

# EXPLORING THE BEST WAYS TO SUPPORT FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

## EXPLORACIÓN DE LAS FORMAS DE APOYAR EL DESARROLLO DE LAS HABILIDADES DE REDACCIÓN ACADÉMICA EN ESTUDIANTES DE PRIMER AÑO UNIVERSITARIO

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Recibido: 08/07/14

Aceptado: 17/09/14

### ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of an action research project carried out in 2012 with 12 first-year university students taking 'Education Studies' in a university in England. The aim of the project was to explore the best ways to support students' academic writing skills. The literature review highlights the challenges students encounter when trying to learn the discourse of a discipline; and in the light of this examination, a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of my own practice provides the context for carrying out an action research project. The teaching intervention was assessed using the following methods of data collection: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with students, and content analysis of my own feedback on student's final assignments. The outcomes of the research demonstrate that students' difficulties with their academic writing are related to their struggle to understand specialized concepts, theories and methods of the discipline.

**Keywords:** higher education, academic writing, college students.

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### RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación - acción realizado en 2012 con estudiantes del primer año en la carrera de 'Estudios de la Educación' en una Universidad de Inglaterra. La finalidad del proyecto fue explorar las mejores formas de apoyar las habilidades de redacción académica de los estudiantes. La revisión de la literatura identifica los desafíos que los estudiantes enfrentan al tratar de aprender el discurso de la disciplina; y a la luz de este análisis una reflexión de las fortalezas y debilidades de mi propia práctica provee el contexto para llevar a cabo una proyecto de investigación - acción. Los métodos de recolección de datos que se usaron

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para evaluar la intervención de enseñanza fueron: cuestionarios, entrevista semiestructurada con estudiantes, y análisis de contenido (retroalimentación) de los trabajos finales de los estudiantes. Los resultados de la investigación demuestran que las dificultades de redacción de los estudiantes están relacionadas con su esfuerzo por entender los conceptos especializados, teorías y métodos de la disciplina.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior, redacción académica, estudiantes universitarios.

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## EXPLORING THE BEST WAYS TO SUPPORT FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS. AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

### INTRODUCTION. BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Widening Participation Agenda in the UK has created new challenges for teaching and learning in higher education. Widening Participation students (Moore, Sanders, & Higham, 2013) have diverse entry qualifications, abilities and experiences (Wingate, 2007) that need to be taken into account when developing strategies, activities and interventions to support retention and success in higher education. Teaching and Learning strategies to better support traditional and non-traditional students have been discussed in the literature (Biggs, 2003; Exeter et al., 2010; Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 1999; Kember, 1997; Otting, Zwaal, Tempelaar, & Gijssels, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; TLRP-ERSC, 2008). Particularly, issues such as 'how students learn' (Otting et al., 2010) and 'learning to learn' (Wingate, 2007) play a major role in the debate.

The literature about students' first year experience in the university shows that students need support to learn new social behaviors and discourses and literacies of the academic culture (Lawrence, 2001). It has been highlighted that there is a lack of understanding about the meaning of learning in university

and this is particularly true when working with first-years students (Gamache, 2002, cited in Wingate, 2007). Students usually learn about the discipline in lectures, seminars, reading texts and writing essays. Indeed, 'practicing' has been identified as the only way 'to gain facility with the discourse of a discipline' (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p. 14). Warren (2002, p. 93) argues more specifically that it is through 'writing [that students] learn the discipline'. Bloxham's and West's (2007, p. 79) review of the literature indicate that assisting students to write 'is a key element of raising their achievement in learning', and this is particularly important when working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Drawing primarily on the South African experience, and similar findings from Australia, Warren (2002, p. 87) found that one of the main weaknesses in students' work is the lack of familiarity 'with specialized concepts, theories, methods and writing conventions of the specific discipline'. According to Taylor (1988, cited in Warren, 2002), 'students' writing problems reflect semantic and epistemic uncertainties, not simply lack of language proficiency'. Haggis and Pouge (2002) provide a similar view when

