

Getting it *write*: A multi-disciplinary approach to student academic support

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August 2007

Abstract

The 'Getting it *write*' project involved a multi-disciplinary response to raising academic standards and achievement. Wide and appropriate reading coupled with the effective and explicit use of those academic sources are two key prerequisites for improvements in standards of academic writing and so the project paid particular attention to targeted academic reading, essay writing and drafting exercises and using the TurnItIn software. The work focused primarily on 'Teaching the skills' although it also had considerable relevance for the theme of 'Creating a culture of honesty' and involved just over 100 undergraduate students including both full-time and part-time groups on an Early Childhood Studies degree.

This report constitutes an evaluation of the outcomes of embedding expert input and support on TurnItIn and academic writing within an existing module on the degree. The staff groups involved included academics, course administrators, learning centre advisors, student academic support advisors and IT specialists from the University's Learning and Teaching Institute. The report draws on data relating to prior student achievement, student module evaluations and analyses of student interview data.

Background to the project

'Getting it *write*' was a small action research project aimed at improving the academic reading and writing skills of a group of undergraduate students. The project involved a cohort of around 100 second year students including both full-time and part-time groups that previous exam board results and academic conduct panels had shown had pockets of academic underachievement. The University and the course team place a high value on widening participation but a concomitant of this is commitment is that HEIs cannot assume pre-existing familiarity with academic conventions and protocols on the part of all students (Harvey & Drew, 2006). Previous student evaluations, external examiner reports and tutor feedback had all identified academic skills as a key issue for this group. Prior to the start of the project for example a survey of student views on academic writing lent support to some existing staff assumptions, hunches and other anecdotal accounts. In the past, students were thought to have 'caught' rather than been 'taught' academic writing skills. Student views on academic writing were sought using a questionnaire asking for comments concerning a range of academic writing tasks such as

paraphrasing, referencing, introducing and referencing quotes, referencing journals, websites and other non-book publications and compiling summative reference lists. Student responses included remarks such as:

- *How can I improve if I've never been shown how to?*
- *I worry when paraphrasing in case of plagiarism.*
- *I want to say in my own words before changing it into an academic style.*
- *Harvard referencing is still affecting my marks.*
- *I try to write it in my own words but end up copying what I'm reading.*
- *I don't understand what is plagiarism or not.*
- *I hate referencing books especially when it is edited books and you only have to reference one chapter.*
- *There is only one word that sums this up and that is HARD.*

Although some of the students had what might be termed 'non-traditional' backgrounds and some had found the transition to higher education challenging, the project was aimed at improving the academic skills of all the students on the course. Whilst academic writing support can appear as an essentially remedial resource suitable only for the less able or the less prepared the team's view was that it should be regarded as part of a continuous process of learning and improvement crucial for all, including the most able.

Experience elsewhere in the institution and garnered from the literature indicated strongly that free standing academic skills support would most probably have a very limited impact. Such provision can be seen by some students as irrelevant due to its apparent separation from the subject content and knowledge that is of most interest to them (Wingate, 2006). A particular problem in this context was that even when referred to existing academic support the onus was on students to take the next step and this they did not always do. Research also suggested that self-esteem and morale were key factors in becoming more effective as learners (McCarthy & Schmeck 1988 in Sutherland, 2003). The project team were therefore keen to make the connections between the social, emotional and cognitive aspects of learning and to create opportunities for positive reciprocal feedback between students' skills and their levels of confidence.

The project sought to enhance the institution's existing attempts to make academic conventions and protocols more explicit to students. The approach adopted involved embedding academic skills learning and teaching into existing provision on the course to heighten its relevance for students and to ensure that it became seen as an issue for all. The project was woven into a twelve week taught module in order to provide the meaningful context necessary for the input on academic skills (Wingate, 2006). The project was consciously multi-disciplinary in its approach; it started from the premise that improving students' abilities to do things better and to become more 'self-determining' and autonomous as learners (Rawson, 2000) could not be achieved by academics alone. Academic staff student ratios and teaching timetables in much of the HE sector mean that tutors must work as part of a wider team to support students' academic development. The project therefore

drew on input from a wide range of staff groups not just academics but also course administrators, learning centre advisors, student academic support advisors and IT specialists from the University's Learning and Teaching Institute. These groups worked in concert to support the students in developing an improved appreciation of scholarly conventions as well as acquiring the academic skills and knowledge necessary to be able to realise the goal of enhanced academic attainment.

