Closed questions using a likert scale were followed by open-ended questions, inviting the respondent to give more qualitative information. The student survey was administered using MarkClass[1], software specifically designed for educational establishments, universities and colleges to create student questionnaires. All students were invited by e-mail to participate in the online survey. The 601 respondents to the student questionnaire represented a well-balanced account of UL's 11,000+ students in terms of discipline of study, year of study, age and gender (see Table 1: Profile of the student respondents). Both surveys revealed very rich data. This paper, however, focuses primarily on the results of the student survey. Data from the staff survey will be discussed briefly in order to give solid endorsement to the students' comments and to shed more light on the students' insights.

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1 http://www.markclass.com/

Year of Study

1st year	24.7% (148)
2nd year	17.4% (104)
3rd year	22.0% (132)
4th year	26.0% (156)
Postgraduate	9.8% (59)

Age

18-23	77.1% (461)
23+	22.9% (137)

Gender

Male	42.6% (255)
Female	57.4% (343)

Table 1: Profile of the student respondents

2.2 Analysis

The aim of the writing needs analysis carried out at UL was to establish the students' attitudes towards writing: their perception of the importance of writing, their difficulties in writing, the level of support received for the development of their writing, and the need for writing support and the form that this should take. These needs would be considered in the formulation of an appropriate response.

2.2.1 The perceived importance of writing

Firstly, in relation to their perception of the importance of the impact of their writing skills on helping them reach their full potential at university, 79.3% (n=474) of the respondents felt that writing skills were either extremely important or very important. Only 0.7% (n=4) believed that their writing had no impact at all on them reaching their full potential at university. Comments such as "I don't think people with poor writing skills are taken very seriously" capture the significance that the majority of students attached to their writing. Similar importance was

attributed by staff to writing, with all 99 respondents indicating that student writing has an impact on students reaching their full potential at university. Students attached similar importance to the impact of their writing on their future professional lives, although to a slightly lesser extent.

2.2.2   Difficulties in writing

The variability of student writing experiences is reflected in the analysis of students' needs. One-third of the students (n=196) found it either difficult or very difficult to complete written tasks, while 45.6% (n=272) found it a little difficult. 21.5% (n=128) of students declared that they found it easy or very easy to complete written tasks. Developing an argument, referencing sources and achieving clarity of expression gave students the most difficulty, according to their testimony. Punctuation, form, grammar and spelling were reported to be the least problematic.

A significant number of students (36.1%/n=216) maintained that their writing had only *improved a little* since starting university. 29.1% (n=174) felt that their writing had *improved quite a lot* and 9% (n=54) claimed that their writing had *improved very much*. However, over a quarter of the students (n=154) believed that their writing had *improved very little* or *not at all*. A closer look at the qualitative evidence supplied in the open-ended question that followed this inquiry gives insight into their perceptions of why their writing had/had not improved. One-quarter of those who responded to this question attributed their improvement to the sheer volume of writing they had done and saw a relationship between this improvement and the types of writing activities they performed, the guidance provided and the feedback offered to them. However, those who felt that they had made no improvement offered the following reasons for a stasis or regression:

- they had received no support for their writing, either in the form of guidance or instruction;
- they received no feedback on their performance, other than through the marks awarded;
- they did not do much writing, or were in courses for which there were few, if any, writing assignments;
- they did not see any need to improve as assessment emphasised content over style;
- their difficulties with the disciplinary style of their course hindered their development.

Students reported that, in certain instances, only assessed writing was assigned, which they associated with stress and anxiety, and, consequently, negative feelings about writing.

2.2.3   The level of support offered to students

Although 54.8% (n=328) of students acknowledged that they had received support for their writing, nearly half of the students claimed they had received no support. In this, there is a strong correlation between the staff and student reports. Only 36 of the 99 staff respondents reported being involved in any activities which aim to develop students' writing. The majority of these activities were offered as part of existing modules and were aimed at fourth-year students, intervention which students coincidently felt was too late. Two-thirds of staff reported that they did not engage in any activities which aim to develop students' writing, despite the fact that the vast majority felt that writing has an extremely or very important impact on

students reaching their full potential at university. Consequently, in these instances, unless the students were self-motivated, little or no progress was made. This non-systematic approach to writing support and development reflects a widespread presumption highlighted in Lea & Street (1998, p.158) that students will be acculturated into academic writing simply by being immersed in the academy.

