

Situating Academic Writing In The Undergraduate Curriculum: Some Reflections

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Abstract

Despite considerable efforts across the Higher Education (HE) sector to promote academic writing, concerns continue to be raised about standards. While a considerable body of research exists on academic writing, the relationship between the curriculum and

academic writing has not been explored in depth. In light of the current level of concern about academic literacy standards (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), coupled with the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011), it is appropriate that we analyse how we are addressing academic writing within our curricula. In this paper we examine our own undergraduate curricula in Nursing and Health Disciplines and critically reflect on aspects that may facilitate or hinder the development of academic writing. Suggestions are made for ways in which 'space' can be created within the curriculum for academic writing to be fostered.

Key words: Academic literacy; Academic writing; Undergraduate Curriculum; Nursing.

1.1 1. Introduction and Background

Commensurate with international trends the Higher Education (HE) sector in Ireland is undergoing a process of reform and innovation in terms of the design and delivery of undergraduate curricula. One of the more significant drivers of change is the Bologna Process which specified that by 2010 all undergraduate programmes and modules must be written from a learning outcomes perspective. The adoption of a learning outcomes approach enables HE institutes to move beyond the confines of disciplinary specific knowledge and communicate the skills developed during the educational process (Maher, 2004). Discussions on graduate skills form part of the larger debate on the role of tertiary education in contemporary society (Star and Hammer, 2008). However, there is consensus that a key or fundamental skill that all students are expected to develop and master is the ability to write effectively and competently from a disciplinary perspective (Andrews, 2003; Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson, and Reddy, 2006; Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Whitehead, 2002; Wingate, 2006). Arguably, agreeing key skills does not automatically guarantee appropriate consideration within curricula. Indeed, current levels of concern about academic writing standards suggest that our curricula may be failing to effectively promote and develop these skills (Harwood and Hadley, 2004). With the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) proficiency in academic writing is placed firmly at the centre of the Irish Higher Education agenda. In outlining the major challenges facing the third level sector this specifically addresses the need for the inclusion of generic and lifelong learning skills in a knowledge based sustainable economy.

Academic writing is widely recognised as challenging and potentially problematic for students. In fact Elander et al. (2006) describe it as one of the most demanding tasks that students face. Some of the concern stems from the recognition that for some students finding an academic 'voice' and 'identity' may prove frustrating, particularly during the transition to Higher Education (Gourlay, 2009). Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, and Swann (2003) suggest that academic writing is often the 'invisible dimension' of the curriculum, with students not explicitly taught yet somehow expected to conform to agreed standards, norms and conventions. The national strategy has clearly 'lain down the gauntlet' for the HE sector in terms of promoting key skills, when it suggests that 'doing nothing is not an option and leaving it too late is not an option either' (Hunt, 2011 p. 4). Traditionally, curriculum design has not explicitly addressed academic writing (Lea, 2004), although increasingly this is changing. In Ireland and the UK, institutional and curricular support for writing is influenced by the models discussed below.

1.2 Models of Academic Writing

Approaches to academic writing generally fall into one of three overlapping models (Lea and Street, 2006), the Study Skills model; the Academic Socialization model and the Academic Literacies model. At one end of the spectrum is the traditional skills approach, which views the learner as relatively passive and knowledge as transparent and stable. The origins of the skills approach are attributed to a deficit or remedial perspective (Green, Hammer and Stephens, 2005; Huijser, Kimmins and Galligan, 2008; Skillen, Merten, Trivett and Percy, 1998) where deficiencies in writing are seen as easily addressed. The focus is very much on the teaching of commonly held features and norms with skills taught in generic workshops or skills classes. Criticisms leveled at this approach include the overwhelming focus on technical skills, the decontextualisation of writing from disciplinary discourse, the promotion of surface learning and the perception that shortcomings in writing are easily corrected (Lillis, 2003; Skillen et al., 1998; Wingate, 2006).

The academic socialisation model views the development of academic writing in terms of socialisation, acculturation and apprenticeship, within a disciplinary context (see Lea and Street, 2006). Although it acknowledges context, it has been criticised for viewing disciplines as fixed and stable and socialisation as straightforward. Increasingly influential is the Academic Literacies approach which embraces the inherent complexities involved in learning and acknowledges 'both epistemological issues and social processes including power relations among people, institutions and social identities' (Lea and Street, 2006, p. 369). Writing from this perspective is perceived as a socially mediated and dynamic practice, with students actively navigating and engaging in disciplinary discourse. Because writing is situated and context-specific, issues of institutional power, authority and identity are recognised as having a profound impact on how and what students come to know in relation to writing (Lillis, 2003).

