Tertiary students learning to write assignments: Student and staff reflections on what is helpful and unhelpful to students

Christina Gera – 30 September 2015

National Teaching and Learning Conference

Bay of Plenty Polytechnic's Windermere Campus

Participants

- Staff and students from the pre-service primary education programme: on-campus and distance programme
- 1st year paper
- 2nd year paper

Research questions

- What understandings of academic writing do case study students and staff have?

- **What aspects of academic writing learning experiences do case study students perceive as helpful/unhelpful?**

- **What kinds of academic writing learning practices do participating staff perceive as helpful for their students and how do they build these into their teaching?**

- To what extent is there a divergence or convergence between case study student participant and staff participant understandings of academic writing learning practices?

- What are the similarities and differences that occur between the academic writing learning experiences of students in two delivery modes, where one is predominately face-to-face and one is predominately online?

Help and unhelpful academic writing induction practices

- Course delivery modes
- Feedback
- Materials
- On-campus services (SLS & Library)

Tutorials

Students

- Most often commented on helpful practice, both first (20/21) and second year.

- Students found helpful being told about the content etc of specific assignments and generic writing instruction : broken down assignment questions (6), explained what students needed to do (3), tutor expectations were clear (3)

- Less instruction given for 2nd first year assignment.:

- 2nd year: range of responses: Panopto recording, gave info on essay and paragraph structure, gave info on suitable references

Staff

- Most common: Students benefit by giving instruction on structuring assignments (first year staff) (4/7) .

- Most common helpful tutorial practice was at word and sentence level (referencing, grammar, punctuation etc).(3)

- Students having consultation opportunities in tutorials (4)

- I saw students in second year being given specific instruction on assignment and paragraph structure.

Quotations

Students

One student said the process was "amazing". She liked being given "clear" instructions "on what" the lecturer "expected" and being told "how" to write the assignment and "what to do" helpful.

"we just sort of got dumped into it, I think that is why we relied on each other a lot more, for this one and then like at the beginning everyone was sort of like trying to figure it out in their heads, … everyone was talking to each other about it, and then we sort of settled down and started doing it but we still kept on asking each other about it because we hadn't been given like specific like points sort of things to look at, like there is this …"

One student commented that one second year assignment was "paint by numbers".

Staff

1st year

"The reason and the difference between the first and the second for this time round is because they are both essays. And I was hoping that students would use the feedback from their first assignment and scaffolding to actually be able to make the transitions themselves, into knowing ok this is an essay this is the format of the essay but it has got to follow on and be the same with the second one. The only difference is that the topic is different"

2nd year

Assisted students with writing in tutorials by "just going over basic things like … sentence structure" (first year staff)

"basic things like referencing … punctuation, capitals … sentences, 'cos some will go for ages". (second year staff)

Discussion forums: Moodle and Facebook

- Students

- Not a lot said about Moodle, but a few students (6) said it helped with understanding theorists

- Facebook: Many students found this helpful in the first year. Second year students not so positive about this.

- Staff

- One staff member (1st year) commented on students being given writing tips on Moodle.

- 4 posted: 3 on referencing, 1 on two aspects of syntax (ing, and 25 words max).

Discussion forums: Moodle, Edlinked and Facebook

- On-campus

- "one of my friends didn't know how to reference the curriculum, … and one of the people actually told her how to reference it and did it for her". This meant "anybody else that was stuck on that could use it too".

- "With the lecturer I think you need to be careful about how you word things or is it okay to actually ok to ask them this question"

- Lecturers did not comment on Facebook

- Distance

- "its not just about the study, we're all learning about each other's lives and …. Get really involved with each other, so it's good".

- "Facebook has a lot to answer for when it comes to what goes on in the background at uni". (2nd year)

Lecturers did not comment on Facebook

Conferencing: Before beginning assignments

Students

- First year : discuss assignment with course peers (8), tutor (2), in class discussions (1), staff in base schools (2)

- Second year students: Course peers (2), flatmates (1) discussions in class (1), reading others online questions (1)

Staff

- **Moodle :** monitoring of students. Will phone them.

- Unhelpful: students having conversations with each other. (1st year)

- Unhelpful: students not being given much time in class to discuss assignments, and different amounts of time spent talking about assignments in different tutorials. (2nd year)

Feedback: pre-submission

Students

- First year: Helpful to have course peers (7), friends (5), family members (7), tutors (3). Students appeared to be trying to work out what to do.