2.2.4   The need for writing support and the form that this should take

Over two-thirds of the students (n=393) felt that there was a need for additional support for their writing. Coincidently, 98% of the respondents in the staff survey (n=97) felt that there was a need for support for students' writing. Although there was some consensus between staff and students in relation to the need for writing support, there was less agreement about which particular aspects of writing were in need of support. Students drew attention to the need for support for macro or higher-order issues such as developing an argument, citation practices, redrafting, adopting an appropriate style, and structure and organisation of texts. Although the quantitative data from the student survey suggests that the students perceived elements such as spelling, grammar and punctuation to be relatively unproblematic, the qualitative data from the staff survey suggests that these were precisely the areas students needed to address. The fact that students reported consulting many electronic resources that were primarily concerned with such issues may serve to reinforce staff stated suspicions or, conversely, confirm students' claims that this is an area they were able to care for themselves.

In relation to the form that the writing support should take, both the staff and student surveys indicate their first preference to be integrating writing support into existing modules. There was also a consensus among staff and students for providing online support for student writing. However, well over half of the staff indicated that their preferred type of initiative, after integrating support into existing modules, was providing specialised modules (n=58). Conversely, this was one of the least preferred options of the students (23.8%/n=134), who were more in favour of occasional seminars to support writing (41.3%/n=232). Both groups included a dedicated writing centre in their top four choices and agreed that it would be an important means of providing additional support (35.4%/n=199 students; 52.5%/n=52 staff). There was also a consensus amongst staff and students that, as well as a more structured approach to writing support, the interventions should be offered much earlier. In addition to the above-mentioned types of support, the following is a small sample of further suggestions for support made by students: essay writing competitions, feedback on writing, sample answers/examples/guidelines, continuous practice and evaluation of writing skills, and a formal booklet on writing skills.

The primary research highlights evidence of a non-systematic approach to writing support and development and suggests that writing was not getting the attention it needed, despite the fact that it is central to success at third level and has an important impact on students' professional lives. The variety of students' needs is great, and, therefore, a response which would accommodate such diversity would be required. Many factors have influenced the University's response to the development of student writing, in particular the models already in place in institutions that support a systematic approach to the development of student writing. The next section of the paper focuses on the models that informed the search for an appropriate response for our particular context.

3. International responses to writing needs in higher education

Much of the current scholarship on writing in the US emerges from a hundred-year Rhetoric and Composition Studies tradition (Russell 1991) and from nearly as many years of documented pedagogical practice in core writing-degree programmes, writing centres, clinics and labs at both second and third levels (Carino 1995). By contrast, interest in academic writing and writing pedagogy in third-level education does not begin in Europe until the late 1980s and early 1990s, coinciding with relatively recent national strategies that require that a significantly greater proportion of the population progress to a higher level of competency across a range of generic skill sets (European Parliament 2000). Coventry University's Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (2006, pp.xxi, xxiii) offers this fact as partial explanation for the extent to which composition pedagogy in the UK and the rest of Europe was, and to some extent still is, beholden to the long tradition of US scholarship on writing. She nevertheless makes the case that more recent international, transnational and cross-cultural, comparative studies are making an increasingly important contribution to the scholarship on academic writing and writing pedagogy, and assures us that "… although institutional circumstances and national priorities for education may differ, those interested in developing student writing can learn from and contribute to Academic Writing theory and pedagogy developed in other national contexts" (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006, pp.xxiii-xxiv). With this in mind, US and European responses to particular writing issues in higher education were examined. We needed to look not only at the typical kinds of initiatives on offer, but at the differing philosophical contexts from which these programmes emerge and at the values implied by those methodological choices. The goal was not to replicate US or other European models, but to determine how aspects of each model fit into specifically Irish national and institutional contexts.

The options available to those wishing to offer more systematic writing initiatives to their student and/or staff populations are multiple and varied. Writing initiatives are traditionally delivered through (a) core programme(s) — either through *ad hoc* initiatives within core programmes in response to what a teacher might perceive as a need or, more systematically, through departmental/faculty initiatives, through core communication programmes or degree-bearing writing programmes such as the Rhetoric and Composition programmes in the US, or through a collaboration between the two — or through non-core supports such as writing centres or teaching and learning support centres. In the US, writing support comes from both within and without the core curriculum, whereas in the UK writing support is primarily delivered by programmes that are outside of the core curriculum. Although degree programmes in Rhetoric and core programmes in writing can be found in UK universities, they have never aspired to the massive, industry-generating status (Robertson et al. 1987; Mullin 2006) of the Rhetoric and Composition and Communication Studies programmes in the US.

