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PASSwrite: Recalibrating student academic literacies development

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Abstract

Concern about student retention and success remains paramount in universities both in Australia and overseas, especially in the light of the ongoing massification of higher education, yet current strategies are not necessarily dealing successfully with the changing demographics of student populations. This is particularly so in the realm of developing student academic literacies. This paper argues strongly for a shift in approaches to the development of academic literacies, adopting current trends in peer learning rather than relying on the deficit model of study skills which is frequently employed at Australian universities. We present an overview of the innovative PASSwrite model, utilising the principles of peer-assisted study sessions (PASS) to create a peer-led informal environment in which students can develop their academic writing abilities in a collaborative, discipline-specific context. We posit that such an environment can better address students' learning needs across a wide spectrum, from understanding the specific discourse of their discipline and receiving timely feedback on their writing, to developing confidence in their ability to navigate successfully a path through the maze of academia. We provide an outline of a PASSwrite session to demonstrate how this can be achieved, along with the anticipated outcomes. As the project is at an early stage at the time of writing, no firm conclusions can be made, but it is envisaged that these will be presented as the project matures.

Introduction

In the main succeeding at university means acquiring the language and conventions of academia. Rarely does this happen by osmosis. Indeed, few would argue that writing effective academic texts is easy, even for skilled writers. As "novice" writers, students, particularly those who have had little, if any, exposure to writing in the academy, often struggle with text-level organisation; the logical development of content and argument; complex sentence construction, including punctuation and the accurate use of discipline-specific vocabulary; and referencing conventions. And yet without opportunities for formative feedback, support and scaffolding from more competent others, many students fail to acquire adequate disciplinary knowledge, respond appropriately in their assessment tasks and develop the critical and communicative capabilities required to succeed at university and beyond. While the English-language and academic-literacy needs of students have long been recognised (e.g. DEEWR 2009; Devlin 2010; Arkoudis 2011; Lane 2012), programs to develop these capabilities continue to operate largely at the fringes of universities.

This would seem at variance with the higher-education imperatives to enhance student engagement and positively affect retention and progression. This continued focus on issues of student retention and success has been heightened by the massification of higher education in Australia and globally, with a concomitant increase in student numbers, diversity and variation in levels of preparedness. University populations now commonly consist of students who may be first-in-family, LSES, from vocational education pathways, mature-age, studying part-time or from a language background other than English (LBOTE). As a snapshot, in 2011, the University of Western Sydney, a large, multi-campus institution in a socioeconomically disadvantaged region, saw student enrolments from 23.7% low socioeconomic status (LSES), approximately 50% first-in-family, 19% vocational education and training (VET) pathway and 32% LBOTE[1], many of whom were longer-term migrants with complex and poorly understood sociolinguistic and educational backgrounds (Williamson 2012). Many such students may lack the educational capital that constitutes "the knowledge, skills and values which ground orientations to education" (Watkins & Noble 2008, p vi). UWS is by no means unique in its student demographic; most Australian universities now have significant numbers of such students. Further complicating the picture, many new students have significant family and work commitments outside of university, reducing the number of hours they spend on campus. But this profound change in the higher-education system is not just a matter of demographics. It demands a concomitant cultural shift in the receiving institutions. Unfortunately, there are real concerns over raising the aspirations of non-traditional students, but not adjusting university settings to accommodate these aspirations. There is, therefore, a strong moral argument for ensuring all institutions that have committed to the widening participation agenda provide opportunities for students to develop the attributes of successful learners and communicators (Engstron & Tinto 2008; Williamson & Goldsmith 2012).

