

Reading and Writing Skills for Business: the students' voice

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Key words: *writing in the discipline; authentic; reading; self-efficacy*

Introduction and Context

This paper contributes to the emerging discussion around student writing through its focus on writing for Business for first-year students at the London Metropolitan University Business School. We focus on the student writing experience in one compulsory Management module, (People Management: Challenges and Choices – PMCC) which was introduced as part of a broader revision of the first year Business syllabus designed to make transparent to students the discourse of Business studies and of Higher Education more generally. Against the background of Business Students entering higher education with increasing diverse biographies, expectations and constraints (Holley and Oliver, 2009), many Business Schools have recently embarked on re-designing large parts of the curriculum (see Parrott, 2010).

New approaches have emerged often challenging traditional tutor-led lecture/seminar delivery and highlighting the development of 'key skills' in accordance with a government-driven skills and employability agenda (Leitch, 2006). The increase in introductory academic skills modules is testimony to such an approach.

The academic literacies approach pioneered by Lea and Street (1998) and others (e.g. Lillis, 2001 and 2003) has reminded us that writing cannot be detached from the social contexts in which it takes place. Therefore, integral to our approach, has been the examination of the student voice in order to gain a wider understanding of the strengths and weaknesses associated with students' academic writing and how any weaknesses might be resolved.

Redesign of 'People Management: Challenges and Choices' (PMCC)

The main aim of PMCC is to support a cross-curricular introduction to people management in contemporary organisations and to focus on empowering students

to succeed in academic writing as a key aspect of their learning. The module runs at both the university campuses in the autumn and spring semesters.

It is a very large module with several hundred students from diverse backgrounds and is ring fenced for all Business and Management students within the Business School. PMCC adopts the traditional one-hour lecture followed by a two-hour seminar format supported by independent study.

PMCC: Assessment and feedback strategies

The module was designed to include two assessment strategies, a summary of which is shown below. The assessments were designed to assess students' knowledge and understanding of people management as well as assessing their research, reading, analytical, evaluative and written communication skills.

Assessment Type	Description of Component	% Weighting	Due in Week
Coursework	Individual written assignment	40%	8
Coursework	Individual paper and personal reflection	60%	14

Figure 1. Assessment of module.

The specifications required of students two separate writing assignments of 1500 and 2000 words. One of the main outcomes of our initial discussions was that we decided that these two independent assignments might be perhaps unnecessarily onerous for first year students. Instead of setting two separate writing assignments, we decided that the first assignment should be a briefing paper in which students are asked to give an overview of the key elements that will make up the final paper e.g. the structure, arguments/thesis and academic sources. This seemed appropriate for business students as the briefing paper would have relevance to the types of writing that might be expected from them in a professional business context (see MacAndrew and Edwards, 2002 on the benefits of authentic writing).

The briefing paper was therefore designed to provide students with detailed oral and written formative feedback on their academic writing within two weeks of submitting. This was expected to improve performance in the second assessment.

For the final coursework essay, students are expected to take into account this feedback. Students are asked to submit a 2,000 word individual paper drawing on their knowledge and understanding of the challenges facing contemporary organisations and the current issues facing HRM managers, choosing a topic from the list previously provided, together with a 500-word reflective piece evaluating

their performance in completing the assessments for PMCC. The reflective piece presented the opportunity for students to comment on the feedback received from their seminar tutors about their briefing paper and to reflect explicitly on their learning with respect to academic writing.

In addition, the lecturer customised a generic LearnHigher CETL/Learning Development essay-writing pack to produce a course-specific workbook for use in seminars and out of class. This took students through key study and research skills focusing on writing their specific module essay.

Challenges delivering PMCC in the first semester

Based on the module leader's own observations and on several discussions with seminar tutors, who had taught and marked the students' coursework, it was clear that some of the problems that students were experiencing with their writing were partly due to their difficulties with fulfilling the assigned reading which affected their gaining a better grasp of the subject. As noted by Hobson (2004), although reading skills are essential they are often ignored within the context of HE students.

Method

A focus group interview was conducted in the second semester of delivery since it was a convenient way of exploring the student's voice on reading and writing for PMCC. It is also a useful way of capturing broader data from students who are already familiar with each other. Eleven PMCC students from our City Campus volunteered to participate in a focus group study. Most of these students were international students from Asia, Africa and Europe whilst only two were home students from the UK. The students who attended represented the academic range of students who completed the module.

Flip charts and post-it notes were used to facilitate the students' expression of ideas and solutions and to record key issues. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

The focus group lasted 90 minutes and semi-structured questions were used to explore students' experiences of reading and writing. Students were asked questions their reading and writing in terms of what they read, the usefulness of their recommended text for their assignments and the difficulties they encountered with their reading. Questions also centred on students' experiences of writing for the module, when they started writing for the assignments and the difficulties they encountered in writing their assignments. In what follows, we highlight what emerged from the group and its implications for our thinking about writing – and reading for writing – in this module.

Main findings

Reading for PMCC

With regards to the semi-structured questions on the issues students were facing with their reading it was pleasing to note that students found the main introductory text and recommended website useful and easy to understand. This may be because the reading was closely aligned with the characteristics of their assignment topics. Students seemed to like reading the introductory text and the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) websites as the recommended weekly reading chapters and the various sources available on the CIPD as these were relevant to the course content (Maleki and Heerman, 1992). However, with respect to the reading of other texts and journals students expressed less satisfaction:

'Some of the chapters are quite boring and not useful...'

'When reading journals I found a lot of the journals useless as I found I had difficulty finding a useful reference or quote to use in my assignment.'

