

'Really Free!': Strategic Interventions to Foster Students' Academic Writing Skills

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Us: our university; our students; our philosophy

All three authors work together in an inner-city university with a diverse student body from non-traditional backgrounds. Together, we have set up a module partnership, where we share our learning and teaching practice – and also our students. Our job descriptions vary, with two of us working in education and staff development, and one as a course leader in Education. At the time of writing, we were all involved in two partner modules: *Becoming an Educationalist*, which is the focus of this case study, and the *Peer Mentoring in Practice* module, whose students mentor other students on *Becoming an Educationalist (Becoming)*. Together, we discuss the what, why and how of our teaching practice, how best to support our students, to make the *Becoming* module the most empowering academic experience possible and to develop their academic writing practices.

Our University is a post-1992 university situated near the heart of London (UK) and recruiting students from countries across the world: it comes eighteenth in the QS World University Rankings for the international diversity of its student body (10th edition, 2013). The University's student body overall is made up of almost fifty percent 'non-traditional' students (Blagburn and Clutterbuck, 2011); students are often mature (over twenty-one) and from working-class and Black and Minority Ethnic communities – typically they are the first in their families to enter Higher Education (HE). On the BA Hons. Education Studies, the student cohort is practically 100% 'non-traditional', meaning that our students come from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds and have mixed interests, abilities, expectations and connections. For our students, university life is a challenge as they juggle complex home and working lives; they are therefore 'hard to reach' because of their personal responsibilities and financial restraints rather than their lack of interest or engagement.

Our learning and teaching practice is set within BA Hons. Education Studies, a multi-disciplinary degree programme drawing upon history, sociology, philosophy, pedagogics and cultural studies and 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. The formal education landscape traversed by our students is hostile, often alien and typically judgemental, whilst our students themselves are often time-poor and with low self-efficacy. We thus decided to embed (rather than 'bolt on') activities to 'enhance the practice' and develop in authentic ways student understanding of the codes and practices of Higher Education (HE). The *Becoming* module takes an approach that is creative and emancipatory – helping students find their academic identity and voice through meaningful projects and activities rather than de-contextualised interventions or supplementary instructional add-ons. A key desirable outcome for us is that our students *become academic* without losing themselves in the process.

Becoming educational

Becoming an Educationalist is nominally the 'academic skills' module, the space where students are building up their study and academic strategies and their writing skills and practice. For some academics, this is sometimes thought of as the 'remedial' module, designed to bring less than university-ready students up to standard. We reject this negative view of our students. Whilst our students may not have the same academic or cultural capital as the typical white middle-class student, they bring with them rich life experiences that traditional universities typically neglect to value or actively ignore in their widening participation students. We have designed *Becoming* to allow students to showcase their

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strengths and maximise their potential on the way to becoming the academics that they want to be. That is, we have re-framed *Becoming* not as the stigmatised 'repair them' module, but as the synoptic module that brings together the ideas in the other three core modules of the first year. This makes it a high-status space that allows students to think about and reflect on what they are learning across the programme as a whole.

In *Becoming*, students are given the time and space to get to know each other and feel as if they belong - to the module, to the course and to the University itself. We do not tell students the 'right answer' but set up problems and challenges that they can discuss and resolve together. They are invited to make sense of university by exploring the University and conducting small research projects so that they discover for themselves what makes learning happen – and what gets in the way of their learning. We link this creative academic practice to critical pedagogy¹, championing the idea that education should allow students time and space to regain their sense of humanity – rather than to lose themselves. Our students are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge; in *Becoming*, they are co-producers (Carey, 2013) – of ideas, of resources and of artefacts. They are social constructors (Burr, 2015), empowered, when in dialogue with knowledge-claims and with each other (Bakhtin, 1981), to come to new ways of knowing the world and knowing themselves. Where learning and study are seen as a struggle to find the 'right' answer, student thinking and action are circumscribed and controlled; agency is denied and 'creative power' inhibited (Crème, 2003). We wanted a more mutual approach to education that values *all people* – tutors and students. Viewed through this lens, we wanted to consider more carefully how we work with our students – and reflect more critically on the methods we use in our classrooms to support academic thinking and writing.

Free writing

Just as our students are considered to lack general academic skills – they are seen to be deficit in their academic writing. Typically, staff cry out in despair, "*They just can't write!*", focusing merely on the technical issues that reveal themselves in the students' writing. In the midst of this negatively-framed discussion, we have embraced an empowering strategic intervention to tackle academic writing – and that emphasises the value of (iterative) writing over time. Rather than a recondite focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar, we foster students' academic writing by using free writing exercises (Elbow, 1998).

Free writing is a form of writing without censorship or too much conscious control. The idea is to put temporarily aside such functional matters as 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, 1998:15). 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*. Free writing models writing to learn.

This is writing as plentiful (Elbow, 1998), not writing that is one-draft, last-minute-just-before-you-hand-it-in writing, but writing that acknowledges that ideas and words are plentiful – and that, in order to get to the good stuff, you will have to write some rubbish (garbage) on the way. That is, it is counter-productive even to aim for one-draft perfection (for this is writing and editing at the same time) which often leads to stasis, frustration and writing blocks. Free writing allows exploration and understanding rather than, say, shaping and constructing an argument to follow the lecturer's opinions. Free writing is powerful in many ways – not least that it models to students that one-draft writing serves up raw ideas, undigested and uncritical. Like Elbow (1998), we acknowledge that ideas need to develop before they are ready to be presented to an audience or, in this case, before they are submitted to essay markers.