Despite the more recent learning and teaching discourses suggesting that universities are keenly aware of their student demographics, the dominant pedagogical paradigm does not reflect this. Instead, the university sector has embraced the independent-learner ethos and is moving rapidly towards blended/online delivery. This approach sees students struggle, at least initially, to adapt to the autonomous learning expectations: recent school leavers and those from the VET sector may rely more on teachers and parents for direction; students with significant financial and family obligations are not on campus enough to easily unravel where and how to locate the support they need. Furthermore, despite the desire on the part of many students for flexible online learning, they still greatly value face-to-face time with teaching staff and opportunities to seek and receive feedback on written work (Ferguson 2009). However, undergraduate study today is largely characterised by limited opportunities for

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[1] UWS DEEWR Submissions 2011

dialogue between students and academics (Lillis 2001). When it does take place, there is a perception among some academics that academic support of underprepared students unreasonably increases their workload, and that it is somehow separate from their role as content lecturers (McInnis 2001). Consequently, only around a third of students feel satisfied with the accessibility and level of feedback they receive from teaching staff (Krause et al. 2005).

In the light of these prevailing conditions, this paper argues strongly for the need to adapt the way academic literacy has traditionally been delivered. Despite the broad sector acceptance of the academic-literacies model (Lea & Street 1998), with its emphasis on discipline-specific literacy (see DEEWR Good Practice Principles 2009), university language centres predominantly offer generalised non-disciplinary specific workshops on study skills. Apart from the issue of generic skills workshops being divorced from the language and discourse practices of specific academic disciplines, evidence indicates this model is not working as well as it once did. Study-skills workshops are suffering from falling attendance, doubts over the transference of skills (ABDC & ALTC 2010) and a failure to attract those who most need the support (Arkoudis & Starfield 2007). Many institutions also provide students with just-in-time, one-to-one consultations with academic-language advisors. Such appointments, while effective in the short term, are very resource-intensive and can inculcate remediation and dependence in place of self-reliance and resourcefulness. For the many new students in universities who are time-poor and struggling to unpack the expectations of tertiary study, being referred to study-skills centres or academic-language units for "fixing" is arguably neither effective nor sustainable. There is, moreover, a need to nurture a culture of writing that values the process of writing as much as the final product (Aitchison 2009). The key then is to realign both the type and mode of academic-writing development to better meet the needs of current students and circumvent institutional constraints. While we recognise that embedding and mapping academic literacies and English-language proficiency at the program level is certainly best practice, it is a longer-term goal, demanding significant commitment and collaboration from a range of stakeholders. In the meantime, students need access to contextualised, discipline-specific writing development.

The Shift to Peer-Learning Pedagogies

This leads to the basis of the model that we propose: that of peer learning. Peer learning is increasingly used here and abroad for effective, discipline-based learning. It is defined by Topping as "the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals.... It involves people who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn...." (2005, p631). In the United States, it developed as a response to widening access policies where non-traditional students had difficulty adapting to the conventions of the college classroom (Bruffee 1984) and were reluctant to use support that was based on those conventions. Collaborative, supplemental peer-tutoring was seen as a possible strategy. This model is now an integral part of the student experience in higher education in the US, and increasingly in the UK. Similarly, in Australia, the peer-learning model has become a mainstay of the undergraduate student experience. The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) model, the most widespread and rigorously evaluated model of peer learning, has been successfully implemented across 33 institutions in Australia. PASS is based on the following hypotheses: that students resent being targeted for remedial programs; that first-year students are more likely to be engaged with peer learning than with traditional lectures; and that novice learners are more likely to learn from successful peers than from lecturers, as long as the peers leading the sessions are facilitators, not tutors (Longfellow et al. 2008). At UWS, PASS has become a widely accepted brand, enjoying support from staff, students and management.

Besides discipline-based support, peer-learning models are increasingly being adopted as vehicles for the delivery of English-language and academic-literacies development. In the UK,

where university writing centres are being disbanded, peer writing-tutor programs are taking their place (O'Neill 2008; Longfellow et al. 2008). In Australia, peer writing support has taken the form of one-to-one mentoring and/or pit-stop services (e.g. University of New South Wales peer writing assistants, Queensland University of Technology peer advisors, University of Melbourne peer writing tutors). As argued previously, such one-to-one models are not only unsustainable on the scale required but also run the risk of becoming little more than editing and proofreading services. On the other hand, we believe the small-group learning model exemplified by PASS is perfectly situated to produce the kind of hands-on, low-risk, formative opportunities for writing practice that many students both need and desire.