explaining students' lack of understanding about the meaning of learning in university. They argue that the problem lies on the kind of epistemological beliefs that students have in their approach to learning. McGowan (2005, p. 51) explained that when students write essays, 'there is no reason to assume without explicit induction, that they know *why* they are required to do so'. This is why it has been suggested that activities that focus on the '*why*' of writing rather than the '*how*' of academic writing are more likely to promote meaningful engagement (Delahunt, Everitt-Reynolds, Maguire, & Sheridan, 2010; Delahunt, Everitt-Reynolds, & Maguire, 2011).

Research suggests that the role of all university teachers should be to teach students how to learn the discipline. One way of doing this is through timely and effective feedback on assignments. It has been very well documented in the literature that quality feedback is important for student to progress in their learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hounsell, 2008). Yet, there is less evidence on the impact of feedback on students' learning. Findings from research have demonstrated that many learners do not understand the criteria and terminology that tutors write in their assignments (Cowan, 2003). This, as Hounsell (2008) explains, is mainly because lecturers tend to use the academic discourse taken for granted in the discipline.

In summary, the literature review reveals that students' difficulties with their academic writing skills seem to be linked to the lack of understanding of the academic discourse of the discipline and university teachers, including myself, fail to recognize this issue when providing feedback on students' learning.

### **The context of my own practice**

Over the last ten years, I have been teaching in Education Departments (Non

Qualified Teacher Status or Non QTS) of two universities in England. One of the main problems that I have encountered since my early days as a university lecturer is students' lack of academic writing skills. My students are mainly 'widening participation' students who need to be supported in different ways in their learning journey, and particularly in their academic writing skills. When marking assignments, and delivering lectures and seminars, I have observed that despite making an effort to read the course materials, students struggle to express their arguments in an academic style. When reading short academic articles in seminars, they find it difficult to understand key theoretical concepts and I have spent more time helping students to understand the meaning of concepts than critically discussing the topic of the lecture.

Supporting first-year students' academic writing skills became the topic of my interest when I realized that the lack of coherence and structure of students' essays started to dominate my attention when marking their work. Despite using strategies such as detailed feedback on assignments, short sessions about essay writing, handouts with key information, signposting to academic writing skills websites, I still have to discover the best ways to better support them. Most of my first-year students are from non-traditional backgrounds and this creates challenges for teaching and learning. I have a mixture of young and mature students who fit their studies around other responsibilities such as childcare, part-time and full-time jobs. In order to better understand their difficulties with academic writing and understand whether or not the strategies that I apply are working, I decided to carry out a small action research project and focus upon my experience of teaching first-year students in a post-92 university.

In the academic year 2010-2011 I taught the compulsory module 'Introduction to Education Studies' to First-year students working towards a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Education Studies. We were a team of seven lecturers who together were responsible for the weekly delivery of a three-hour teaching session including one-hour lecture and two hours seminar. During the group seminars, students had the opportunity to discuss further the key concepts and theories introduced at the lecture. Structured activities in the seminars usually consisted of reading two or three pages of a relevant academic articles, and group work where students had to answer some specific questions in relation to the lecture and the text. Each group provided feedback to the whole group at the end of their discussion.

The purpose of the seminar was to offer students an informal setting to reinforce their knowledge and grasp the key concepts explained in the lecture. During my seminars, I observed that students made an effort to engage with the topic but they required support to move from the descriptive level of their discussion to theoretical abstraction. Assuming the role of a facilitator (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, cited in Knight, 2002), my priority was to help them to co-construct meaning asking relevant questions to trigger their thinking. Once the students constructed their understanding 'in their talk and interaction with each other' (Cain, 2011, p.7), they were ready to use the concepts and develop reasoned arguments. It was this opportunity that I took to emphasize that they had to follow the same process of thinking when writing essays. I did what Warren encouraged university teachers to do, 'to illuminate the discourse of academic inquiry showing students 'how to know, how to justify their knowledge and how to structure it – in short, how to read and write in [the] subject discipline' (Warren,

2002, p. 91). I experienced moments when students seemed to grasp the meaning of the obscure academic language and asked further questions. I felt at that point that my strategy was working but it was not clear if they had been applying this acquired knowledge in the development of their essays.