- Most common to have assignments checked for spelling and grammar, but also checked for flow (3) One student said "linking of paragraphs". Two students said they had their assignments checked to see if they fulfilled assignment criteria.

- Second year: less had non-academics check assignments, and more had academics check assignments (course tutor and Student Learning). Unhelpful: conflicting information from tutors

Staff

- First year: All staff offered to give students feedback pre-submission. First year staff gave this in different ways (in office, in last 20 minutes of tutorial, give me the draft a week before and I will look at 2 or 3 things).

- Second year: coordinator said feedback meant students could pull up their grade a little bit. Other staff member concerned she had put a student wrong.

Feedback: pre-submission: why students do not access this

- Drafts not ready in time

- 1 student did it for another paper and not happy with feedback

- Students get lower marks because they are then marked on improvement: "I guess because they're already seen it …they're looking for how it can be improved from what they've already seen … I don't think its done intentionally"

Written assignment feedback from staff

- Students did not identify this as a helpful practice unless asked.

- Sometimes first year students not sure what the feedback meant.

- Generally students referred to word and sentence level feedback when asked to reflect on feedback.

- Second year: Students generally appeared to understand what the feedback meant

- "I go the impression that I sort of floated over things too much, I should've gone much more in-depth and used more literature to back it up"

- First year: Helpful: Only 1 staff member referred to feedback. Mainly commented on word and sentence level feedback (referencing, grammar and things, overall coherence). She hoped from her feedback comments students would be able to identify the essay genre and apply this to their second assignment.

- Second year: 1 staff member. Identified feedback as valuable, both comments down the side, and comments on back sheet.

- 1 staff member (draft feedback) not sure if helpful.

So what?

- Students, especially in the first year, tend to give each other assignments, rather than lecturers.

- Students in the second year more likely to give draft assignments to staff.

- Students and staff tend to focus on the mechanics of writing (word and sentence level). Students did not comment on this in the second year.

Materials

- Readings
- Theorist summary sheet
- Library APA sheet

Materials: Readings

- **First year**

- Helpful: readings book, especially for assignment 1A. (9)

- Helpful: for copying references from contents page. (3)

- Difficulties: number of readings (1), readings being long (2), size of the book of readings (2), language level (1).

- Students not taught academic reading strategies

- **Second year**

- Students did not comment on readings, Some found the reading workload difficult.

- One staff member said it was helpful in tutorials for students to be orientated to the readings book.

Theorist summary sheet

- Students (7) identified this as helpful as had a summary of each theorist to begin assignment 1A with.

- On-campus students in particular identified they would have struggled without this.

- . One staff member. Observed "scaffolding from students to their peers" in which students discovered for themselves that the "answers" were on the sheet.

Library APA sheet

- Students

- 5 first year students: tended to copy the references from this sheet

- Second year students used it to check referencing was right. Second year no student identified the sheet as helpful.

- Staff

- 1 staff member said the sheet was helpful (more staff said they referred students to the sheet).

- One staff member thought students should no rely on this but develop the ability "to tell what right". However, the "majority just mess that up".

So what?

- Students could do with skill development (academic reading).

On-campus services

Library

Students

- First year – tutorial on referencing, hardly commented on.

- Second year –tutorial, when asked 5 responded positively. Level of enthusiasm possibly related to proficiency level of students re online searching.

- Distance students reported using library services in a number of ways: library posting books to them, phone library and library assisted finding articles online, used on-chat service, Auckland public library.

Staff

- Arranged a tutorial for first year students and one for second year students

- No staff member commented on the tutorial or the library as being a helpful practice

Library

- One on-campus student reported the library as helpful

- "Really helpful" because they would give assistance with searching for articles and books and would also assist her with referencing, and "checking grammar and spelling". Library staff "more helpful than the tutors" in checking these aspects of her assignments.

Student Learning

- More students identified this as helpful in the second year than the first.

- Second year: more students accessed.

- First year staff: good but too far away

- Much staff support for this in the second year

So what?

- Both in the first and second year tutorial instruction overwhelmingly supported by students and also staff. Students really liked to be told what was expected and generic writing instruction. Staff commented on generic writing instruction.

- Students in the first year peer, family, friend support important. Students in the second year more likely to access institutional support.

- Operating as a COP: Technology enhanced the community aspect of this. However, students realised it was not always a positive thing.

Questions