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Academic Futures: Inquiries into Higher Education and Pedagogy

Edited by

iPED Research Network

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SEEKING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INDIVIDUALISED WRITING CONSULTATIONS

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Keywords

writing consultancy; individualised consultations; student motivation; Writing in the Disciplines (WiD); staff development

Coventry University's Centre for Academic Writing (CAW)

At Coventry University's Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) individualised writing consultations are popular with students, but there is limited research on the outcomes. The challenge this chapter addresses is evidencing the effectiveness of these teaching interventions through qualitative research (Hylton 1990, Thonus 2002). The chapter shares data collected at CAW to investigate whether students feel better able to prepare and revise assignments following individualised writing consultations. It also explores the wider benefits of individualised writing support including impacts on students' confidence, motivation, and academic grades.

Academic Writing is a growing discipline within UK Higher Education (Lea and Street 1998, Jones, Turner and Street 1999, Ganobcsik-Williams 2006). At British universities an influential model for Writing Centres is North American, but the anglicised spelling points to some major differences in the UK context. It is difficult to specify how British Writing Centres differ from international models because the design of each Centre

is specific to the local context, but a significant feature in the UK is that many centres of writing specialism do not have the title "Writing Centre". In conjunction with this relative lack of visibility, academics who teach and research writing are often engaged in a wide range of other activities including providing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for academic staff, enhancing Learning and Teaching, and researching within academic disciplines.

The Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) at Coventry University was established in 2004, and was one of the first Writing Centres in the UK. Partly due to this, CAW is influenced by international pedagogic approaches as well as British models (Harris 1986, Skillen and Trivet 2001). Although the focus in this chapter is individualised writing consultations, CAW also supports students' scholarship through writing courses, workshops, and online writing resources. Working with academics in the disciplines is also an important focus, and CAW provides consultancy to staff across the University on writing for publication as well as running Writing Groups, Scholarly Writing Retreats, and workshops for staff. CAW is closely linked to the E-learning Unit, and the use of technologies for teaching writing is integral to the Centre's work.

In terms of British influences, writing development at CAW is informed by academic literacies theorising which examines academic reading and writing as social practices specific to cultural contexts and disciplinary conventions (Street 2005, Lea and Street 2006). This perspective enables staff at CAW to examine the multiple identities, modes of communication, and conventions students are required to master for specific purposes within academia (Lillis 2001). In terms of international models, CAW is influenced by the Australian "Developing Academic Literacy in Context" (DALiC) approach to writing development (Purser, Skillen, Deane, Donahue and Peake 2008). Like academic literacies, this field focuses on developing students' literacy in disciplinary contexts and highlights the epistemological aspects of academic writing (Skillen and Trivett 2001).

"Writing in the Disciplines" (WiD)

Although the population at Coventry University is approximately 14,000 students, not all of these attend individualised writing consultations, so staff at CAW continually seek ways of reaching more students and maximising the effectiveness of their writing development (Harris 1992, Paecher 2004). These efforts include the qualitative study discussed in this chapter, and a quantitative study which is also ongoing at CAW to further

identify the outcomes of writing consultations, specifically the changes students make to their assignments after attending consultations at CAW.

One way in which CAW extends the reach of writing development is through staff development in teaching writing, or "Writing in the Disciplines" (WiD) initiatives (Monroe 2002). WiD is a sustainable approach to teaching writing because by collaborating with academics in the disciplines staff at CAW support whole cohorts of students not just individuals. WiD work is informed by a belief that writing is a complex activity that is integral to thinking and cannot be divorced from the epistemologies and discourses students need to learn about for their subject studies (Monroe 2003: xi-xiii). In contrast to teaching writing as a "study skill" outside of subject studies, the WiD approach integrates writing development into disciplinary contexts (Bean 2001, Wingate 2006).

CAW writing specialists work with colleagues across the University to strengthen students' writing through WiD initiatives (Bull and Deane 2007, Samuels and Deane 2008). These collaborations not only support students' learning, but also contribute to the professional development of disciplinary academics, who become writing specialists within their fields as a result of WiD work (Gottschalk and Hjortshøj 2004).

As part of WiD initiatives subject specialists and writing specialists collaborate to re-design curricula, and give students more guidance on producing the genres required in their disciplines. WiD may involve providing examples of good and bad practice so student writers can see what they are expected to produce. Drawing on WiD interventions, academics also publish their findings about disciplinary writing conventions and effective teaching methods, which raises their research profiles and disseminates expertise on disciplinary writing cultures (Somerville and Crème 2005).

Individualised student writing consultations

The main pedagogic rationale for CAW's individualised writing consultancy is to promote self-directed learning, so rather than advising students on the content of their assignments staff at CAW discuss how to research and write effectively. This is important because as students make the transition to university they are expected to manage the composition process independently, whereas before there may have been more structured opportunities for gaining feedback and advice (Ramsden 1992). For instance, school teachers sometimes collect drafts and comment in detail before pupils submit coursework for assessment. CAW seeks to

support students in managing the tasks involved in producing assignments independently and judging the quality of their own work (Harris 2000).