This paper then argues for an expansion and recalibration of the peer-learning model for the development of student academic literacies. We propose a hybridisation of contextualised, discipline-specific academic literacy and the collaborative, peer-led model of PASS. We report on the initiation of such a project, PASSwrite, at UWS. We explain the impetus for the program, the theoretical approaches underpinning it and the anticipated outcomes.

The Project Background

Many of us working in academic language and literacy are familiar with the incongruity of high academic-literacy workshop registrations and low attendance. Registration rates suggest that students recognise their need for guidance in unpacking the expectations of university reading and writing, and yet actual attendance reflects the time-poor nature of many of our students. Equally frustrating is the perennial complaint within the academy and wider community of slipping standards for student writing. This is especially so when attempts at structural changes to support the development of student writing by embedding and mapping academic language at the program level are slow and often ad hoc. At the same time, we have witnessed the enthusiastic uptake of peer learning in the form of PASS at most Australian universities. As coordinators of the PASS program at UWS, we have watched with interest as significant proportions of PASS sessions have increasingly been given over to study skills, including all aspects of essay writing, critical reading and argumentation. It seemed to us that there was the potential to reach the students who no longer, or never had, attended study-skills workshops, and to apply the notion of discipline-specific writing and academic literacy practice. It was from this hybridisation that the idea for PASSwrite emerged.

In brief, PASSwrite sessions provide students with the opportunity to deconstruct academic texts in terms of meaning and structure; apply what is learned to their own writing; give and receive feedback on their academic writing in an informal and collaborative environment; and practise writing within the session. The role of the facilitator is to model successful academic-writing approaches, give feedback in small groups and move the attendees through structured writing activities. A more detailed explanation of what occurs in a session is outlined in Table 2.

We initially ran two PASSwrite sessions at two separate campuses of UWS in the intra-semester break of semester 1, 2012. The sessions were advertised widely to all first- and second-year humanities students. Data from the student evaluations of these sessions, a focus-group interview with PASS facilitators and bi-annual PASS program evaluations from 2009-2012 were collated. Table 1 summarises the major themes articulated by students that then informed the design of the PASSwrite model are summarised.

Table 1: Summary of themes and sub-themes emerging from PASSwrite and PASS evaluations

Main Theme	Sub-themes
Reassurance	Checking if on right track
	Gaining confidence in own abilities

	Realising not the only one feeling confused or anxious
Feedback	Getting individual feedback on own writing Learning by critiquing others' writing
Exemplars	Seeing examples of effective writing in different genres in specific disciplines
Strategies	Unpacking requirements of assessment tasks Decoding expectations of lecturers/units/feedback from academic staff

Theoretical Underpinnings

In addition to seeking students' perspectives on the kinds of support they value in becoming proficient writers and readers in the university context, the design of the PASSwrite model is premised on the following theoretical approaches:

Collaborative

"I found the prospect of essay writing overwhelming after such a long break. Brainstorming with other peers was so useful. It assisted in breaking down the tasks to better understand what is expected." (Student comment, UWS PASS survey, semester 2, 2011)

The social-constructivist perspective that knowledge and language are built within and rely on a social context underpins the collaborative nature of the PASSwrite project. According to this view, learners develop knowledge by interacting with other individuals. The verbalising and questioning that are integral to collaborative learning are especially effective when discussing the writing process (Lillis 2006). Indeed, this social interaction works to demonstrably improve writing (Bazerman et al. 2006). Beyond the cognitive benefits of group work, collaborative learning also has obvious social benefits (discussed in detail on page*). In the current climate, when many students are spending less time on campus due to competing priorities outside of university (such as work and family commitments), collaborative peer-learning models like PASSwrite allow students to meet their academic and social needs in the one space, mitigating some of the demands that student have on their time. Finally, we argue that group collaboration, rather than the mentor-mentee relationships typical of one-on-one peer writing programs, affords greater benefits for all participants. Not only is learner autonomy more likely to be fostered in such an arrangement, but collaborative learning spaces provide opportunities to promote greater equality and connectedness between diverse groups of students. It is not uncommon to have recent school-leavers working cooeratively with mature-age, international, refugee and migrant students towards a common goal of academic success.