1.3 This paper

While study skills have their role, it is now widely acknowledged that writing can not be separated from subject content and the process of learning (Wingate, 2006). Given this, it is important to examine academic writing within the context of the wider curriculum. Our aim in this paper is to examine and reflect on the ways in which our curricula may help or hinder the development of academic writing among our students as well as open up discussion on ways in which we might address this. We teach in a Department of Nursing, Midwifery & Health Studies that offers a wide range of programmes at undergraduate and post-graduate level. For the purpose of this paper we focus on our core undergraduate provision: four Nursing programmes (BSc in General Nursing, BSc in Intellectual Disability Nursing, BSc in Midwifery, BSc in Psychiatric Nursing), BA in Early Childhood Studies and BSc in Health & Physical Activity.

We support our analysis with reference to our students' perspectives as evidenced in a number of studies and evaluations conducted with our students (Delahunt, Everitt-Reynolds, Maguire & Sheridan, 2010; Delahunt, Maguire & Everitt-Reynolds, 2011; Maguire & Delahunt, 2009).

2. When, where and how do we cover academic writing?

As is typical in many Departments and Institutions academic writing is explicitly covered in depth in the first year. All Nursing and Midwifery students take a semester 1 'Learning to Learn' module that covers academic writing, use of sources and referencing and academic integrity. On our other programmes academic writing is covered via dedicated classes in specific modules. Not surprisingly therefore, that when discussing academic writing with our students, we found that when it came to what is 'covered' students tended to emphasise many of the norms and conventions that for them constitute academic writing. Referencing and using sources appropriately were perceived as the most frequently mentioned issue whether in the study skills sessions, in class or in feedback.

In 2010 we conducted a survey of our 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students (n=263) in order to assess knowledge and understanding around plagiarism (Delahunt, et al., 2010). We were surprised to note the consistency in key responses across years of study. We expected that 3rd years would report higher levels of confidence and knowledge but generally this was not the case. This may suggest that if our students don't 'get it' early on then they continue to struggle with academic writing through the course of study.

The feedback students receive on their written assignments contributes significantly to the development of academic writing throughout the entire programme. A focus-group study (n=40) of our students' perceptions of feedback (Maguire & Delahunt, 2009) found that students identified both formal guidance and feedback as contributing to their writing 'know how'. Indeed, feedback was acknowledged consistently as perhaps the most effective way of improving writing skills. However, issues such as timing, clarity and concreteness impact on students' access to and use of feedback and these are well acknowledged within the research (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2004). In particular the curriculum structure was identified as a potential barrier to accessing feedback. Modular structure and the clustering of assignments towards the end of the term meant that at times detailed feedback was not available until long after submission dates or after the semester had ended.

In summary, academic writing is addressed in multiple ways throughout our curricula however most of the formal provision is concentrated in the first year. It seems likely that some students are much better placed to benefit from this early on than others. Some students are very confident in their writing and the curriculum seems to have supported them in developing confident voices. However, for many, academic writing is challenging and continues to be so throughout their studies. While embedding academic writing throughout the curriculum is complex our department recently introduced Stage Convenors whose role includes providing academic support. Students are encouraged to take advantage of the individual attention and anecdotal evidence suggests students are certainly availing of this; however this does rely on students proactively seeking help. A key challenge for us in terms reviewing our programmes is

how best to systematically and proactively support student writing throughout the programme.

3. What are our students internalising about academic writing?

Inadvertently, some students seem to be getting the message that academic writing is essentially about referencing and avoiding plagiarism. Our survey indicated very high levels of concern regarding unintentional plagiarism. While overall students expressed moderate confidence in their use of sources and understanding of plagiarism, 78.4% of students in the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they were worried about unintentional plagiarism. A majority also agreed or strongly agreed that they were reluctant to make their own points if they can't reference them. MacGowan (2005) has argued that technical skills-focused approaches may undermine the development of academic writing and contribute to excessive concern about unintentional plagiarism. Overall our findings suggests that many of our students are overly concerned with the 'how' of academic writing at the expense of the 'why' and this may inhibit their development as writers within their disciplines.