The assessment strategy of the module consisted of a 2,500 words essay to be submitted at the end of the semester. The main purpose was, as in any summative assessment, 'to see how well students have learned what they were supposed to have learned' (Knight, 2002, p.142). When marking their essays, the main weakness that I found was the lack of academic writing skills and understanding of academic conventions (the absence of an essay plan, lack of essay structure, academic writing style, referencing). It was clear that students read the academic sources but they did not know how to interpret and analyze the ideas of other academics to develop an argument.

When I wrote my feedback on their essays, I referred to the assessment criteria (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). I used the same academic discourse reflected in the assessment criteria and provide contextualized feedback linked to their assignments. However, specific examples to illustrate what I was explaining were not very often included. Reflecting on this issue, I also wondered if students read their feedback and applied this feedback in future assignments. Houghton (2003) points out the need to ensure that students know what the assessment criteria is in order to become strategic learners who know what we want them to do. It is clear that university teachers need to ensure that students understand the assessment criteria to enable them to engage with feedback. In this way they will be able to learn more about the academic writing conventions of the discipline.

I decided that for the next academic year (2011-2012) it was important to know if any of my teaching strategies were working. I wanted to find out if first-year 'widening participation' students who were new to the university life felt that any of my teaching strategies made an impact on the development of their academic writing skills.

It is important to mention that first-year students in the BA Education Studies take a compulsory module related to academic literacies. It concerned me that despite studying a module that was supposed to prepare them for the understanding of the epistemological and paradigmatic issues of Education as a discipline (Warren, 2002), most students did not show the relevant academic skills in their essay writing. They did not even demonstrate that they could apply the technical aspects of essay writing (for example: essay structure and referencing convention). These observations led me to support the view that academic literacies should be subject specific, contextualized in the specific discipline and embedded in the curriculum (Wingate, 2007). This is the approach that I was determined to take when I decided to do something about my 'I wonder moments' (Dickinson, 2005, p. 3) and designed an intervention as part of my action research project (Reason, 2001).

### **The Action Research Project**

My intervention to support students' academic writing skills took place in the second semester of the academic year 2011-2012 (February to May), and consisted of three activities. 1) A review of the assignment brief of the module 'Introduction to Education Studies II', and the design of an 'Essay Submission Checklist' to ensure that students understood the assessment criteria. Both documents were introduced in a special two-hour session

dedicated to explain the purpose of the module assessment. The documents were also uploaded on Blackboard; 2) Students were offered one-to-one tutorials to discuss feedback on the previous marked assignment from Semester I (Introduction to Education Studies I) and to receive feedback on draft assignments of the module on Semester II (Introduction to Education Studies II). Students were asked to complete a Tutorial Report after each session and attach it to their final assignment. 3) Seminar activities were based on the analysis and discussion of academic articles, and linked to the academic writing skills required for the final assignment.

I used a combination of three methods of data collection in my investigation: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and content analysis of my feedback on students' final assignment. A questionnaire was used to gather students' views about the implementation of the intervention. The lecture topic of the last session was: 'Examples of Educational Research' and this was the perfect opportunity to administer the questionnaire. My action research project was an appropriate example to illustrate how and why this type of research was conducted. My lecture included a few slides about the topic of the research, the themes of my literature review, the activities of the intervention, the use of the questionnaire as a method of data collection, and consideration of ethical issues. I explained to the students that my intention was to collect data about their views on the implementation of the intervention and this was a way to empower them to make changes in my teaching practice. I indicated that improvements as a result of the investigation would be implemented in the following academic year with the new cohort of students.