Discipline-specific

"For me, group activities were most helpful since we got to share our ideas about the texts that we studied for the course. It also helped me gain more knowledge of how to answer questions for this particular course." (Student comment, UWS PASS survey, semester 1, 2012)

PASSwrite aims to develop both discipline-based writing and academic literacy practices through contextualised learning. The discipline-specific approach has been adopted in part because the program builds on the PASS model, which targets specific (challenging) units of study and integrates content and study skills in the sessions. Equally important is the

perspective that writing (as part of the development of literacy) is seen as a socio-cultural act, necessarily embedded in the social practices and social contexts in which it is used (Street 2003). Becoming a skilled writer involves responding to the specific demands of the cultures in which literacy is used; thus, it needs to be in the disciplinary context in which it occurs. The Good Practice Principles (AUQA 2009) recognised the disciplinarity of academic literacy (hence, the increasingly accepted term "academic literacies") and emphasised the need for "oral and written communication skills to be made more visible, accessible and most importantly, integrated within specific disciplinary contexts" (p2). This notion of visibility is also important because contradictions arise within different disciplines, ranging from variations in the expectations of different tutors to different understandings of what a specific genre may require, particularly as these understandings are frequently not made explicit (Lea & Street 1998). Students need support to negotiate what is expected of them within their discipline and to manage the often-contradictory expectations. PASSwrite can facilitate a discourse within the practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), hopefully leading to the development of student voices that are both individual and appropriate to the discipline.

Hands-on

"Practising academic writing helped me improve my writing skills and helped with referencing skills." (Student comment PASSwrite pilot survey, semester 1, 2012)

The program also reflects the perspectives of situated cognition and situated learning in a number of respects (Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989; Kirshner & Whitson 1997; Lave & Wenger 1991). Both these perspectives see the learning context and the authenticity of (writing) tasks as critical, and posit that students learn by doing; "that knowing, thinking and understanding are generated in practice, in situations whose specific characteristics are part of practice as it unfolds" (Lave, in Kirshner & Whitson 1997, p19). A key aim of PASSwrite is to nurture a culture of writing that values the process as much as the final product (Aitchison 2009). Not only does this approach present opportunities for students to practise the mechanics of writing, but also the very act of writing helps develop cognitive skills and critical thinking (Emig 1977). It is our belief that much of what constitutes unclear writing is a lack of clear thinking. We assert that the creation of a space in which students can engage in meaningful, constructive, facilitated conversations about unit-related readings, and then, crucially, test that understanding through free writing, will improve their writing.

Peer-facilitated

*'It gave you another form of understanding material from a different perspective which we understood better as the other students and facilitator are at our level.' (*Student comment, UWS PASS survey, semester 1, 2012)

PASSwrite is peer-facilitated to reflect the social constructivist view of learning as scaffolded exploration through social and cognitive interactions with a more-experienced peer. Unlike experts in the form of lecturers and tutors, who are likely to be outside students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), near peers can provide frames of reference to understand new information in new disciplines, and can "lend the students the capacity to frame meanings they cannot yet produce independently" (Norton & Crowley 1995, p172). For this reason, many students view successful peers as more credible (Topping 2005). However, it is not only a matter of being able to relate more readily to peers that makes peer-facilitated learning models effective. The trend away from attending lectures (McInnis, James & Hartley 2000) may in part be due to the size and nature of this traditional form of instruction, both of

which can be intimidating for beginning students. These students report an unwillingness to ask questions; in addition, fear of exposing their ignorance or a lack of confidence in their own ability prevents them from seeking clarification or venturing their own opinions. Within the context of peer-led sessions, the role of the peer facilitator is not to judge or assess students' work, but to have a conversation about it, and it is this that is instructive. In this way, the PASSwrite facilitator inhabits a space somewhere between student and teacher (Harris 1995), providing all-important face-to-face time in which students can articulate bewilderment, seek clarification and speak and write in the discourse with a competent (if not expert) other.

