How do first year lecturers help students develop writing skills?

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Abstract: As part of a larger study, this paper reports on the various ways in which lecturers in a multidisciplinary first year embed and develop writing skills. A wide variety of approaches are described based on information gleaned through the examination of materials used as well as through in-depth interview with the first year staff. The paper reflects on the various approaches taken and discusses these within a developmental approach to tertiary student writing within the disciplines. It also examines the relationship between lecturers’ perceptions of student written ability and the ways in which they help students develop their written abilities. The paper concludes with suggestions for first year staff on improving student writing.

Keywords: writing development, first year transition, lecturers’ strategies

Introduction

The literature records that as far back as the 1870’s, academics have been concerned about student tertiary writing and these concerns have persisted to the present day (Russell, 1991). Complaints about student writing have been documented by various researchers and include concerns with: grammar, spelling and punctuation (Baynham et al 1994; Lea, 1994); ability to understand and explain facts (Russell, 1991); ability to structure argument (Lea and Street, 1998); and plagiarism (Baynham et al, 1994; Russell 1991; Currie 1998). Even students who have perceived of themselves as good writers prior to entry into the tertiary system often start to query their writing abilities at the tertiary level as difficulties arise in working out what is required in the written work. Of their many concerns, students have expressed a lack of familiarity with the conventions of writing including how to: globally structure a piece of writing; select appropriate content for inclusion in the writing; and use and cite sources (Lillis, 1997; Lea 1994).

Universities have responded to these concerns in two major ways: one which reflects a skills deficit model and the other which reflects a model of writing that is developmental and socially constructed (Russell 1991; Candlin 1998; Lea and Street 1998). The skills deficit model assumes that students are lacking in skills which should have been taught prior to entry to university. In this model, the “basics” of writing are assumed to be at fault and once these are remedied, the student should be able to write whatever the task or context. Under this model, students are offered or obliged to take “composition” classes or “communication skills” units which aim to “fix” the writing problems and have them ready for writing in their discipline units.

But do students have problems that need fixing? In examining writing requirements at the tertiary level it would appear that the difficulties being reported do not arise from a lack of
basic skills, but that the writing requirements are different from both the secondary context and the work context. At a general level, tertiary students are required to use academic voice in discipline specific language, to take a stance in relation to other texts and to write long, complex texts objectively and explicitly (Johns, 1997; Kaldor & Roucheouste, in press; Vardi, 2000) – writing requirements which they may not have previously experienced. These, however, are only part of the challenges facing first year students in their writing. As they move from unit to unit and, therefore, often from discipline to discipline, they are confronted with a variety of writing requirements. This variety reflects differing purposes, cultures, disciplines and ways of thinking (Chanock 1994; Lea and Street 1998; Vardi 2000). This diversity requires writing to be developed within disciplines, schools and ultimately individual units. Such an approach acknowledges that writing is developmental and socially constructed. How can lecturers develop their students’ writing abilities while teaching the content of their unit?

To investigate this question, I interviewed first year content lecturers about how they perceived their students’ writing abilities and how they managed to help students develop the writing skills appropriate to the task and the discipline.

Methodology

As part of a larger study, the perceptions and strategies of first year lecturers with regards to student writing were examined in semester 2, 1999 of a business degree programme within a large West Australian University. Within this programme, all students are required to complete a core set of eight units in their first year. Each of the eight units provide students with the foundation for a range of disciplinary majors upon which they may decide to embark in their second and third years of study. The eight units include Economics, Accounting, Finance, Management, Marketing, Statistics, Management Information Systems (MIS) and Legal Studies. Full-time students complete four units per semester and these can be taken in any combination and in any order. Unit numbers vary in size from between 400 to 800 students in any given semester.

The student group is characterised by diversity in terms of cultural background, work experience, and formalised learning experiences. To help this heterogenous student group transit successfully into university, all the first year lecturers are part of the Faculty's First Year Lecturers' Group. The group shares information about what each of their units is doing and formulates strategies for aiding students in a wide range of areas including the development of tertiary literacy abilities.