Not everything went as planned. Out of approximately 90 students registered in



the module, only 25 students attended the last lecture. Eighteen students completed the questionnaire but only 16 students signed the consent form confirming their willingness to take part in the research. Out of these 16 students, two did not give their permission for any data to be published as a result of their participation. When reading the questionnaires, it was difficult to know who the students who signed the consent forms were, and who did not want their data to be collected. This is the reason why I decided not to use direct quotes from the students to illustrate the findings.

Asking students to complete the questionnaires was less time-consuming than conducting interviews, and it allowed me to gather significant amount of data in a short length of time (Howard & Eckhardt, 2005). I used questionnaires because it was convenient, but I believe that in-depth interviews would have produced more meaningful data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The questionnaire was divided into four sections: 1) General questions about students' background; 2) Questions about feedback on previous assignment (Introduction to Education Studies I); 3) Questions about students' understanding of the assignment task (Introduction to Education Studies II); and 4) Questions about the seminar activities.

Although I explained to the students that all their responses to the questionnaire were anonymous, I was aware of the fact that all lecturers of the module were present in the classroom. I explained that if they felt that they did not want to continue completing the questionnaire, they could stop at any time and withdraw from the research.

Data gathered from questionnaires was complemented with semi-structured interviews with two students of my own seminar group who had completed the questionnaires and

gave their full consent to participate. They were happy to speak openly about their views on their final one-to-one tutorial support and their experiences of receiving feedback on their draft assignments. I had arranged to have interviews with four other students but they did not turn up to their appointments.

I felt that collecting data about students' views on the implementation was not enough to understand the effect of the intervention. What people say in interviews or questionnaires is not always what they do. In a different type of research, I would have used a combination of observation and interview methods. However, as an insider action researcher, I did not feel comfortable teaching/tutoring and observing my students at the same time. While writing this report, I discovered that I was inclined to subordinate research to teaching. Like Hammersley (2004), I believe that research and teaching have different goals. This is why, instead of using observations, I decided to use content analysis to have some indication about the impact of my intervention on students' final results. Doing a content analysis was within my comfort zone and it made me feel as if I were an 'outsider' in the research process (Hammersley, 1993). It was a way of avoiding the tension that I had in my role as teacher-researcher.

Eighty-seven students submitted their final assignment on May 2012, and I was responsible for marking 12 essays (we divided the total number of assignments among the 7 tutors in the module). After marking all assignments, I decided to carry out a classical content analysis and a qualitative content analysis of the feedback forms that I completed (Ryan & Bernard, 2000 cited in Folhlbacher, 2006). I produced a matrix table comprised of nine categories. The set of nine codes that I created allowed me to gather evidence of my feedback on student's understanding of

the assessment criteria. Whilst doing the analysis, I noticed that the codes represented what Johnston (2003) defined as technical writing skills rather than critical analysis skills. Delahunt, et al. (2010) warn to be careful not to overemphasize the basic technical skills necessary for academic writing. On reflection, I am conscious that I was inclined to do this. It seems that I approached aspects of my practice from a technical/practical perspective (Kemmis, 2006).

The content analysis that I carried out was both quantitative and qualitative. I was interested in the number of students who achieved a pass grade and fail grade, the number of students who attached the tutorial form, and the number of students who understood the essay question. In terms of the technical aspects of the essay, I wanted to know if students demonstrated their knowledge of essay structure (introduction, body of an essay, conclusion) and referencing conventions. From my point of view, both qualitative and quantitative data provided evidence of students' engagement with the activities of the intervention. I carried out this analysis after completing all the marking. It was not possible to analyze the content of students' assignments because I did not know if these students agreed to participate in the research.

In summary, the three methods that I used in my action research project (questionnaire, short semi-structured interviews, and content analysis) helped me to triangulate the data and ensure the validity of the findings (Cohen et al., 2011). I considered issues of access, confidentiality, and anonymity during the life of the project.

