

Teaching Academic Writing skills at Level 9: An Evaluation

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'There remains in circulation a myth that writing can't be taught. That despite the proliferation of writing courses, writing is something esoteric, unpindownable, something inspired by muses and shaped by genius.' (Bell, 2001: xi, as cited by Antonio and Moriarty, 2008: 160)



Background

In 2008/09 a 5 credit level 9 academic writing module was offered in the School of Business Studies, Letterkenny IT. Three techniques were identified from the literature and included in the module design: the writer-respondent method (Bharuthram and McKenna, 2006), writers' groups incorporating peer review (Aitchison and Lee, 2006), and WebCT® reflective postings. Learners could bring their dissertation proposal to the academic writing module for both tutor and peer review. The module had relatively low contact hours; assessment comprised 8 WebCT® discussion postings (task based and reflective) and a portfolio of evidence of improvement in writing skills.

Aim

The aim of this study is to evaluate both the overall quality of the intervention and the individual strategies chosen. It focuses on assessing students' perceptions of their own improvement in academic writing skills. This could be developed into an iterative process of improving the module, and add something to the knowledge base on the pedagogy of academic writing skills.

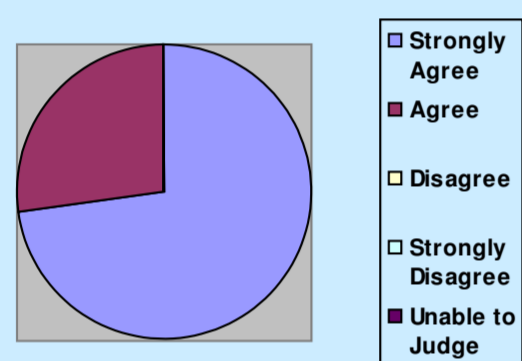
Methods

A questionnaire to all participating students evaluating how well the module fulfilled its LO's (Oliver et al, 2008), followed by semi-structured interviews with 7 out of 12 participating students focusing on the effectiveness of the various learning strategies.

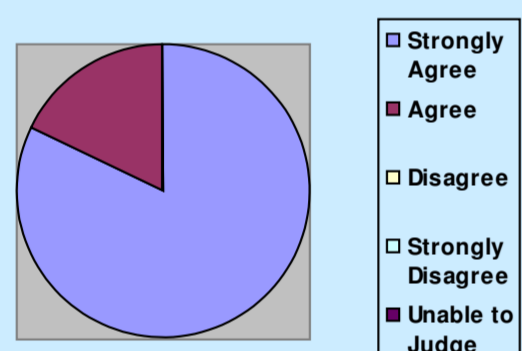
Preliminary results

12 questionnaires were distributed and 11 were returned completed.

Questionnaire:



Overall, I was satisfied with this module.



The learning experiences in this module helped me to achieve the learning outcomes.

Student comments

'This module allowed me to recognise my strengths and weaknesses in academic writing. In particular, recognising my weaknesses made me aware of my mistakes and allowed me to understand such weaknesses and work on correcting them.'

'The module helped me to understand the importance of clarity, referencing and structure when conducting academic research writing.'

'A very helpful and rewarding learning module. The regular tasks and deadlines keep the workflow and the learning process progressing.'

'I found the ability to review peers' work extremely helpful as it guided me with my own writing style.'

Interviews:

Students were enthusiastic about the module. While making suggestions for improvement, they found the writer-respondent method, writers' groups incorporating peer review and WebCT® discussion postings all effective in helping to improve their academic writing skills. The amount of formative assessment included in the module was seen as a major reason for the success of the module. Feedback on written tasks and the opportunity to read peers' work were popular aspects. Interestingly, the opportunity to do a peer review was perceived as more useful than reading a peer's review. Overall, students saw a short term improvement in their writing skills associated with their knowledge and competence in approaching their dissertation work. However, there was also evidence of improved confidence in general writing skills both in written work from their other subject areas and in their attitude to future writing tasks in their professional careers.

Preliminary conclusions

The module was perceived as successful in achieving its LO's. Also, the task-based strategies used were perceived as effective in improving academic writing skills. The use of feedback was integral to the success of the module. Most students had never read colleagues' work as part of module requirements, and this peer review approach was valued as a learning experience.



References:

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Bharuthram, S, and McKenna, S (2006) 'A Writer-Respondent Intervention as a Means of Developing Academic Literacy' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(4) pp.495-507
Oliver, B., Tucker, B., Gupta, R. and Yeo, S. (2008) 'eVALUate: an evaluation instrument for measuring students' perceptions of their engagement and learning outcomes' *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(6) 619-630