For this part of the study, each of the lecturers in the First Year Lecturers’ Group were interviewed resulting in a total of eleven interviews. The interviews were transcribed and analysed for perceptions of student writing ability. Copies of the lecturers’ written assignment prompts, written instructions and any written information handed out on writing were also collected and analysed. The interviews along with the written material were used to ascertain the strategies the lecturing staff adopted with large numbers of students.

Results

With eight units representing different discipline areas, there was wide variation in the assessments set for the first year students in semester 2 of 1999. Examination of assessment requirements reveals that over the course of a year's work, students would have been exposed to three minor pieces of extended writing (two pages or less), five major essays and three business reports. The MIS, Statistics and Legal Studies units each required one piece of
extended writing. The Accounting, Economics, Marketing and Management units required two pieces of extended writing while the Finance unit did not require an extended cohesive piece of writing at all. First year students in semester 2 1999 would have experienced a combination of up to four of any of the above units.

As previously reported, interviews with the eleven first year lecturers involved in these units revealed that their expectations of writing differed from written task to written task. These differences related to various aspects of academic writing including:

- what are considered to be appropriate sources and uses of information
- appropriate ways to order and sequence information
- which types of information are considered important and which are not
- format requirements (Vardi 2000)

With all the staff being involved in the First Year Lecturers' Group, most of them were aware of the need to help students transit into the new academic requirements of tertiary education. All, bar two of the lecturers, believed that they had a role in developing students' written abilities and laying a foundation for writing requirements in the second and third years of the degree programme.

**How lecturers helped students with writing requirements**

Analysis of the data reveals that lecturers helped students in their writing through three major approaches: handouts, advice and coaching.

**Information from handouts**

While both reports and essays were required in the first year units, these were dealt with quite differently in handouts. For each of the reports in Accounting, Marketing and MIS, the handouts prescribed which headings were to be used along with the nature of the information to be included under each heading. These were carefully explained and were accompanied by strict guidelines for formatting. As one of the marketing lecturers stated:

"If I don't give them the headings that is where the ordering is wrong ... and (they) don't have adequate headings and don't have the right paragraphs - split paragraphs, combined paragraphs"

In contrast, the amount of instructions and direction given for the essay writing tasks varied greatly for the 5 major essays arising out of the Economics, Accounting, Legal Studies, Management and Statistics units. Three of the units provided limited information about writing requirements over and above the assignment prompt, giving only an indication of requirements such as to “logically develop” the essay, “write clearly and precisely” and to "avoid plagiarism".

Two units provided extensive information both on the process of writing and the general requirements of the end product. These included such information as: how to get started on an essay; lists of appropriate library indexes and databases; general information on paragraphs, topic sentences, introductions, bodies and conclusions; referencing conventions; and the criterion reference marking guide used throughout the faculty. In one of these units, students were also provided with a model essay, the structure of which had been deconstructed for them. This was accompanied by strict instructions on structuring the essay to match the model they had been given.

Despite the wide variety of expectations in essay writing identified earlier, very few of these were specifically addressed in the written handouts accompanying the essay prompts except in the unit where the model essay and explicit instructions on format and structure had been
provided. The handouts overall appeared to address few of the differences in writing expectations. Further delving, however, revealed that lecturers gave much more help with writing requirements than could be ascertained through written materials.

**Advice given through lectures**

Lecturers in all the units with extended writing tasks gave advice on these during the lecture, though the amount and type of advice given varied. Several lecturers helped their students by addressing the assignment question in lecture a few weeks before it was due to be handed in. One lecturer described what he did as follows:

"I gave them a pep session about two weeks prior to the essay about what I saw as a good academic essay .. I went through each of those questions and highlighted to them what they should be looking at. So the first question I ask is 'What particular action word do you see there. Oh discuss. Well, what does discuss mean?' ... I pull the question apart so they knew exactly what we're looking at."

Others went beyond the prompt. One of the lecturers, for instance, over a period of five weeks leading up to the date of assignment submission, used the faculty’s criterion referenced marking guide as a mechanism for teaching the students how they could write better and get a better mark.