## Key findings

As a practitioner conducting research to improve my own practice, my aim was to seek

students' views on my intervention. They were the main subjects from whom I collected data (Kemmis, 2006).

## Students' background

Out of the 18 students who responded to the questionnaire, 15 were female, reflecting the gender composition of the student population in education studies. Twelve students were under 25 years old, three students were age 26-31, and 2 students were over 36 years old. Twelve students reported being from black, Asian, and mixed/multiple ethnic groups, showing again similarities with the ethnic profile of the University. The university where this study was carried out has over 60% of black and minority ethnic students (BME), a percentage that is more than the entire Russell Group (Race for Opportunity, 2010). Six students did not have English as their first language and only one student declared having a disability (dyslexia/dyspraxic).

## Perceptions of feedback on previous assignment, and one-to-one tutorials

Fourteen students answered the questions about feedback on previous assignment, and all but one had a positive view. They said they understood the feedback and felt that it was useful to know what they did wrong and why. One of the students indicated that the handwriting of the lecturer was unclear and this was the reason why he did not understand the feedback. Another student highlighted that 'just ticks' were difficult to understand and more information was required to know how to improve. A student who obtained a good grade mentioned that although the feedback was useful, it was negative. This comment suggests that whatever the quality of the essays, students need to receive some encouragement and positive feedback to keep them motivated.

Thirteen students declared that the feedback on their previous assignment helped them to understand how to improve future assignments. I was interested in knowing if students paid attention to feedback on academic writing, essay structure and referencing because these were areas that I focused upon when providing feedback on their assignments. However, there was insufficient evidence in the questionnaires to illuminate this issue. Only three students said the feedback from previous assignments helped them to improve the structure, writing, and referencing of their essays. One student suggested that it was important to sit down and discuss the feedback with a tutor.

All six students who declared to have attended one-to-one tutorials found the experience helpful. Two students said that they discussed issues of academic writing, and two others mentioned that the discussion was focused on the content of the essay and what to research for further reading. In order to get more insight into students' views of one-to-one tutorials and formative feedback on their draft assignments, I gathered the views from two female students who had one-to-one tutorials with me on the last day of lectures (03/05/2012). When I asked the students what was the most useful aspect that they would remember about the tutorial, one student said 'how to make my argument effective instead of being descriptive'. She also highlighted that it was useful to know how to develop her own theoretical framework. The second student said that the tutorial gave her 'an insight to be analytical'. She recognized that she had lots of ideas, but not being analytical deterred her from producing good essays. Her view was that academic writing was 'an art, not something that [she] can produce excellent essays overnight'. These short conversations

with students after the tutorials helped me to understand more my own students, their educational background, their knowledge and the kind of support that they needed to improve their academic writing.

### **Perceptions of seminar activities**

A common theme that emerged from students' responses to the question 'which aspects of the seminar activities did you find most useful?' was the value of group discussions. It was clear that students enjoyed working in groups and listening to others' views to gain a better understanding of issues covered in the main lecture. Students declared to feel comfortable talking and asking questions in seminar groups rather than in lectures. From their point of view, they could gain a deep knowledge of topics, theories and concepts through seminar discussions. As indicated in the review of the literature, the understanding of the academic discourse of the discipline (Educations Studies is underpinned by psychological and sociological theories) seems to be a major difficulty for first-year students. When exploring students' views about the module readings, similar data was gathered. Students indicated that they found difficult understanding key concepts and words. For many students, 'the meaning of the text', the 'theoretical part of the reading', the 'complicated words', and the 'terminology' were the most challenging aspects of the readings. However, as one student put it 'the discussions [in the seminars] helped a lot...' One student mentioned the fact that seminars were more interesting than lectures. Only one student said she failed to understand the link between the lectures and seminars.

Contrary to my assumption that students would value talking about the assignment during the seminars, I found that only one



student said that it was useful to talk about it. Similar to Johnston's action research about teaching and researching academic writing (Johnston, 2003, p. 367), there was a clear 'gap between what I expected and what the students were doing'. There were insufficient responses to know what aspects of the seminar activities were the least useful for the students.