Such attitudes echo the view of academic reading and writing scholars who have found that the recommended reading texts in academia are usually designed for audiences who are highly skilled and specialised and as such these texts may seem irrelevant for novices such as first year higher education students (Bean, 2001; Hobson, 2004; Leamson, 1999; Maleki and Heerman, 1992).

In addition, some students revealed that they faced problems with assimilating information from their readings into their essays:

'There was too much information within the books regarding my chosen subject, so to make sure I was using the appropriate information was not always easy...'

'Did not know which part of the information to extract. How much information to extract.'

What has emerged from the students' responses are that generally they cope quite well with the essential reading (textbooks etc), but find it harder to assimilate additional readings where the relevance of texts may be harder to gauge.

Writing for PMCC

There seem to be very positive responses concerning students' experiences with writing. In exploring the students' perception on the importance of writing it was pleasantly surprising that students felt that academic writing was very important for studying Business Management as it develops their researching, critical writing, referencing skills and organisation skills as well as enhancing their learning experiences and business vocabulary:

'Good writing experience, did not have any major problems writing for this module...'

'Writing made me see that I can do things that I never thought I will do'

'I understand new ways of writing a business report.'

'Get familiar with business terms and new key words and how to structure a report.'

Overall, the briefing paper was useful in terms of pointing students in the right direction, helping them to present ideas and with the use of relevant theories. There was a clear indication from the responses that the briefing paper was a success in terms of enabling students to reflect on strengths and weaknesses that subsequently helped them to progress in their individual papers.

However, similar to the responses on reading for PMCC, quite a few students indicated that they started writing for their briefing paper later than we intended, with many starting in week seven, even though the briefing paper was due to be submitted in week eight. Once more, some students noted issues with assimilating information as their reasons for starting writing for their briefing paper and individual paper at such a late stage.

Solutions for getting students to engage in reading and writing:

Towards the end of the discussions students were split into two groups to engage in a debate on what would they would do, to resolve their challenges with academic reading and writing, if they were seminar tutors. Students made a list that were categorised as enablers and disablers.

Enablers

- Schedule extra reading lessons to allow more time for reading
- Show students what reading is most useful for the coursework in order to get students excited about the subject
- Getting students to focus on the question from the beginning of the module
- Give encouragement to students and be passionate about the subject
- Allow students to read a book followed by a set of questions
- Compiling a list of recommended readings for the assignments
- Discuss reading topics within group discussions
- Clear explanations on what is expected
- Provide appropriate examples regarding the module assignments
- Activities to engage students to research widely on their topic
- Encourage students to submit drafts for tutor's feedback
- Attendance was seen as an important factor

Disablers

- Tutors just telling students to read for their assignments was not useful
- Tutors not having a passion for the subject
- Tutors' lack of explanation and clarity on a topic
- Lack of encouragement
- Not giving students recognition for reading (however, some students felt that self-motivation was more important than gaining recognition from tutors).

Discussion

Our findings give impetus to future syllabus and pedagogical changes which will make the reading experience of first-year students more rewarding and also more formative for their future development as students where they will be expected to read more extensively. We should note that our findings in some respects support educational psychologists' work into reading. Nearly all such work relates to younger children, but an important finding is that motivation to read is a crucial success factor (Guthrie *et al.*, 2004 and 2006; for a useful overview of motivation theories in education, see Wang, 2008). And some educational psychologists have spoken of a 'Matthew effect' (Stanovich, 1986), a vicious cycle whereby the successful at reading get further ahead and those who fall behind early on continue to fall behind. In such cases, bad learning experiences leads to lower motivation and reduced self-efficacy.

It is not our intention here to make excessive claims about university students' reading, but – especially at universities with large number of Widening Participation and non-traditional students – it is important to bear in mind that many of our students may have had very bad learning experiences concerning reading and may be quickly alienated if they encounter negative reading experiences in their first weeks of university. Perhaps, care should be taken to ensure that chosen texts, especially at the beginning of the first year, relate to students' experiences. This may help to lessen the risk of such alienation (see Guthrie *et al.*, 2004; Rose *et al.* 2003).

We were pleased with the students' suggestions, as they paralleled our own feelings, particularly concerning the need to make the point of reading clear (as it relates to assignments) and also in providing feedback on reading and also on incorporating more reading activities into workshops. And we note that some students suggested that reading take place in a social rather than isolated environment.

It was also striking that students acknowledged the importance of the passion and enthusiasm of the lecturer and their need to be inspired. This brings us back to motivation, which is clearly key for students' reading and writing. It also supports the recent findings of Freeman *et al.*, (2007) who show that academic motivation among first-year American students relates to students' sense of belonging and

emphasise above all the role of the teacher – and in particular the importance of enthusiasm, openness, friendliness, encouragement of active participation, and good organisation. These are salutary reminders that a focus on writing only takes one so far and that the passion and competence of academic staff remains key for student success. However, this suggests that well-designed writing and reading tasks and exhibiting enthusiasm for the value of academic reading and writing are likely to provide a positive experience for students writing their first university essays.

Conclusion

This study has renewed our determination to continue to work on the module, and in future years we will focus in particular on more reading in workshops, taking into account our conclusions identified above: using authentic readings relevant to the assignment and in workshops involving a social element and providing feedback that encourages self-efficacy in reading. This writing collaboration has been very useful in that it has enabled us to believe that we can attempt to tackle solutions which are often seen as systemic or something which somebody else should be taking care of. It is true that reading and writing are not the only reasons for student failure. Nevertheless, focusing on these areas offers a constructive way to do what we can as lecturers to make our modules as conducive to student success as possible. The very fact that we are engaged in the question of student writing is likely to mean that we exhibit a greater enthusiasm for students' assignments. We hope, in turn, this will lead to student motivation to succeed. There may be quite a long way to go, but attention to writing seems to offer a uniquely rich vehicle for keeping us on track.

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