Activities that focus on the 'why' of writing rather than the 'how' of academic writing (see MacGowan, 2005), are more likely to promote meaningful engagement. These include opportunities to discuss writing and expectations, opportunities to write and demonstrate critical analysis in academic scripts (Gopee, 2002), placing more emphasis on formative feedback and discipline-specific genre analysis (see Zhu, 2004; Gimenez, 2008). Increasingly, it is argued that these activities should be a core part of the programme in first year (MacGowan, 2005; Gourlay, 2009). In response to this, in 2010-11 we developed an initiative 'Finding your academic voice' that was delivered to all incoming first year students. Using an Academic Literacies (Lea & Street, 1998; 2006) framework the initiative focused on the nature and purpose of academic writing in Nursing and Health Studies. Many of these activities, exercises and examples were also included as a booklet that we produced with the help of National Digital Repository (NDLR) funding (Everitt-Reynolds, et al., 2011). The initiative consisted of three 2-hour work-shops. The first was delivered in induction week and the rest in weeks 2 and 3. Workshop 1 dealt with the nature and purpose of academic writing, Workshop 2 with understanding expectations and Workshop 3 with getting started. Our evaluations showed that students found these very useful (Delahunt et al., 2011). Approximately 80% of students felt better prepared to engage with academic writing after each work-shop. Ninety-four percent of respondents agreed that they had a better understanding of how academic work is evaluated and 86.5% agreed that they had a better understanding of academic sources. Interestingly, when we asked our students how we could improve the workshops, many of the suggestions were around referencing and other specific skills. This suggests that, for our students at least, the 'why' and the 'how' of writing need to be addressed together and we are modifying our workshops in response.

4. Conclusion

What emerged from our analysis was that issues within and beyond the formal curriculum can have a profound influence on our students' understanding of academic writing. In short, factors such as a preoccupation with the more technical aspects of writing, confusion around expectations, as well as issues of ownership and power can have unintentional consequences in developing writing 'know how'. These findings are consistent with the Academic Literacies perspective of Lea and Street (2006) and highlight that if academic writing is to be effectively promoted within curricula then the entire programme merits careful consideration. This is essential so that when, where, and how academic writing is addressed, across the programme, becomes explicit. It is worth considering what this might look like in practice. Fundamentally, this may necessitate a redesign of current curricula so that writing and assessments are introduced in a staged, incremental and explicit manner across the programme of study rather than just in the first year, as proposed by MacGowan (2005). The challenges posed by this at both the institutional and departmental level are significant (Mills and Bennett, 2009). In effect, it would necessitate a re-examination of all aspects of the curriculum including learning outcomes, course content, teaching and learning strategies and assessment criteria and methodologies.

One of the most effective ways to make 'space' within existing curricula is to pay more attention to formative assessment and feedback. Good feedback effectively promotes learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998, Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2004) and is essential in developing academic literacy. However, without dedicated space for feedback within the formal curriculum a message may be sent to students that academic writing is not important. Informal assessment and feedback offer considerable opportunities (Jawah et al., 2004; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2004) in this regard. If well-designed, these can be used in ways that do not add to student and staff workloads (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Snelgar and Maguire, 2010).

To make 'space' within curricula, where writing and disciplinary content become more visibly integrated, it is essential to open up dialogue with students, right from the very start, about their expectations, our expectations, as well as the nature, process and purpose of academic writing. The importance of the first year as a transitional period is widely recognised, as is the role of academic literacy in the development of student identities (Gourlay, 2009). New students both want and need to develop the basic technical skills necessary for academic writing but our findings suggest that these may be overemphasised in ways that are counterproductive and furthermore, contribute to limited conceptualisations of academic writing.

In conclusion, there is much that can be done to improve the way that academic writing is situated within contemporary curricula. The creation of 'space' could provide students with opportunities to demonstrate the level of learning achieved as well as their commitment to professional development (Lloyd, 2007). It is evident that the Academic Literacies approach

has much to offer in terms of curriculum design. However, there is potential to make more 'space' within current programmes. We can start by looking at the messages, intentional and unintentional, that our students are getting about academic writing.

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