Through individualised tuition, writing specialists at CAW aim to foster students' confidence to tackle the range of written assessments demanded by their degree programmes. They also seek to encourage a self-directed approach to research and writing. Individualised writing consultations are not intended to be a remedial service, but instead represent an opportunity for all student writers to strengthen their performance by learning new strategies for planning and revising texts. Staff at CAW do not proofread students' texts despite the fact that students sometimes seek this level of intervention in their writing, instead, students are taught to evaluate their own writing and take control of the process of producing successful academic assignments.

CAW's individualised student writing consultations are a confidential service available to all students at Coventry University from all disciplines and levels of study including doctoral work. The usual length of time for an appointment is 55 minutes, and CAW provides at least 60 appointments per week. Students usually attend on a voluntary basis, although some lecturers recommend individuals to take advantage of this opportunity to obtain feedback on their writing-in-progress. Students are required to book an appointment in advance by calling, emailing, or visiting the Centre, and they are expected to bring relevant documents such as their assignment brief for a particular project with a plan or draft in progress. Whilst working on a particular assignment, the wider issues which may be addressed include students' transitions to university-level study, the development of critical thinking skills, and project management.

Methodology

The qualitative data this chapter discusses was collected during a four-year period from CAW's opening in July 2004 to July 2008. All the students who attended consultations during this period were invited to complete an online questionnaire immediately following their appointment, and a total of 1,133 responses were collected. The feedback varied in length from a brief comment such as, "Thank you" to a couple of paragraphs detailing the strengths and weaknesses of a particular writing consultation. This feedback represents a rich body of data covering a wide range of issues, and the selection criterion for the present chapter was whether comments yield information about students' perceptions of the effectiveness of individualised writing consultations. In this context effective refers to positive outcomes on students' studies, such as aptitude in planning and

revising assignments. A single survey was conducted based on comments from students about the effectiveness of CAW's writing consultations, and this qualitative data also yielded feedback on a broader range of issues which are not reported here, such as the teaching style of particular writing specialists or the administration of CAW's services.

A limitation of this approach is the inherent subjectivity of selecting comments, plus as Bell argues, students are likely to give positive feedback immediately after an individual consultation because they tend to appreciate advice on their writing (Bell 2000). A further problem is that there is not necessarily a correlation between students commenting that they are better able to prepare and revise assignments and their actual ability to do so. It is particularly difficult to quantify changes in students' writing following an individualised writing consultation owing to other influential factors (Macdonald 1992, Bell 2000, Kelly and Bazerman 2003). As Yates points out, there is wide variation in students' experiences prior to university education, which also complicates data collection (Yates 2004: 15).

Nevertheless, qualitative data is appropriate for an enquiry into students' perceptions of individualised writing support, and it is essential to gather this material for Quality Assurance and Enhancement. Students' perceptions of their learning experiences are increasingly significant within Higher Education, for instance as part of the Quality Assurance Framework, since 2005 the National Student Survey (NSS) has collected information about students' perceptions of academic support at universities in the UK, and the results inform policy making at senior levels (HEFCE 2009). By researching student feedback CAW can be responsive to the demands of their service users and maximise the effectiveness of resources, which is particularly important as individualised writing consultations are relatively resource intensive.

Findings

Students who completed the online questionnaire about CAW's writing consultations reflected on a range of issues, and the first main finding reported here concerns the relationship between writing development at CAW and their disciplinary studies. One student writes:

The session was overall satisfactory, however, I did not find it as informative as I initially perceived it. I was under the impression it would be more subject orientated. (Student feedback 22.3.06)

The potential tension between centralised writing consultancy and departmental guidance is noted by another respondent, who reflects, "[I] asked a very vague, probably unusual question and [the tutor] helped all she could, advising me to speak with my [module] tutor" (Student feedback 9.6.06).

However, one student points out the benefit of centralised writing consultancy, writing, "It's nice to know that I have even more support and someone who is separate from the course" (Student feedback 7.12.05). Another student comments, "I think this will be very useful, and hopefully be supported by my module tutor" (Student feedback 11.10.07).

A second finding is that some students find individualised consultancy motivating. For example, one student writes:

It's great to get the opportunity to discuss my work. Not only does the session aid with the structure of my work, it also motivates me to work between sessions. (Student feedback 4.3.05)

Another respondent reports, "Feeling motivated to start next assignment" (Student feedback 7.2.08). A further respondent records, "I have gained a new approach to my writing" (Student feedback 24.2.06).

A third finding is the confidence boost that some students gain from individualised writing consultations. One respondent reflects:

My confidence is building and I am able to accept changes for the better not as criticism. (Student feedback 7.6.05)

Another student comments that a particular writing consultation was "very good at restoring confidence" and adds, "I might actually be able to progress from bashing my head against the brick wall to getting words on paper" (Student feedback 17.5.05). A further respondent feels more in control of writing after discussing a project, remarking, "the fog has lifted" (Student feedback 6.10.05).

