

Optimizing Teaching and Learning through the Use of Feedback on Written Assignments in History

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Background: the 'Academic Literacies' approach

The pedagogical initiative outlined here is based on the 'academic literacies' approach to student writing, a term coined by Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998) after carrying out research into the feedback given on written assignments in two UK universities. Having interviewed students and staff to establish what their expectations were of undergraduate written assignments, Lea and Street concluded that what they call the 'study skills' and 'academic socialisation' models that have been generally used to support student writing development, did not adequately take account of the importance of issues of identity and power within university institutions. Arguing that developing student literacy involves more than merely acquiring surface language skills and becoming orientated within the university, they advocated what they called the deeper 'academic literacies' approach. This views student writing at the level of epistemology and identities, implying a need to recognise the subjective experience of students and the effects on their self-image/esteem of having to master the linguistic conventions that they are required to employ across disciplines and modules.

Lea and Street discovered that tutors had widely different interpretations of what they considered appropriate, that were in turn related to the different epistemological assumptions of their disciplines. For instance, while some accepted the use of the first person in essays, others did not, and this led to confusion and insecurity on the part of students. In one detailed example they explain why and how a student, who had written a very successful essay in History, failed in Anthropology because he was not attuned to the different epistemological requirements of the discipline. The Anthropology tutor was unable to recognise the logic of the structure of the student's essay because it was written using the constructs of a History essay. Clearly, the student did not require generic lessons in writing skills that the Anthropology tutor advised he should take, but instead a greater awareness of the requirements peculiar to a subject with which he was unfamiliar.

Another key issue disclosed by Lea and Street's work concerns feedback on coursework and the ways in which the modality employed in providing it serves more to establish the tutor's authority rather than to encourage learning. Vague, truncated and overly critical marking on the student's text did not help students understand where and how they might improve. This point was taken up very forcefully by Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000) in their chapter in Lea and Street's groundbreaking book, *Student Writing in Higher Education*, in which those authors provide detailed evidence that substantiates Lea and Street's findings about mode of feedback.

Subsequent studies, for example by Lillis (2003), Northedge (2003), Orell (2006), Baruthram and McKenna (2006), further confirm that Lea and Street's assumptions were well grounded. From a reading of all these studies it is possible to summarise their findings and implications, as follows.

Academic Literacies: research findings

Key percepts from the 'academic literacies' literature are:

- Writing is a process, not a product: the way one arrives at the final product is as important if not more so than the final product itself. By focusing on writing as a process, the act of constructing meaning is drawn out and thereby demystified (Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000: 64).
- Writing is not neutral - it actively constructs knowledge (Baruthram and McKenna 2006: 497). This is the most important epistemological finding of the research. Different academic disciplines have different modes of discourse that are specific to them. The language, vocabulary, tropes and even grammatical constructions of one subject do not readily transfer to another. Furthermore, this is even person specific: one tutor's idea of what is acceptable differs from another even within one subject community. Hence the appropriate term is 'literacies' in the plural – there are multiple literacies and therefore students who do modular-interdisciplinary degrees encounter difficulties when switching from one subject and one tutor to another.
- Lecturers have internalised academic discourses while students still have to learn the conventions. The research has found that acquiring this 'subject literacy' is in fact part and parcel of mastering it. Academics have somehow internalised the language and often fail to place themselves in their students' position. We have to help them 'bridge the gap' (Lea 1994: 225).

The academic literacies approach therefore:

- focuses on discipline-specific conventions and ideas and tries to make these plain to the students;
- tends to see 'surface errors' such as grammar and spelling as important but secondary to the above (Baruthram and McKenna 2006: 498);

- seeks to *guide* the writer rather than to *instruct*. Researchers have found that this approach has the best results because confidence and esteem is a huge factor in student development.
- aims at encouraging the student to write. Negative comments that demotivate are to be avoided (Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000: 64).

Above all, the research findings suggest that a dialogic approach to teaching is required, with a greater emphasis on peer and tutor feedback on writing (Lillis 2003; Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000: 64). Unsurprisingly perhaps the research finds that feedback on writing is absolutely essential if students' writing is to be improved, but that it must take place within each specific module in every discipline so that the student is helped to acquire the skills and literacy that is required in each one. As a consequence, the opportunity to write and receive feedback, both oral and written, on what they have written is essential to the learning process. Assessments need to be structured to facilitate as much formative feedback as possible.