The TurnItIn software was seen both as a potentially valuable formative learning and teaching device with which to assist students' efforts to hone their existing academic skills and as a means of reducing incidences of both inept and intentional plagiarism. Although the software indicates possible plagiarism rather than providing complete certainty even these false positive results would provide a valuable stimulus for discussion and reflection between staff and students around the themes of citation, paraphrasing, summarising or referencing (Barrett & Malcolm, 2006). Students received at-elbow guidance on the use of TurnItIn as well as explicit and overt information on their academic duties and responsibilities and extensive guidance and instruction in a variety of forms on academic conventions and protocols including:

- academic writing;
- citation and attribution;
- avoiding plagiarism and collusion whilst working collaboratively.

Methodology

The purpose of the project was to improve students' academic writing skills and to enhance their self-confidence as learners and the methodology was largely qualitative in nature, albeit with some reference to quantitative data on student attainment.

Student feedback on the project was sought through a series of focus group evaluation exercises involving the whole cohort divided into 5 groups coupled with a sample of individual interviews. The group approach provided a forum for the development of a collective analysis of the success or otherwise of the project (Litosseliti, 2003). However the outcomes of the group discussions could prove to be misleadingly seductive as the power relationships (overt and covert) between group members might result in the over-reporting of individual articulate group members rather than the collective opinions of the group (Field, 2000). For this reason the focus group data was supplemented with other interview data. Whilst the individual interviewees were clearly self-selecting and could therefore be deemed as potentially unrepresentative it was thought important to balance seemingly collective views with individual perspectives.

Using data collection methods which were primarily language dependent raised questions about how wording and non-verbal signals might carry different meanings and thus be interpreted differently. Interviewing inevitably produces data in which there may exist a 'residue of ambiguity', however, such data collection techniques provided opportunities to gain an insight into

students' actions and the purposes and meanings underlying those actions (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Group and individual interviews enabled lines of enquiry to be modified and facilitated the pursuit of interesting responses as well as providing opportunities for the investigation of underlying motives (Robson, 1993). The approach therefore enabled project outcomes that were not susceptible to purely numerical analysis to be penetrated in ways that illuminated the subtleties and complexities of the process. The qualitative data could shed light on those harder to measure variables, namely student confidence and levels of engagement.

In addition to the qualitative data however the project also drew on student attainment data. Given the challenges associated with academic writing that students and others had highlighted previously staff involved were sceptical that the project would result in any immediate rise in student attainment in the space of twelve short weeks no matter how 'embedded' the work. However although any movement or lack of movement in student grades would not prove causality it would be of interest and might prove a useful counterpoint to qualitative data emerging from the interviews and focus groups. The students' results for the current and previous year of study were examined across modules and semesters. Consideration was given to the question of whether or not to employ statistical tools in an attempt to gauge whether any of the data that emerged from the academic results were statistically significant or not. However, as the project did not involve random sampling and the dataset was generated from a relatively small convenience sample this risked generating invalid and spurious claims about statistical significance (Gorard, 2003). Instead therefore actual and percentage figures only were utilised in the attempt to locate and explain patterns and relationships.

Outcomes and commentary

Given the predominantly qualitative paradigm within which the research was located, the process of bringing some semblance of order, structure and interpretation to the data was inevitably iterative. The approach adopted had its roots in an editing analysis style in which the interpreter engages text naively, without a template, searching for segments of text to generate and illustrate categories of meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Notwithstanding the somewhat parallel nature of the data collection and analysis elements of the research, the first stage in the process of analysis was to organise the data which included collating and transcribing interview and other data. This was followed initially by reading and examining the data to acquire an overall sense of meaning and then subsequently engaging in a more detailed analysis involving coding and generating categories, themes and patterns under which the different data could be located (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). For Cresswell labelling these categories or themes using the actual language of participants and respondents is important (Cresswell, 2003). Marshall and Rossman (1999) too argue for the need for editing analysis approaches to identify and use indigenous typologies. However, they also envisage a place for analyst constructed typologies and argue that this process is not merely technical in nature but can also produce new understandings. As a result the outcomes are

organised using a combination of both participant language and researcher constructed categories broken down into three themes:

- *'Everybody does it differently so it's quite confusing'*: the need for multi-disciplinary yet consistent approaches across a course
- *'Examples are always better to learn from'*: embedding the work lent purpose to students' efforts
- *'I found [TurnItIn] really useful I'll be using it again next time'*: TurnItIn as a formative tool for improvement

'Everybody does it differently so it's quite confusing': Using a multi-disciplinary, consistent approach across the course

A wide range of staff were involved in the delivery of this module to ensure that the students received a range of skills and expertise. This included IT specialists, academics and learning centre advisors. The danger in such an approach was that the student experience would become fragmented and disjointed, particularly where communication and a shared understanding between staff groups was not strong. In an effort to reduce the likelihood of this academic staff acted as a constant throughout the module. They liaised with colleagues from other departments prior to their input, attended those sessions in order to ensure that students were not given mixed messages and revisited the skills and reinforced the expectations in their own teaching:

We've had two members of staff that were very very involved in making sure that everybody understood what we were doing and wanted to help with our study skills.

...we've been over it as well to make sure that we're clear. I do feel a lot more confident about how to get like access to journals.

... you ended up having to read virtually a full book a week!

Given that this was a first attempt at such a multi-disciplinary approach the incidence of communication breakdown was rare and students seemed to welcome the range of 'expertise' on offer:

I think the two sessions we had with TurnItIn ...were really helpful cause he broke it down what we had to include and he like showed us how to do things...so we got a lot of support...we got kind of the technology support off...and we got the academic support of ...so I think we got quite a lot of support for that.

...we had a seminar on how to use lit search...we didn't have like our normal module tutors we had someone else that kind of specialised in it and he gave us useful help...

The need for consistency in relation to expectations, conventions and protocols related to academic writing was a common refrain from students

during the focus groups and interviews. Many students bemoaned confusion over the information they felt they had sometimes received in the past, for example in relation to the use of quotes and referencing, and welcomed the project's attempt to offer a more definitive set of statements:

Being told how to do your referencing properly but the down side of it is that they say one thing in that module but then when you go to another they do it slightly differently everybody does it differently so it's quite confusing...I think if you have one set structure of how we do it for our course I think it would help everybody out.

...they change all the time like with referencing it's not very consistent ...some people think they've done really good with the referencing and then suddenly you've done really bad and it's like you've done the same thing throughout...

'Examples are always better to learn from': embedding the work lent purpose to students' efforts

As part of the assessment process the students were asked to complete a five hundred word reflection on the module. This asked them to reflect upon their strengths and limitations from communicating their ideas in writing and how they could apply these skills in a work environment. Although not originally intended as such the assessment provided further evidence in addition to the interviews and evaluations. Many students were positive about the incorporation of the academic writing activities within their existing work on early years education and educate:

The academic writing sessions really helped.

Overall I have thoroughly enjoyed this module. I have learnt a lot of new skills that I now use on a regular basis in terms of IT and especially paraphrasing. I was especially pleased about the fact we had the session on how to reference the work properly.

I've learnt more this semester than I think I have others because I didn't really think they made it clear at the beginning how important it was.

...examples are always better to learn from...

The consensus from the focus groups and the majority of students interviewed individually was that they had acquired new academic writing skills through the module and were more confident than previously:

I've always used a lot of quotes in my work...now I've only got I think may be two quotes in it cause most of it I've paraphrased so its kind of showing the importance between paraphrasing and to show your understanding...if you use quotes you have to explain what the quote means whereas if you paraphrase...it shows you know what it means.

... you know they're all skills that will make you more employable...

...the rest of my references have been like five things and this time it's like three pages or something ridiculous it's like I think I know how to do it.

I didn't know how to access journals at all last year...but now I feel reasonably confident to go and do it...

...it's been easier to kind of skim read the article because before I spent a lot more time reading the whole of it and then by the time I got to the end of it I'd forgotten what was at the start...I can skim read better. I can pick out the main parts...

Some students also retrospectively discussed their initial thoughts and feelings at their interview.

I didn't really have a clue at the beginning, about academic writing, never really been taught to do that.

I knew paraphrasing was like important bit I wasn't sure how to go about it.