"(I) point to the descriptors (on the marking form) and say 'if you only in your introduction said 'In section two I am going to do this and in section three I am going to do this and then I will wind up with a conclusion', then you've written an introduction but it's very basic and sits down in this (pass) range. If you do some research into the mathematics and say a sample of 35 is borderline for a t z distribution and make some sort of comments about that, you're creeping up into (a credit pass level) ..”

Some lecturers provided models and examples for students to follow during the lecture. For instance, one of the lecturers would model the process for dealing with the assignment question:

"(I would) model how to get the key concepts out of the article. Get a blank sheet of paper. Photocopy the article several times. Put pen on to link things. Then write a draft. Write a precis. Write another draft."

He would also model how to write answers for the exam:

"I would say things like 'If you get an exam question ... and the question is ... what are you going to say?' So we'll do how to run through the five paragraphs or the six paragraphs of your essay answer."

Another of the lecturers used past questions in each lecture as a basis for modelling and discussing writing with her students.

"How would you answer it? What do you think?.. This is how I would approach it ... Why not do this by way of a short introduction. Give a definition of the terms that are covered so that we know we are on the same wavelength before we start marking it. Why not use this as your main body. Why not add a few examples into here and pad that out and really demonstrate your understanding."
In contrast to the bulk of the handouts accompanying the essays, the advice given in the lectures tended to be directly related to the specific writing task often highlighting expectations and disciplinary requirements. While this advice was useful, it was dispensed to all students en masse and several of the lecturers recognised that they needed to do more.

**Coaching**

The coaching of students took a number of forms. While some lecturers offered to look over drafts of essays, staff reported that only a few students availed themselves of this offer. Other lecturers, however, built in coaching in a more systematic way into their unit delivery. In one unit for instance, students were coached through their entire report. Each week, one section of the report was set aside for the tutorial. The tutor taught the students about what needed to go into that section and the students worked on that part of the report in their groups.

Another of the lecturers set aside individual appointment times for each of the students in her tutorial group. She explained the appointments as follows:

“*When they come, they must have read the article, in the first meeting at least and thought about the article. They may not have brought the first draft, but that doesn't matter. In subsequent meetings with me they must have something in writing. .. The first appointment is 15 minutes. The subsequent appointment is 30 minutes.*"

She estimated that 80% of her students used the appointments system stating:

“*Without that help, they wouldn’t know that they are on the right track.*"

Given the amount of help offered to students, how did the staff perceive students’ writing abilities?

**Staff perceptions about student writers**

All the lecturers interviewed felt that, to varying degrees, students presented with writing problems. Table 1 summarises lecturers' estimates of the percentage of students in their classes presenting as "poor", "average" and "good" writers.

**Table 1: Lecturers' estimates of poor, average and good writers from across units**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Competence</th>
<th>Mean %</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>10 - 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>25 - 65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10 - 25%</td>
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Examination of Table 1 reveals a wide range of opinion between lecturers, particularly in perceptions of poor and average writers for the same first year group of students. Even within the same unit with the same written assessment tasks, perceptions of the proportion of writers with problems varied where there was more than one lecturer. For instance, one of the Statistics lecturers felt that between 10 - 20% of her students had poor written ability, while the other believed the figure to be 35%. In the Economics unit, the difference in perception was even more marked with one lecturer believing 30% were poor writers while the other believed it was 60%.

What were the nature of these "problems"? Again different lecturers reported a different range of concerns. Together, these concerns related to tertiary writing problems that have been reported in the literature for over a century: mechanics; presentation; use of colloquial language; research; plagiarism; logic and thinking; and demonstration of knowledge (Russell
1991; Baynham, Beck et al. 1994; Lea 1994; Reid 1997; Currie 1998). Table 2 shows, however, that lecturers within different units perceived the same cohort of students as presenting with different sets of writing problems.