The US programme with the longest tradition is the first-year *Composition* requirement, usually developed and delivered by English or Communication Studies Departments. Beyond this first-year, compulsory model, English or Communication Studies Departments in US universities often offer a number of higher-level writing modules that contribute toward a writing minor (equivalent to the Irish undergraduate Diploma), a B.A., M.A. or Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition Studies or some other closely related area of study. Writing modules that might contribute toward a degree in writing could include modules such as *Basic Writing*, a module that addresses the challenges of teaching in classrooms in which a range of English

language varieties confront both each other as well as the targeted formal, academic register (Shaughnessy 1977). Other examples might include such modules as *Writing with Media*, as is offered at Dartmouth College, or the *Theory and Practice of Editing* module offered at George Mason University, in Virginia.

Outside of the core writing programmes in US universities, Writing Centres / Labs / Clinics, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), Writing to Learn (WTL), Writing In Disciplines (WID) programmes and Online Writing Labs (OWLs) proliferate. Writing centres in the US work in conjunction with, but independently of, the core writing programmes. They tend to focus on the delivery of one-to-one and small-group peer tutoring sessions. The result of collaboration between subject specialists and writing specialists, WAC, WTL and WID initiatives tend to be infused into already existing programmes across the disciplines rather than presented as separate, discipline-specific writing modules. Arguments continue to be made for strong links between writing centres and WTL, WAC, and/or WID programmes (Harris 2001; Waldo 2003). WAC programmes ask teachers in all disciplines to assist with the acculturation of students into an academic register through a variety of both low- and high-stakes writing and writing-to-learn exercises (Fulwiler & Young 1982; Maimon 1982). WTL programmes bring writing experts together with teachers in the disciplines to develop writing as a tool for learning both subject content and writing skills (Emig 1977; Fulwiler & Young 1982; Parker & Goodkin 1987; Bazerman & Russell 1994; Parks & Goldblatt 2000). Students in WID programmes, on the other hand, engage in discipline-specific writing practices, focusing on formatting and stylistic conventions and on how specific kinds of information is normally located in particular text-types, genres or sub-genres (Jolliffe 1988; Myers 1990; McLeod et al. 2001). Finally, OWLs offer many of the same services that writing centres offer, providing one-to-one tutoring, synchronous and asynchronous on- and off-line writing help, in-classroom and laboratory writing workshops, etc. One advantage of being online is the round-the-clock accessibility. Purdue's OWL advertises its writing help and teaching resources as being "free" and available "24/7". Harris and Pemberton (2001) offer an overview of some of the technologies available for the enhancement of existing tutorial services and how technological choices impact on pedagogy and institutional goals, priorities, and missions.

In the UK, much of the writing support originates from outside of the curriculum in centres for teaching and learning and writing centres. The *Write Now Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*, involving collaboration between London Metropolitan, Liverpool Hope and Aston Universities, "celebrates and promotes student writing in the disciplines, enabling students to develop academic and disciplinary identities as empowered, confident writers"[1]. The *Write Now CETL Writing Centres* offer one-to-one assistance from CETL staff or mentors. They also work with staff on writing in disciplines initiatives and on how to promote learning through assessment. In Coventry, the *Centre for Academic Writing* (CAW)[2] performs similar services for both students and staff through one-on-one and small group sessions and workshops.