### **The impact of the intervention: The assessment results**

Although the majority of students who completed the questionnaire reported that they attended the session about the explanation of the assessment brief, and that the session helped them to understand better the assignment task, it was difficult to know if what they said was reflected on what they did in the final assignment. Therefore, in my attempt to understand if the intervention made a difference on students' final results, I decided to explore this issue and carried out a content analysis of my feedback on 12 essays. The results of the 12 assignments that I marked were as follows:

- two (2) students achieved a Band A grade (70 and above)
- two (2) students achieved a Band B grade (60 to 69.99)
- one (1) student achieved a C grade (50 to 59.99)
- one (1) student achieved a D grade (43-49.99)
- three (3) students achieved an E grade (40-42.99)
- three (3) students failed the assignment

Only one out of the 12 students, whose assignments I marked, enclosed the tutorial feedback form that they were asked to complete after each one-to-one tutorial. And out of the 87 students in the module who submitted their assignment, only five students enclosed the form. This could be an

indication that students did not read the Essay Submission Check list before submission.

After coding the content of each of the feedback forms, I analyzed my comments under two categories: 1) Comments about essay writing, essay structure and referencing; 2) Comments about essay content. I wrote the first type of comments in all assignments that fell within band D and below, and in all band A assignments. Comments in the band D, E and F group focused on the absence of a title, lack of references to support arguments, lack of structure, the difference between description and critical analysis, and the difference between opinion and academic argument. I also made explicit comments about the requirement to complete the 'Essay Submission Checklist'. I emphasized that they could have achieved a better grade, had they read the checklist. Comments on assignments graded with an A grade were specifically aimed at improving the quality of their academic writing. I did not make any comments about the content of the theoretical discussion. It was interesting to note that feedback on assignments with a band B and C grade included comments on both the structure of the essay and the theoretical aspects of the topic.

### **Implications for teaching and learning in the area of Education Studies**

The findings of the action research project have helped me above all to develop a better understanding of my practice (Kemmis, 2010). The evaluation of my intervention to find better ways of supporting first-year students' academic writing skills showed that it is important to embed academic writing skills within the delivery of the module. Even though I pay great attention to academic skills when writing feedback on students' assignments, it seems that students are not able to grasp

the meaning of the feedback until they attend one-to-one tutorial conversations. It is in these tutorials where I provide the 'scaffolding' that they need to understand the complexities of the academic discourse. As a tutor I find myself mediating between what they know and what is not yet known (Mason, 2000, p. 348). It is in these interactions that students understand theories and concepts and learn how to express their ideas in an academic style.

Some students recognize that it is during the seminar activities that they are able to unpack the meaning of the terminology of the discipline (social sciences and education). Students seem to learn more from discussion groups rather than from lectures. They feel motivated in this type of environment that creates the conditions to co-construct knowledge in collaboration with peers. A review of the literature carried out by Jeong & Chi (1997) revealed that working in collaboration is beneficial for students in that they tend to learn better or solve more problems. Collaboration also seems to improve social relations, and increases students' motivation. Waite & Davis (2006) have found that working in collaboration supports the development of motivation in terms of expectancy, value and affect. I am convinced of the benefits of peer learning and this should be a central activity in the seminars. This evidence shows that I need to create strategies to teach academic writing skills during the seminar sessions; and these strategies need to be embedded in the topic of discussions because this is what students seem to enjoy most from the seminars.