'Really free'

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In *Becoming*, we have used free writing to help students to write – and also to allow their issues with academic writing to surface naturally. Many lecturers across the sector make it clear to students – and particularly make it clear to ‘hard to reach’ or non-traditional students - that they cannot write (Lea and Street, 1998) – that they pay no attention to spelling, punctuation and grammar and that they have little or no understanding of academic codes and conventions (Carter *et al*, 2009). Strangely enough, this ‘feedback’ does little to liberate student writers, instead forcing them to search for the right answer to please the hostile critic.

University is supposed to nurture analytical and critical thinking and to foster engagement with difficult ideas, as students wrestle with tough subject matter, discovering for themselves what the differing knowledge-claims are... and what they themselves think. By focusing on the syntax, we are telling students that rather than thinking freely – or critically – about the question that they have been set or the material with which they are engaging, we want them to worry about ‘getting it right’ (Carter *et al*, 2009) – we want them to pay attention to the spelling, punctuation and grammar rather than the ideas and the epistemology.

So, by way of challenge to this traditional academic approach to students, *our* intention with the first writing exercise in the *Becoming* module is to raise these issues sensitively and to open *constructive* discussion about the meaning and purpose of academia... and of writing!

In the first free-write session that we hold with our students, we ask them 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 ‘free write’ makes use of writing under time pressure – we typically ask our students to write for ten minutes on a topic, though the exercise can be shorter or last much longer. In this writing, we emphasise that it is ok for them to make mistakes and 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 get used to the feeling of articulating, on demand, their ideas on paper.

After the timed writing, we have an extended debrief: guided reflections focusing on emotional responses to the writing and on their reasons for not writing; a chance to see what they can take from this experience into other (academic) writing. Students’ reasons for not writing are, typically, lack of confidence and fear of getting it wrong. Neither laziness nor a lack of ideas is what inhibits student writing: it is the fear and shame of failure. This pressure makes students write and correct at the same time – an act of censorship that makes ‘real’ writing very difficult, or impossible. Just coming to realise this allows many students to adopt free writing as a strategy for capturing first thoughts about an assignment before then developing them into a first draft of potential essay paragraphs.²

Lessons learned

Lessons learned from these sessions often involve students’ realising that when ‘free writing’ they can actually write and that, once they start writing, amazing things can happen:

“When we first started free writing I didn’t get it at all. What’s the point? Then I realised that I could just let myself go. Things started to happen.

When we did that free writing every week, I got the best mark I’ve ever got for an essay.

All the free writing helped me to take control of the module. I think it helped me be more creative.

When I did the weekly writing, I finally understood why I was reading!”

(Burns and Sinfield, 2016:160).

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Some students continue to use the two-pieces-of-paper strategy – using the second sheet to write down what might be blocking their writing this time – or to write what they would rather be writing an essay upon. Just getting those thoughts, that garbage, out of the way can overcome an otherwise pernicious writing block. Overall, most students realise that the process helps to clarify and focus ideas:

“As students have been working with their ideas, they have been making a series of choices about their ideas that will lead them to feel “ready” to put them in more complete, coherent form; they will feel “ready to write” their ideas in something closer to the assignment or paper from”

(The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016).

Next steps and recommendations

Our students are expected to become ‘experts’ in academic writing at the same time as they wrestle with new and complex material in often Byzantine academic settings. Our experience reveals that the very way that their critics (outsiders and insiders) frame academic writing increases student anxiety about writing itself, inhibiting their progress. Student work is often condemned as not ‘academic’ or ‘not critical enough’, when students are just *en route* to analytical and critical thought; or that it is plagiarised, when really it is just ‘clunky’, as students struggle to express new ideas in unfamiliar formats. In our module, we acknowledge that students are *becoming* writers, wrestling not only with writing itself but also with the rules of academia. We aim to allow our students time to settle into the academic environment and space to become ‘good essay writers’, by creating opportunities in our classes for them to ‘write to learn’. This means that all students in a class experience this writing practice; just as the module is not positioned as if for deficit, ‘hard-to-reach’ students, so the writing itself is not hived off and stigmatised as remedial writing for remedial folk. And, indeed, all writers benefit from the space to learn that writing is thinking – that it is iterative – and that we can develop our writing craft by developing a writing habit. Free writing exercises seem a good starting point for students to think about their own practice and the practice of others, but we recognise that they are only a first step on the road to becoming academics. We do, however, recommend that others also set aside that focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar and trust that students will come to academia and become skilful academic writers by inhabiting thinking/writing spaces in our curriculum and in our classrooms.

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Notes

¹ Viz. Paulo Freire Brazilian educator and leading advocate of critical pedagogy: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970

² Other free writing strategies can include a ten-minute free write on an assignment answer in the very first session that you meet – and ten minutes of semi-structured free writing at the end of every – or every other – seminar – modelling writing to learn.