Formative

"Essay writing, learning to critique essay writing each week and being able to read out aloud any work I had done and get feedback was great. It helped me see if I was on the right track with my writing." (Student comment PASSwrite pilot survey, semester 1, 2012)

The modern university has limited opportunities for students to engage in dialogue about their understanding of unit content and academic writing expectations. Such dialogues, when they do occur, reflect the relationships of authority between tutor and student. Too often, it is the tutor or lecturer talking to or at the students, and in such contexts it is difficult for students to challenge this dynamic. Similarly, opportunities to receive and discuss detailed, constructive feedback are few and far between. Only around a third of students feel satisfied with the accessibility and level of feedback they receive from teaching staff (Krause et al. 2005). Furthermore, any feedback received is frequently delivered long after the task has been completed, thus lessening its formative value; it is also acknowledged that much feedback is cursory, unclear, confusing or unnecessarily negative (Catt & Gregory 2006). In contrast, the feedback in peer-led writing sessions is immediate and framed in language that students find accessible (Devet et al. 2006). The importance of receiving swift and purposeful feedback should not be underestimated, but teaching staff can often find it logistically difficult to achieve. In peer-led sessions, students and facilitators learn through giving and receiving feedback, in the process of considering both their own work and that of others.

Engaging

"I gained confidence in reading my work to my peers. It was a great way to not feel as isolated and know that my peers were the same as myself in regards to abilities and that we all have strong points as well as struggles." (Student comment, UWS PASS survey, semester 1, 2011)

Much of the literature around building student engagement speaks of fostering a sense of student belonging through supportive peer relations (Thomas 2012). The establishment of these peer networks is particularly important in students' first year, as the isolation experienced by many new students is a contributing factor in student attrition. Survey data and qualitative research from the UK identified feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in as key reasons behind students' decisions to leave university (Thomas 2012). Collaborative, peer-led sessions such as PASSwrite allow students to recognise that others are feeling similarly confused about what is expected of them in terms of university writing. This recognition fosters a sense of belonging and can help ameliorate the detrimental impact of isolation on retention and success. Another affective outcome of peer-learning is a growth in confidence and willingness to identify as successful learners in the higher-education context. This combination of belonging, confidence and identifying as a successful learner contributes to what Topping refers to as "educational resilience" (2005, p641).

The PASSwrite Project

Each weekly PASSwrite session runs for one and a half hours and aims to integrate reading and writing as much as possible. This equal focus on reading is due to our belief that an understanding of the literature of the discipline, including the tutorial readings, is critical to academic success in the unit. Data from our student evaluations indicate that even when students have done the tutorial readings, they do not necessarily understand them. Students also report that the tutor may go too quickly or digress, in the assumption that students have a basic comprehension of the main points of the texts. Thus, each session entails a discipline reading: unpacking it and responding to it in a structured free-writing activity. The free-writing activity provides an opportunity for the PASSwrite facilitator and the attendees to give feedback. This is done verbally, where the students read their responses aloud and the other members of the group comment on it, either in pairs or as one small group, depending on numbers. Table 2 gives an outline of a PASSwrite session. Following evaluation and feedback from facilitators and attendees at the end of the current trial, it may be modified to suit the perceived needs of the students.