Given the widely contrasting historical contexts in which US and European writing pedagogies were born, it is not surprising that their pedagogical foundations are informed by profoundly differing values. In the US, "[p]edagogical theories in writing courses are grounded in

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1   URL: http://www.writenow.ac.uk/

2   URL: http://www.coventry.ac.uk/cu/caw

rhetorical theories" (Berlin 1982, p.765). Generally, most teachers of writing in US universities are graduates of English Departments, the home of rhetoric and composition studies since the late 19th Century (Russell 1991; Reynolds et al. 2003). This explains why many writing programmes and initiatives in the US, including those seemingly autonomous writing centres, WAC, WTL and WID programmes, are either funded by English Departments or staffed with graduates with literary and/or writing backgrounds. "They", writes North (1984, p.437), "...is *us*, members of English Departments, teachers of writing". In Europe, conversely, many of the initial responses to writing issues have been led by student support programmes, learning support units, study skills centres and libraries, much of the instruction coming from people with backgrounds in English Language Teaching (ELT), Linguistics and Applied Languages or in Sociology and Anthropology (Ivanič & Lea 2006, p.10). Initially, that support would have broken down the act of writing into a set of discreet, teachable skills and social practices. These skills, once acquired, were thought to be transferable to other contexts (Lea & Street 2006, pp.368-369). Since the mid- to late-nineties, however, there has been a movement in Europe toward an *Academic Literacies* model.

Based on the findings of New Literacy Studies, Academic Literacies sees literacy as a term that signifies any one of a number of socially situated, culturally mediated practices or *literacies* (Lea & Street 1998, p.158). This approach draws attention to the multiple, very often conflicting, codes and conventions through which students navigate as they acquire disciplinary experience and expertise, all the while encouraging them to investigate "ways in which issues of meaning making and identity are implicated" (Ivanič & Lea 2006, p.12; Lea & Street 1998, p.158). Academic Literacies pedagogy then wishes to expose and engage in discourses on how students' attempts to participate in academic discourse inevitably involve struggles over which language or ideology is valued and over who decides whether or not that contribution is relevant. Lillis (2003, p.195), in an article that attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice, reminds us that mediation requires that all parties be involved in the dialogue on difference. Pedagogies, she warns, that "assume that an (already critical) expert is engaged in raising awareness of an (as yet uncritical) student about language, power and ideology..., like more conventional pedagogy, privileges only the tutor/institution's perspectives and denies students' contributions to, and struggles around, meaning making" (Lillis 2003, p.195). She ultimately recommends that those attempting to design a framework for Academic Literacies concepts engage in dialogues which "[o]pen up disciplinary content to 'external' interests and influences" and which involve newer ways of meaning-making (Lillis 2003, pp.201-205). The academic literacies approach is discussed further in Section 4. below.

A final consideration of existing models and approaches cannot neglect Ivanič and Lea's (2006, p.14) advice that writing programme developers choose carefully, reminding us that any response "is always a political act", even if it is rarely recognised as such. The reminder from Ivanič and Lea is reminiscent of an even earlier caution by the late James Berlin (1982, p.765) that choosing one pedagogical theory of writing over another is more than just quibbling about which feature of the writing process to favour. "To teach writing", says Berlin (1982, p.766) "is to argue for a version of reality, and the best way of knowing and communicating it".

4. Choosing an appropriate means of responding

Having established the importance of writing to both the academic success and future professional development of students and the level of awareness of this link amongst both students and faculty, the choice of an appropriate means of responding to the writing needs at UL remained. Early initiatives included the establishment of a cross-disciplinary Writing Research Group and pilot interventions for targeted groups, for example, Final-Year Project writing support in the form of *ad hoc* seminars for students of Aeronautical Engineering, Nursing, and Languages and Cultural Studies. These pilot interventions, supported by UL internal funding sources, served to garner more interest from colleagues across the disciplines and to corroborate the growing support for a systematic approach to writing development. The interdisciplinary working group, influenced by the diverse needs expressed in the surveys, concluded that, rather than one single response, a multiplicity of responses was required. Taking into account the many approaches and models which exist in other institutions, the objective was to find a means of responding which would be appropriate to both the Irish and institutional contexts.

Of the models and approaches considered, the Composition and Rhetoric model was deemed the least appropriate to the UL context, primarily because its "pre-disciplinary" aspect (North 1994, p.15) was unlikely to meet the discipline-specific writing needs implied in the surveys and focus groups described above. Furthermore, the introduction of a mandatory generic writing course along the lines of the American model would have been hindered by resourcing issues and the administrative difficulty of modifying all programmes to allow for such a far-reaching change. In contrast, the *Writing Across the Curriculum*, *Writing within the Disciplines* and *Writing to Learn* programmes each held certain attractions from a pedagogical perspective. Importantly, the three approaches were not viewed as mutually exclusive. Together, they offered the possibility of providing an institution-wide, discipline-specific response which would foster metacognitive thinking about writing. Such an eclectic approach would allow student writers to develop their academic writing as well as generic competences and transferable skills, which would be useful in their future professional lives.

