Tertiary students' and staff understandings of academic writing

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Academic writing: Student and staff perspectives

- Research question 1:
- What understandings of academic writing do case study students and staff have?

Participants

- Staff and students from the pre-service primary education programme: on-campus and distance programme
- 1st year paper.
- 2nd year paper.
- Participants: on-campus: 7 students, 7, 2 staff
- distance: 14, 2, 2 staff

Assignments:

- 1st year paper: 2 essays on-campus students), essay and booklet (distance students)

- 2nd year paper: summary, evaluation, critique of an article, essay

Research methods

- Ethnographic methods
  - Interviews
  - Observations: in-class and online
  - Focus groups (online)
  - Documentary evidence (written assignments, course outlines)

Conceptual framework – Locke's (2015) rhetorical approach to literacy

- Social/contextual level – audience, purpose (language functions), genre, voice
- Macro – content, coherence
- Micro – cohesion, referencing, punctuation, syntax, spelling, layout

Contextual/social level – first year

- **Students: audience**
- First year students: “give the lecturer what they want”. Second assignment distance students told the audience was teachers.
- Second year students also had great awareness of audience (the marker).

- **Staff: audience**
- First year: Not addressed in tutorials, assignment criteria, marking criteria. Feedback comment “Remember this assignment is a learning curve and so is writing for an academic audience”.
- Second year: Mentioned many times in tutorials “Consider the reader … your writing needs to make sense to the reader”.

Contextual/social level – first year

- **Students - Voice**
- **First year students** : some thought uni was about a stronger voice, some thought it was about leaving yourself out of it.
- One student said if not made clear by the lecturer "leave yourself out of it".
- Second year: voice was about paraphrasing

- **Staff - Voice**
- **First year:** voice not in assignment instructions or criteria, lectures, tutorials, and on Moodle. One lecturer talked about students having a personal story to tell in booklet.
- **Second year:** marking criteria for 2nd assignment (expected to develop an argument), writer's voice explained in tutorials as paraphrasing instead of using direct quotations.

Contextual/social level – argument

- **Students: Argument**
- **First year**: Students did not talk about argument in relation to their paper (3 talked about it in relation to a writing paper.
- **Second year:** 2 students talked about argument in relation to their critique "Offer the thing that you're going to bring to the reader's attention, argue whether it's good or bad or otherwise, and then summarise".
- When 3 students asked directly about argument showed very little understanding of what it was. Students also did not talk about position, even though for 2nd assignment had been told to take a position (told what that position was).
- **Staff - Argument**
- **First year:** students told to take a position for their 2nd assignment. The term argument did not appear in assignment instructions, mentioned twice in a tutorial but not explained to students what this meant.
- When staff asked what constituted a well written assignment 3/7 staff referred to argument.
- **Second year**: Language functions were a big part of the course (critique, evaluation, students shown how to justify a position). Students were given the position. Argument not mentioned to students.

Contextual/social level – genre

- Students
- First year: Students confused by genre of booklet
- Only one student commented on genre: “a difference between first and second year was the number of genres expected “unless she had a model to follow” she “couldn’t easily understand what her writer should look like”.
- Staff: genre
- Staff (2) about what genre the booklet was. Decided it was more like an essay.

Referencing

- First year students – Did not feel proficient at referencing, not all students included citations, “takes away the knowledge you’re trying to portray” “read about those theorists in lots of places”, paraphrased if able to, direct quotations added authority to work, generally used academic sources
- Second year: generally had intext citations and reasonably correct reference lists, paraphrased, generally used academic sources
- Staff – understand at conceptual level, demonstrate at mechanical level.
- First year: Demonstration of intext citations etc given to students. Staff interview: students use references to add depth to writing. Range of references to support ideas (A+ essay)
- Second year: intext citation demonstration, synthesizing literature demo, students told to paraphrase “we want to hear your voice”.
- A+ essay: student demonstrated “really deep critical thought” and “synthesizing from a range of literature … looking from alternative perspectives”.

Questions