Table 2: Perceptions of student problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prob Type</th>
<th>Acc</th>
<th>Man</th>
<th>Econs</th>
<th>Legal Studies</th>
<th>Stats</th>
<th>MIS</th>
<th>Mkt</th>
<th>Fin</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
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<td>Presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colloquial language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plagiarism</td>
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<td>Sequencing</td>
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<td>Illogical</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<td>Poor flow</td>
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<td>Poor argument</td>
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<td>*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of explicitness</td>
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Several of these differences in perception appear to be due to the differences in expectations associated with different academic writing tasks. Where the lecturers expected argument in the students' writing, some students had difficulty in meeting this expectation satisfactorily and so a problem existed. This "problem" did not emerge for lecturers for whom this was not an expectation. Similarly, where students were required to analyse material rather than search for it, no problems in plagiarism were reported, though being illogical did arise as a problem. Where, however, students were required to report or retell findings from the literature, so problems such a plagiarism arose.

The only area about which almost all the lecturers commented was that of mechanics. The lecturers' descriptions of these problems, however, suggest that these were not related to fundamental problems with basic skills but rather to a lack of editing and last minute assignment writing.

Discussion

This examination of the concerns that lecturers have about their students' writing along with the types of help they offer to students suggests that the first year context brings new writing challenges to students. Analysis of lecturers' complaints about student writing reveals that the vast majority of students may not have problems with basic literacy skills despite the beliefs of some members of the broader community and university lecturing staff to the contrary (see Russell 1991; Reid 1997). Rather, all of the lecturers, in different ways, were describing problems relating to the new academic demands and expectations of the tasks that were set.

New expectations for writing, however, do not fully explain the differences in lecturers’ perceptions of student ability. The study shows that individual lecturers perceived the overall written capabilities of the same student cohort quite differently – even those who teach in the same unit. These differences ranged from a perception of only 10% of the students being poor...
writers to a perception of 60% of the students presenting as poor writers. Why is this so? It would appear that these differences in perception of the percentage of poor writers are related to the actions taken by individual staff members in aiding the writing process. Lecturers who were explicit about their requirements often perceived their students in a more positive light, whereas those who put less effort into making expectations clear and supporting students in their transition to tertiary writing were more likely to perceive a larger percentage of the group to be poor.

The results from this study support the notion that students are being further progressed along a developmental literacy path started in their pre-primary years through the new writing challenges they encounter in their first year of tertiary study. This path, however, is not unilinear (Heath, 1982 as cited in Street 1984 pg 125). It has multiple branches reflecting the wide and differing range of expectations that students encounter. These results show that when lecturing staff recognise these differences and put into action strategies to help students in their development, then the abilities of the students are viewed in a more positive light.

**Implications for developing writing in the first year**

General aspects of academic writing for all students, irrespective of discipline, can and are addressed through workshops and courses offered through the university. These have limited ability, however, to address the multiple literacy practices that exist at university. The specific writing expectations associated with a particular task, within a particular unit and discipline, need to be addressed by the content lecturer. This study shows that there are many ways in which lecturing staff can help students understand their expectations. The study also shows, however, that to be effective in clarifying expectations, first year lecturers need a high level of awareness about academic writing as it pertains to writing both in and outside of their own unit. This includes awareness of the following:

♦ Lecturers’ own expectations for written assignments;
♦ The differences between their own expectations and the expectations of other first year lecturers; and
♦ The differences between expectations at the first year level and the pre-tertiary level.

To achieve this level of awareness, there needs to be strong communication between teaching staff about the types of tasks being set. This can occur through staff development with first year lecturers or the formation of interest or focus groups, where different types of written assignment tasks as well as expectations for the final written product can be shared. These fora can also be used as a basis for examining the differences between pre-tertiary writing expectations and the expectations of the first year staff. This, then, provides an excellent basis for sharing and further developing strategies for making these differences clear to enable students to develop their abilities further.

The transition to university requires the learning of many new expectations and writing skills. Rather than viewing students as lacking in skills and hence branding a large proportion as “poor writers”, first year lecturers can move together toward in a developmental framework where staff constructively help students to find new and challenging ways of expressing their ideas through helping them understand the differences in expectations and how to meet these.

**References**


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