Table 2: A PASSwrite session outline for a humanities subject

Stage	Individual/ Group	Time	Activity/Purpose
1: Agenda setting	Whole group	5 mins	Facilitator negotiates agenda with students.
2: Unpacking a model piece of writing	Small group	15 mins	Students read through and identify what makes this a successful piece of writing. Facilitator nominates/elicits key features to locate and discuss.
3: Co-constructing a text	Pair	20 mins	Students read short text or extract from text and write response to it, keeping in mind the model writing previously analysed. Facilitator provides writing prompt.
4: Feedback on writing	Individual/pair	concurrent with Stage 5	Facilitator moves between pairs, providing feedback and advice. This stage will overlap with stage 6.
5: Specific writing/academic-literacy activities	Small group or pairs	10 mins per activity: 20 mins total	As Stage 3 writing finishes, students choose from three activities (which three has been determined by group in Stage 1). Work through two to three activities in groups. When finished, swap activities and/or groups.
6: Feedback on individual writing/pair editing	Pair	15 mins	Students provide feedback on a partner's piece of writing (brought with them), using a marking guide. Facilitator monitors and provides informal feedback on this process.
7: Reflection	Individual	5 mins	Students reflect on what has been gained from this session and what they want to focus on next.
8: Wrap and close	Whole group	5 mins	Facilitator summarises session and previews next session.

Anticipated Outcomes

As the project is in its early stages at the time of writing, formal quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of PASSwrite have yet to be collected and analysed. However, data from other peer writing programs and our own measures of the impacts of the PASS program at UWS over the last five years have led us to anticipate the following outcomes:

Improvement in student writing

Several studies have demonstrated improved writing performance and/or grades for students participating in peer writing programs, as reported in Topping (1996) (e.g. Holloday 1989, 1990; Levine 1990; Oley 1992; Louth, McAllister & MacAllister 1990). We anticipate that

through increased "time on task" (Topping 2005, p637) and opportunities for engagement in low-risk (non-assessable) writing, coupled with support and scaffolding from a more proficient peer, students who attend PASSwrite regularly will obtain similar benefits. Specifically, we expect to see

- Consolidation, fluency and automaticity of students' core writing capabilities
- Development of students' metacognitive knowledge and regulation
- Transference of writing capabilities to other units within discipline

The degree to which these effects occur will be measured by comparison of performance on pre- and post-tests, performance in written tasks in enrolled units, grade point average and overall unit grade/s and subjective evaluation through a survey instrument.

Enhancement of understanding of discipline-level language and conventions

As a key feature of the PASSwrite project is discipline-level writing development, we expect that discussions around writing from a disciplinary perspective will produce:

- Development of discipline-specific text-analysis skills
- Increased awareness and control of discipline features, including structure, rhetoric, vocabulary and referencing conventions
- Increased awareness of audience

These effects will be evaluated using the measures outlined above.

Educational resilience

Through opportunities to make errors and be corrected in a supportive, non-judgemental environment, we anticipate students will have a greater sense of ownership of the learning process and greater control over the formation of academic voice. Specifically, we will be looking for:

- Improved retention and progression rates among attendees
- Extension of friendship/study groups beyond PASSwrite sessions
- Subjective evaluation by the students through a survey instrument.

Development of graduate attributes

One of the hallmarks of peer-learning models is the tangible benefits available for student facilitators. The metacognitive tasks of planning, monitoring and evaluating sessions, reviewing existing knowledge and skills and reorganising knowledge and applying it in novel ways confer both cognitive and affective benefits. Specifically, we expect to see:

- Enhanced understanding of own academic literacy practices
- Development of a range of literacies, including communication, information, social and cultural
- Enhanced problem-solving, leadership and teamwork skills

These effects will be evaluated using a combination of qualitative (survey, focus-group interview) and quantitative (postgraduate employment outcomes) measures.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the early stages of the PASSwrite initiative to develop student discipline-based academic reading and writing through the vehicle of collaborative, peer-led learning. We have outlined the rationale for our approach, the structure that the project has taken and both the cognitive and affective outcomes we hope to observe. At the time of writing, the PASSwrite project is running in the Business and Humanities faculties on four out of five campuses. Our experience with the PASS program and more traditional forms of academic-literacy support leads us to anticipate a number of challenges with a project such as PASSwrite. These range from logistical to cultural and institutional. Notwithstanding these constraints, we believe that PASSwrite represents an important and timely recalibration of student academic-literacies development in higher education.

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