The constructivist perspective explains how students can generate ideas and reason at a higher level when they listen to different views (Kersey, Di Eugenio, Jordan, & Katz, 2009). During the lectures they just listen to an explanation, and from the students point of view this is not the place where they grasp

the meaning of the difficult concepts of the discipline. Therefore, if I want my students to learn the academic writing skills that they need to learn the discipline I have to use peer-learning activities to engage them with critical reading and writing. However, this could only be effective assuming that students attend lectures and seminars. The problem is that the majority of students do not attend university lectures due to a wide range of reasons. If I can only work with those students who can attend, the question is: how can I make sure that the other students pay attention to their academic writing skills? In discussions with other members of my team, we agreed that one short-term solution could be to embed the checklist and tutor feedback form within the system. This means that when students download the compulsory summative assessment cover sheet, they should also be able to download the checklist and form that they would need to complete before submitting their work. In this way, they will have fewer opportunities to forget about simple things such as the title of the assignment.

Perhaps peer learning is also the answer to encourage students' engagement with the assessment criteria and assessment feedback that they receive. Despite having designed the essay submission checklist and a form to record tutorial advice, most of the students whose assignments I marked did not seem to have read these documents. There was a special session during a general lecture dedicated to explain the Assessment Task. These documents were also published on Blackboard, the Virtual Learning Environment of the module.

The fact that students do not attend lectures and seminars has wider implications for my own practice. The academic year starts in October and it is usually the case that approximately 100 first-year students are registered in the module that I teach. After

Christmas there is usually a drop in attendance figures (approximately 20 to 30 students attend lectures and seminars). Observing this situation, I asked myself several times: how can I implement changes to improve my practice considering that there is no guarantee that students will attend lectures and seminars during the length of the academic year?

The reality of my own practice and my own institution where the majority of students are from non-traditional backgrounds is a challenge for those of us who are willing to find better ways to engage and support these students. Alex Bols, Executive Director of the 1994 Group of Universities, in his response to Gwen Van der Velden's paper about Student Engagement raised a similar point: 'the challenge is... how we can demonstrate the benefits of engagement for those that aren't interested'. Bols reports that the NUS/HSBC research (2008-11) shows more students citing instrumental reasons for going to university. '... we can't rely on the same assumptions about their expectations and what they want to get out of university' (Van der Velden, 2012, p. 6). I am more convinced that 'widening participation' students have not only different reasons why they want to go to university, but they also have different reasons for not attending lectures. Johnston (2003, p. 378) said that she struggled to teach and nurture students' critical academic writing skills to some of her students who had problems that were beyond her reach. Students in my department are full time students, have full or part-time jobs, have family responsibilities and have everyday problems. The 'situadness', richness and complexity of my practice (Kemmis, 2006, p. 15, p. 27) are difficult to describe in this paper.

It is clear to me that in order to find strategies to better support first-year students'

academic writing, the most important action that needs to take place is to spend time knowing the students. I echo Bols' view that 'as a sector we need to be clearer about the many different reasons why students want to go to university and have a more nuanced response to how being more engaged in their learning helps them meet this aim' (Van der Velden, 2012, p. 6). Informal conversations with my colleagues have also led us to think that we need to go to the roots of the problem and this is more about understanding our own students. It is then when I can start a new cycle of reflection (McNiff, 2002) with my colleagues as co-researchers.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of my action research project was to find better strategies to support the academic writing skills of first-year undergraduate students in the BA in Education Studies in a post-92 university. There was no clear evidence in my data that any of the strategies that I implemented worked. However, as a result of my enquiry, I will make sure that group discussions continue to be the central feature of the seminar activities. As suggested in the literature review and my findings, I will also try to engage students with the topic rather than overemphasizing the basic technical skills of academic writing. My feedback on assignments also requires a balance of both theoretical academic content and technical aspects of the essay.

As a compulsory element that might be useful to improve assessment results, I will work with my colleagues in the Department to incorporate the Essay Submission Checklist into the administrative system. In this way, students will have to download the document along with the assessment cover sheet in order to submit their assignments.

The most important findings that emerged from my study were that students enjoyed learning about key theories/concepts from group discussions, and contrary to my epistemological beliefs, they were least preoccupied with their academic writing skills. Therefore, in order to find appropriate strategies to engage them with the academic discourse of the discipline, it is essential to know my students first.

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