

Becoming Writers: Transforming Students' Academic Writing

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Introduction

The present paper builds on Elbow's (1998) idea of 'free writing' and other creative approaches to writing as we explore methods to foster students' academic writing skills. Rather than focussing on a deficit student in need of 'fixing', we introduce and reflect on the usefulness of free- and creative writing exercises as we explore how we can enable students to find 'a voice' as we support them on the way to becoming successful academic writers. In this context, we argue for academic/study skills support that takes students 'serious', and builds on their existing strengths, knowledge – and writing skills.

Our Students: Our philosophy

Our intervention is set within the BA Hons Education Studies, a multi-disciplinary degree, drawing upon history, sociology, philosophy, pedagogy and cultural studies, designed to equip students with the skills, knowledge and understanding to take on socially responsible roles as teachers, youth and community workers, coaches, and mentoring professionals. On the BA Hons Education Studies, the student cohort is practically 100% 'non-traditional' meaning our students come from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds with mixed interests, abilities, expectations and connections. For our students, university life is challenging with their busy lives leaving little time to spend in the University and on their studies – little time to develop their writing outside of class. The module in question is a first year 'academic skills' module, *Becoming an Educationalist (Becoming, the space where students are building up their academic writing skills and practice)*.

We have re-framed *Becoming* as the synoptic module, the hermeneutic space wherein the students can make sense of and experiment with that which they are learning across the programme as a whole. We do not try to 'fix' deficit students, rather we take an approach that is creative and emancipatory – helping students find their academic identity and voice through various creative writing activities including free writing and blogging (Abegglen et al. 2015). A key desirable outcome for us is that our students *become academic* without losing themselves in the process.

We link our creative academic practice to critical pedagogy (see Friere, 1970), championing the idea that education should allow students time and space to regain their sense of humanity, to *become* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) academics. Our students are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge; they are co-producers (Carey 2013) and social constructors (Burr 2015), empowered when in dialogue with knowledge-claims and with each other (Bakhtin 1981) and through exploratory writing. If academia is only presented as a search to find the ‘right’ answer, we circumscribe and control our students’ thinking and action; agency is denied, ‘creative power’ inhibited (Crème 2003). We want a more mutual approach to education that values *all people* – tutor and student. Viewed through this lens, we wanted to consider more carefully and reflect more critically on the methods we use in our classrooms to support academic writing and thinking.

Alternative Writing

Rather than a recondite focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar, we foster students’ academic writing by using a range of writing exercises including slow- and free writing (Elbow 1998). The aim of free writing is not only to develop students’ writing confidence, but also to encourage students to think more critically about a topic or issue – and to experience writing as a thinking process: writing to learn. As Elbow (1998, p. 28) states: ‘Producing writing, then, is not so much like filling a basin or pool once, but rather getting water to keep flowing *through* till finally it runs clear’. Slow writing, is writing taken slowly (DeSalvo 2014) – and we argue that as academics we need to make spaces in our classes and in our schedules for *slow academia* (Berg & Seeber 2016): thinking that is shaped over time – and that promotes deep thought.

Our approach involves writing without censorship or too much conscious control. The idea is to temporarily put aside spelling, punctuation and grammar – and to allow ideas to flow onto the paper. This is writing as cooking; letting ideas ‘simmer and bubble’ before they are ready to be used. ‘Meaning is not what you start with, but what you end up with’ (Elbow 1998, p. 15). Good writing allows exploration and understanding rather than shaping and constructing an argument to follow the lecturer’s opinions. This is powerful in many ways – not least that it models to students that draft writing serves up raw ideas, undigested and uncritical. As with Elbow (1998) and DeSalvo (2014), we are convinced that ideas need to develop before they are ready to be presented to an audience or, in this case, to essay markers.

Take it slow

A key slow writing activity is one that we have adapted from Art History. Ask your students to find a piece of art relevant to your discipline – or to a component on the module that you are teaching. They can choose a sculpture or painting in a

gallery or something relevant in their own homes. Once they have selected something, they have to sit with it for one hour. Yes, a whole hour. They can make notes on the artwork – they can sketch and doodle – but they must not wander off or answer the phone; they must focus. After one hour – they have to write no more and no less than 300-words on the object they have been with. Collect in and celebrate these 300-words (typically they will be interesting). Reflection on the process will reveal that whilst students think they will achieve more if they dash off and write quickly without thought, here the one hour of focus will produce better results.

‘Keep it free’

A free writing activity that we use is designed to help students to write – and also to surface their issues with academic writing itself. We ask students to write with two pieces of paper: one for the response to a question set, and one on which to write their reasons for not writing. This is writing under time pressure. We typically ask our students to write for ten minutes on a topic, although the exercise can be shorter or last much longer. We emphasise that it is okay for students to make mistakes, and to ignore spelling, grammar and punctuation *for now*. Students must write continuously for the time set, even if they do not know what to write. In that case, they are simply asked to write ‘I don’t know what to write’ or ‘I am stuck’ until another thought or idea comes to their mind. The aim is for students to generate as much as they can about the set topic in the given time and to get used to the feeling of articulating their ideas on demand on paper.

After the timed writing we have an extended de-brief and guided reflections focussing on: the emotional responses to the writing, reasons for not writing, and what they can take from this experience into other (academic) writing. Students’ reasons for not writing typically involve a lack of confidence and a fear of getting it wrong. It is not laziness, a lack of ideas or a consumer mentality that inhibits student writing but the fear and shame of failure. This pressure makes students write and correct at the same time which is actually an act of censorship that makes ‘real’ writing very difficult – or impossible. Realising this allows many students to adopt free writing as a strategy for capturing first thoughts about an assignment, and then developing them into a first draft of potential essay paragraphs.

Other free writing strategies can include: a ten-minute free write on an assignment answer in the very first session that you meet; ten minutes of semi-structured free writing at the end of every – or every other – seminar which models writing to learn; and various collaborative writing tasks where together students write a 40- or 50-word ‘essay’ on a topic.

Recommendations

Students are expected to become 'experts' in academic writing whilst also struggling with unfamiliar material and alien academic rules and regulations. Our experience shows that the very way that we frame academic writing for students – with dire warnings about plagiarism and a heavy emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar – increases the struggle to write, and not in a good way. Student work is often condemned as not academic and critical enough when students are just learning the ropes, or that it is plagiarised when it is really just clunky, 'first draft' work, rough and unrefined. These are *becoming* writers wrestling with the rules of academia. The activities discussed in this paper are designed to allow our students a space to become 'good essay writers' by making time in our classes for them to 'write to learn'. Slow and free writing exercises seem a good starting point for students to think about their own practice and that of others, but they are only a first step to truly embracing dialogic learning and teaching:

Argumentation and dialogue are not simply alternative patterns of communication; they are principled approaches to pedagogy (Wolfe & Alexander 2008, p. 15).

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Biographical note

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