A fourth finding is that some students become more self-directed learners as a result of attending individualised writing consultations. For instance, one student reports being given:

Excellent support on structuring my essay by [a tutor] asking me leading questions to think for myself. (Student feedback 2.3.06)

Another student writes, "It's helped me gain a better insight into my writing" (Student feedback 29.11.05). A further response is that a writing specialist "has the ability to help one think for oneself", and the student

adds that with individualised "support I personally reach conclusions that I did not think I was capable of" (Student feedback 1.9.05).

A fifth finding is that some students who are struggling with their studies particularly appreciate individualised support. For example, one respondent comments, "I could not have got through the work without all your help" (Student feedback 25.5.07). Another respondent writes, "Your help, support and sympathetic ear have been just what I needed" (Student feedback 21.3.06). For some students, the opportunity to discuss writing individually makes a difference to their wider approach to university study, and one respondent claims that without "help I would not have passed" (Student feedback 29.6.05).

Finally, some respondents note that writing consultations have impacted positively on their academic performance. One student asserts, "Since starting working with CAW my essay writing has improved in all areas" (Student feedback 30.6.06). Another comments, "The assistance of the academic writing centre has made a vast difference to my grades" (Student feedback 23.4.08). Another respondent writes, "I have been getting better marks since coming here" (Student feedback 19.1.06) whilst another comments, "My grades have also improved and I feel more confident to express my views academically" (Student feedback 14.6.06).

Discussion

The first finding of this study that some students want discipline-based writing development is a persuasive argument for WiD, which as previously observed is a form of staff development that enhances the ability of academics in the disciplines to teach and assess students' writing. WiD is beneficial because CAW could not offer writing specialists in every subject area, and as individualised writing consultations are resource intensive, WiD is also practical from a resourcing point of view.

On the other hand, the second finding of this study that individualised writing consultations can be motivating is a strong argument for maintaining this form of personalised provision (Bruning and Horn 2000). Increased motivation can contribute to students' success and students who are motivated are more likely to adopt good practice throughout their studies (Gow and Kember 1990). Thus, by helping to motivate individual students, staff at CAW foster a positive working environment at Coventry University and have potentially beneficial impacts across the Institution. Whereas centralised writing consultancy may move responsibility for writing development outside of departments, one-to-one consultations put

the onus on students to apply the strategies they learn at CAW to all their writing projects, which can enhance their experience of tertiary education.

The third finding that individualised consultations can boost students' confidence also makes a case for the value of individualised teaching interventions (Pajares and Johnson 1994). CAW aims to help students feel better able to prepare and revise assignments, and improving individuals' confidence is essential to this goal. As previously stated, CAW is not a remedial service, but an important resource for raising the performance of all writers, and this finding is significant because it suggests that CAW can help promote students' engagement and enjoyment of writing, whatever their levels of ability.

The fourth finding that some students feel individualised consultancy makes them more independent scholars is also integral to CAW's objective of helping students understand and engage with the demands of tertiary level study (Amenkhienan and Kogan 2004). It is particularly significant that some students comment on the impact of individualised discussion on their critical thinking skills, which are not only necessary at university, but also beyond in professional life.

The fifth finding that for some students CAW's consultancy helps them at difficult points in their studies is significant from the point of view of student satisfaction (Clarke and Lane 2005). However, in some cases students can become dependent on the support of specialists at CAW, so measures exist to counter this, for instance rotating the staff who teach individuals and maximising the wider impact of consultations by helping students manage their time and writing projects efficiently.

Finally, the finding that some students obtain higher grades after receiving individualised writing consultancy is an issue currently under investigation as part of the aforementioned quantitative research project at CAW which compares the linguistic features in drafts students bring to CAW with the revised versions they submit for assessment. In summary, the main findings of this qualitative research are that the students surveyed identified potential benefits of individualised writing consultations, which include impacts on motivation, confidence, and engagement with academic studies, although they also point to a potential tension between offering centralised writing consultancy and discipline-based initiatives.

Conclusions

At CAW both WiD initiatives and individualised writing consultancy provide support for students at all levels, and crucially these two types of provision are inter-related. For instance, by working with colleagues in the

disciplines staff at CAW learn about discipline-based cultures which informs individualised teaching. Similarly, by working with individual students staff at CAW identify patterns of error and trends which inform discipline-based initiatives.

Although WiD initiatives are a sustainable form of writing development, the students surveyed in this qualitative study were enthusiastic about receiving personalised support because this can be motivating and target their specific needs (Harris 1991). In contrast, the main disadvantage of individualised consultations is that they are relatively resource intensive, which is why WiD initiatives are beneficial alongside these teaching interventions. Staff at CAW aim to foster students' success beyond individual assignments by teaching individuals how to understand and fulfil their assignment briefs, organise their ideas, and prepare appropriately formal texts. The findings of this qualitative study suggest that students value the writing strategies they learn at CAW and adapt these aptitudes to their wider studies.

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