However, many of these skills such as using Litsearch to locate journal articles or using TurnItIn to check referencing, acknowledgements, phrasing and paraphrasing are things that need to be revisited, practised and consolidated. For example even after the intensive support offered as part of the project a small minority of students were still lacking in confidence about how to use TurnItIn. Revisiting skills helps students to learn and apply them in other modules. This is something that will be incorporated into the course in future years as academic study skills are mapped across all the modules on the course.

'I found [TurnItIn] really useful I'll be using it again next time': TurnItIn as a formative tool for improvement

There was a very positive response from interviewees and focus groups to the use of the TurnItIn software. Rather than seeing the software as a punitive tool intended to trip them up, students welcomed the opportunity to use it formatively to help them hone their academic writing skills. Students reported making good use of the software not only in the educare module but also in other areas of their studies:

...using the TurnItIn software was very useful. I've used it loads...

TurnItIn we used that and everyone found that really really useful because we submitted a little piece of work ...not only benefiting our

educare module ...it's also benefiting all the others because it gives us a chance to run all other pieces of assessment through...so that we are not in any danger of being plagiarised.

Well I will use it for all of my assignments I found it really useful I will be using it again next time.

Yes I will definitely, I am going to use it for one of my other essays I have to hand in next week.

...we've had a lot of academic writing...helps a lot especially the referencing I thought I was doing it right to begin with but now I've had these it's like oh...I feel a lot more confident with that now...

The formative use of TurnItIn proved easy to incorporate into the module in part thanks to the expert support provided by staff from the institution's Learning and Teaching Institute. The intention therefore is to roll this out more widely into module planning so that students have more opportunity to learn from their mistakes before the final submission of their assessments.

The review of student attainment data also proved interesting in relation to the impact of TurnItIn and the other embedded activities on student grades. Marking of work was monitored closely and included extensive use of external moderation in an effort to ensure that grade inflation due to any halo effect did not creep in. As was stated earlier the project team had not anticipated any immediate impact on student achievement and therefore expected any fluctuations in student grades to follow what was thought a 'typical' pattern with most students experiencing a few percentage point differences both up and down in relation to their average scores with a small number experiencing no fluctuations at all. However when the assignment scores for the module were compared with students' year average grades, 67 students' marks were higher than their year average, 25 were lower and 10 were the same as the year average. For most students the differences were trifling, a mere percentage point or two, but for 30 of the students whose marks had improved in comparison to their year average scores the improvement was 5 percent or more. Two groups stood out. Firstly the grade improvement seemed particularly marked amongst part-time students and the project team speculated on whether the greater maturity and experience of many part-time students had made them better placed to take on board the input on TurnItIn and academic writing generally. The second group was small, numbering 9-10 students whose poor results had persisted in spite of all the input on TurnItIn and academic writing. The observation tended to support the project team's contention that reaching some of the most vulnerable students will necessitate a longer term strategy of which this was simply the first step.

Clearly it would be a gross over-simplification to assume a crude causality here, this was not an experimental situation, there was no control group and improvements in student grades could conceivably be coincidental or even be the result of a natural, organic growth in students' capabilities that would have

happened anyway. Even so, the assignment scores were encouraging when viewed alongside the qualitative data

Conclusions and next steps

The project showed that a co-ordinated, multi-disciplinary approach to the subject of academic writing skills using TurnItIn as a formative tool to support student's progress can be effective, particularly in relation to building confidence and competencies. No single project or tool will provide a panacea to the on-going challenges facing staff and students in HEIs relating to academic writing and clearly in the longer term the practices developed here need to be built on and disseminated more widely. It is also the case that writing skills and embedding alone may be insufficient to help students progress and that a key ingredient needs to be the promotion of new and innovative approaches to the development of critical and reflective thinking alongside these developments. This said the project was welcomed by students who saw it as meeting a need that they themselves had identified as well as having staff development benefits associated with skills transfer and team working.

The feedback and outcomes of the study have been fed into the annual course action planning process and the project team have identified the following next steps as a result:

- to extend the use of the TurnItIn software into new modules;
- to provide written guidance in student handbooks on what TurnItIn is and how to use the software;
- to incorporate study skills into formative assessment activities;
- to embed study skills more widely across a range of modules on the course;
- to introduce critical thinking exercises alongside study skills and TurnItIn activities.

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