Implications for assessment design and delivery

The 'academic literacies' approach implies a number of principles for assessment practice:

- Clarify the assessment criteria and grade descriptors. The main point here is to ensure that the students are fully cognizant of exactly what is required of them to pass and perform well in any assessment. Vague or complex criteria written in the register that the students have yet to acquire will not only not inform them, it will also demotivate.
- Explain terminology. The terminology of the assessment tasks needs to be explained and clearly defined. What one tutor means by 'analyse' another might mean with the word 'explain.' One tutor's 'assess' is another's 'evaluate.' Time must be taken to ensure that assessment tasks are clearly understood.
- Timeliness for effectiveness. It is essential to look at the assessment timetable and make it work so that enough time is allowed for the students to benefit from the feedback that is given on their work. This includes time, if feasible, for verbal feedback from the tutor and peers.
- Frequency for reinforcement. The research has found that frequent short writing tasks with feedback is better than longer less frequent writing. It also indicates that drafting with feedback and then reflection is absolutely the best way to teach literacy, since this mirrors the act of the process of writing itself.

With regards to marking, the research finds that the following is best practice:

- If marking on hard copy, pencil is far better than pen and especially red pen since red marks on work are found to be threatening and demotivating. Using pencil builds trust as it allows for the student to erase it if they wish.

- Far better, however, than marking on the hard copy is to use email and electronic copies that can be saved as a separate version from the original. Emails allow for dialogue with the tutor and enable students to respond and ask for clarification of any point they do not understand.
- If marking a final copy do not mark on the paper at all, but provide comments on a separate sheet.
- Say what you mean. Be careful to compose comments carefully so that they are as clear and unambiguous as possible. Sarcasm is definitely not good practice or anything that would demotivate the student.
- Being positive is very important in giving formative feedback.
- Use the first person. Comments should be couched in subjective terminology so that the student does not associate the voice of the tutor as an 'authority': 'I find this hard to understand' is much more motivating than just: 'Hard to understand' or simply '?'
- Above all, the researchers say it is always best if you can offer the students the opportunity to talk about their work.

A practical experiment in formative assessment in History

Armed with these findings I set about making lesson plans that integrated writing tasks into each lesson (two-hour session each week) of a History module on 'The Making of Modern Cuba'. I chose activities that gave students the opportunity to give each other feedback in small-group interactions during the classes.

Furthermore, to improve the formative potential of a summative assessment assignment in the module, my co-tutor and I experimented with the recommendations summarised above. The assignment was to write a 1,500-word analysis of a text or texts chosen from the course reading list or selected by the students themselves. The process was as follows:

1. We gave the students a writing checklist and clearly defined grade descriptors.
2. We also gave them an information sheet about the assignment and a session was set aside to discuss and explain exactly what was required in writing an analytical piece. In addition, I gave one-to-one advice via email when requested.
3. In week seven we gave the students the opportunity to send me by email a draft of their assignments which I formatively assessed. The method I devised was to highlight problem areas in the text using the highlighter function in MSWord, inserting general guidance on the problem as a footnote. I also included a general written summary at the end of each assignment, using the language and style as recommended by the researchers.

After submission, I set up a short web-based survey (via www.surveymonkey.com) to collect student's views on the feedback they had received. Five out of the nine students responded.

The main themes from the survey were:

- All the students who took part said the feedback helped them to write better.
- No student said it made him or her feel less confident.
- Most said they had enough time to use the feedback.
- All said that the feedback was useful for further learning.
- There were no negative comments about the way the feedback was given.

Comments made by students about the formative assessment included:

'It was a shock ... as I thought there wouldnt be that much, but fortunatly it wasnt as bad as it looked and i was able to make the changes. (sic)'

'I liked the fact they could tell I worked hard on it, other comments about my grammer, style etc and how i could improve was really helpful. (sic)'

'I have never had feedback given like that but I thought it was really good because the mistakes were highlighted and then there was an explanation saying what was wrong so it was easy to follow.'

'I now know how to write an anaylitcal essay, as before I didnt have a clue! (sic)'

Conclusion

Although this experiment was carried out on a small sample, I believe that the results do provide evidence that this approach to assessment **for** and **as** learning has validity. Embedding teaching of writing in assessment schemes along the lines explained above also provides an inclusive way to addresses the problems of diversity. The conclusion to draw is that assessment practices and systems ought to be reviewed across all modules in order to maximize the possibility of providing constructive formative feedback in a timely and effective manner. Admittedly this particular experiment had the advantage of being carried out on a small group, and the particular type of formative assessment tested here might not be feasible for large groups. But there are ways in which the 'academic literacies' approach can be adapted even for large groups (for ideas see, for example, the 'Thinking Writing' website <http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/index.htm>). The survey results from this experiment certainly indicate that students not only need, but also appreciate, this approach.

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