The implementation of a discipline-specific approach deserved further consideration, particularly in view of the fact that both students' and staff's first preference was for writing support that is integrated into existing modules. A wholly learner-support-based approach — closest to Lea and Street's description of the study skills model (Lea & Street 1998, p.158) — appeared too limited to meet the variety of needs identified in the surveys, particularly those of postgraduates. Another possible model for the discipline-specific approach views students passively absorbing the linguistic knowledge needed to join a discourse community and access its community of practice. However, as Lea and Street point out in reference to academic socialisation (1998, p.159), this acculturation model is limited by the implicit suggestion that the novice writer is attempting to join a clearly-delineated discipline and/or a fixed academic or professional community. By contrast, the knowledge society for which we are preparing our students is a fast-moving, constantly-changing one, where, as discussed above, transferable skills are vital to long-term success. A simple example of how the linguistic knowledge needed to participate in a discourse community is not fixed is the changing style of business correspondence in the last two decades. Against this backdrop, the academic literacies approach proposed by Lea and Street (1998) proved to be influential. The emphasis on epistemology and identities in this approach allows students to develop the facility to switch

practices between one setting and another and empowers all student writers to involve themselves in the "meaning-making and contestation around meaning", which is nearer to the academic and professional writing needs of the twenty-first century. Importantly, the academic literacies approach encapsulates both the study skills and acculturation models, thereby allowing for the multiplicity of responses deemed necessary in what would become an eclectic approach.

A key consideration was where to locate such a development, as it was unlikely that any one academic department could offer the coordinated, systematic, and, most importantly, cross-disciplinary approach required. Ultimately, it was decided that the most appropriate response was the establishment of a dedicated writing centre. Such a centre could provide what North terms the "physical locus" of the institution's commitment to writing (1984, p.446) and more easily initiate and foster an institution-wide conversation on writing. Most importantly, it would allow writing to be overtly valued and would highlight the opportunity for all writers — undergraduates, postgraduates, faculty — to develop their writing. The Writing Centre would also cater for the writing issues of specific target groups, for example, non-traditional, first-year students, postgraduate students. Furthermore, by supporting a discipline-specific approach, students would not only produce better writing in an academic setting but would develop professional transferable skills.

As the concept of a writing centre was a relatively new one in the Irish HE context, it presented an opportunity to choose the services, the approaches to writing development and the pedagogical underpinnings appropriate to the institutional context. In such a hiatus, it was, of course, vital to avoid the Centre being seen simply as a "grammar and drill center" (North 1984, p.437), where individual students had their writing problems fixed as part of the skills-based, deficit model of student writing (Lea & Street 1998, p.157). A key to avoiding such a negative image was the early inclusion of faculty members from across the disciplines who would act as both writing and Writing Centre champions. This collaboration between teachers of writing and teachers in the discipline immediately allowed a greater sharing of expertise and opened opportunities for staff development. It has provided a framework for combining discipline-specific knowledge with expert knowledge in writing, for identifying productive writing practices, for teaching writing and content together, and for providing opportunities for writing in disciplines where writing has been undervalued. Such collaboration implants a belief that writing is a process which encourages learning not only about writing itself but about the discipline-specific subject matter of that writing. The Writing Centre now plays an important role in providing guidance to lecturers on clearly outlining guidelines in assessments and giving productive feedback specific to writing. By proactively developing these kinds of links within the disciplines, the Writing Centre not only avoided the potential negative image of a fix-it centre awaiting students' realisation of some deficiency in their writing, but also allowed writing experts to work with subject specialists in the development of a number of discipline-specific writing initiatives.

Building on the initial pilot interventions, activities expanded to include, for example, a mini-module on writing for engineering students, essay-writing seminars, one-to-one drop-in seminars, and entire discipline-specific modules devoted to writing. The number of target groups also increased to include such diverse initiatives as an *Introduction to Reflective Writing* for Certificate and Diploma students of Women's Studies on an evening programme, *Writing for Publication* for postgraduate students in Occupational Therapy and an academic

writing module for Access students transitioning to university. At the suggestion of interested members of faculty in, for example, nursing, education, engineering and sociology, writing development was integrated into existing modules. More recently, specialised discipline-specific writing modules were developed for a variety of departments.

5. Regional Approach

While originally focusing only on UL, the interdisciplinary working group was aware that writing support/development was likely to be of interest to colleagues in other Irish HE institutions. The opportunity to collaborate with three other HE institutions came with the establishment of the **Shannon Consortium Regional Writing Centre** in 2007. Funded by the HEA's *Strategic Innovation Fund 1*, the Regional Writing Centre serves UL and its three consortium partners: the Institute of Technology Tralee, Limerick Institute of Technology and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

The collaboration affords valuable opportunities for a sharing of expertise through jointly-run staff development seminars, team-teaching and shadowing activities. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that interesting models of writing development were already well-established in some of the partner institutions, particularly the writing support offered to first-year students on the BA programme at Mary Immaculate College. As a result of shadowing and collaboration, students and staff at all four institutions benefit from the replication and contextualisation of writing development activities which have been successful at partner institutions. An action research programme is underway with the first one-day symposium on writing held in December 2007. Other initiatives have included the establishment of a peer-tutoring programme, online resources and the extension of the student needs analysis and staff survey discussed above to the three other institutions. The Writing Centre has both promoted and benefited from the collaboration of the Shannon Consortium partners.

6. Conclusion

The establishment of a writing centre is an important and, in the Irish HE context, ground-breaking step. It provides a centralised locus for the provision of a systematic discipline-specific writing support and development programme. The Writing Centre responds directly to the writing needs identified in the staff and student surveys carried out at UL and corroborating evidence from students and faculty surveys replicated in the other three institutions in the Shannon Consortium. While initial writing support was provided on an ad hoc basis, the move now is clearly towards a *Writing in the Disciplines* approach with elements of the *Writing Across the Curriculum* and *Writing to Learn* approaches being incorporated. The academic literacies approach, encapsulating both the study skills and acculturation models, has also been influential. Such an eclectic approach satisfies the multiplicity of writing needs of UL students identified in the online surveys.

The success of the Writing Centre can be measured in terms of participation rates, its spread across disciplines, its contribution to teaching and research and the feedback it has received. The numbers benefitting from Writing Centre initiatives continue to grow, for example, c. 5,000 UL students between September 2007 and June 2009, and involve all Faculties, both traditional and non-traditional students and at all levels of study. Research on the effectiveness of the Writing Centre is ongoing; however, initial results from a sample of 260

participants in a wide range of writing initiatives, representing a variety of disciplines, reveal that an overwhelming majority of users found the activities of the Writing Centre to meet their needs. 96.2% of the users reported that they found the writing intervention to be either excellent (24.6%), very good (40.4%) or good 31.2%. Just over 3.1% reported that the activities were mediocre or poor. (0.8% of the responses remained blank.) An external evaluation, conducted in 2008 by Dr. Terry Zawacki of George Mason University, commended the Writing Centre for its "remarkable progress" towards meetings its goals. Importantly, the Centre is now recognised as a unique centre of expertise in Ireland, with requests for advice from other institutions wishing to replicate its activities.

The success of the Writing Centre has caused it to deal even at this early stage in its existence with what North identified as the twin factors of image and scale (North 1994, p.14). As described above, the issue of image was one which was considered from the beginning and one which was resolved by the involvement of colleagues from the disciplines. The development of accredited modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and the involvement of Writing Centre staff in research have also contributed to the image of the Centre. The issue of scale relates to the growing demand for the Centre's involvement in ever more activities. The management of expectations has therefore become an important issue for the Writing Centre so that students and other staff have a realistic understanding of the progress that can be made with the time and resources available. The challenge for the Writing Centre staff is in finding the optimal use of resources while continuing to encourage *all* students and faculty to become better writers

Despite these issues, the Centre, to date, has successfully delivered a wide range of interventions to targeted groups. Very significantly, it has raised consciousness of the centrality of writing to academic success and what it is to be a writer. By taking a proactive approach to writing development, it has increased the likelihood of students and colleagues consciously and proactively attempting to produce better writing. Furthermore, by developing writing as a critical skill, the Shannon Consortium Regional Writing Centre has taken an important step in championing the development of professional transferable skills and preparing their students for the knowledge economy.

7. References

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