Writing Mentors and the Writing Centre: Producing Integrated Disciplinary Writers

Savita Bakhshi
Katherine Harrington
Peter O’Neill

London Metropolitan University
“Most thinkers write badly because they tell us not only their thoughts but also the thinking of the thoughts.”
Friedrich Nietzsche

London Met Students:
“I was able to express thoughts on paper freely without interruption. It helped me clear the confusion I was experiencing in relation to starting my first assignment.”

“I would make use of some of the methods of getting started, especially freewriting, as I feel that would help me combat the writer’s block I suffer from that is brought on by dread.”

“On my way home (on the tube) instead of putting my ipod on I’ll think about things that I want to say, write or express … I’ll freewrite!”
London Met Writing Centre

- Working with staff: writing in the disciplines
- Working with students

Existing Learning Development Unit support for writing at London Met

Scope for something different?
Undergraduate Writing Mentors

July 2007
Students helping students: a rationale

- Learning can be seen as isolated act ("empty vessel" model) or as social process (collaborative, creating knowledge and views)
- Deep learning: learning that becomes part of the student
- Vygotsky: "reflective thought is public or social conversation internalised."
- Bruffee: "If thought is internalised public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalised social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalised conversation, then writing is internalised conversation re-externalised" (Bruffee, 1984)
- It follows that engaging students in constructive conversation about all aspects of the writing process is likely to lead to better thinking and better writing. Often students will need to converse with an expert in writing or in their academic discipline. But fellow students, who are peer collaborators rather than authoritative teachers, can also be effective participants in this conversation

One-to-one tutorials: collaborative and non-directive
Academic Literacies

- Writing problems often a result of issues of epistemology and disciplinarity (Lea and Street, 1998)
- Academic Literacies pedagogy: likely to involve increased dialogue around writing – dialogues which “enable participation in dominant academic literacy practices as well as provide opportunities for challenging aspects of such practices” (Lillis, 2006, p.33).


Wingate: Real understanding of the complexities of disciplinary writing “can only be achieved within the subject and through explanations, modelling and feedback by subject tutors” (2006, p. 463).


**OUR HYPOTHESIS:**
Students who are themselves engaged with coming to terms with the complexities of their disciplinary discourse may also have a role to play in helping other students. Moreover, they are close enough to their peers to recognise the confusions that they are going through, confusions which may not be so apparent to a lecturer who has thoroughly internalised the epistemology of his discipline.
From feeling “out of her depth” to being “in the mood to spend the rest of the day in the library”

- After we first met, Jane mentioned that, although she felt very confident when writing for Criminology, Psychology was a completely new field of study for her and caused her to feel very out of her depth. I was keen to get her to elaborate on her feelings of competence and confidence in Criminology, and attempted to translate this to her Psychology studies. It seems that Jane does a lot of general reading and thinking about Criminology, and we discussed the possibility of her spending a bit more time engaged in ‘light’ Psychology reading (such as the BPS magazine and Scientific American Mind) to help her feel more at home with the discipline.

I was slightly concerned that Jane seemed ready to view me as some kind of expert with a huge gulf between us. I spent a lot of time stressing that the learning curve at university is steep, and that practice in reading and writing for Psychology would very quickly help her feel more confident and knowledgeable. This appeared to be quite well received, and at the end of our session she mentioned that she was in the mood to spend the rest of the day in the library working on this assignment.

Reflection of a London Met Psychology Writing Mentor following a tutorial (name of student has been changed)
Objections to undergraduate collaborative writing tutorials in a UK context


- Lack life experience
- See themselves as better than fellow students
- Likely to be “middle-class, monolingual” students

Cf. the experience at London Met

Importance of researching effectiveness
Training in the writing process
Integrated writing

The Writing Centre as a way of making students feel confident within their discipline while at the same time gaining a real ownership of their ideas. We want students to write as themselves, not trying to please a teacher or sound how they think a Psychologist should sound (see e.g. Elbow, 1980, 223).

The goal:

- integrated writers, who write naturally, not artificially, within their disciplines
- Writing in the discipline does not mean that one cannot write as oneself. But this requires confidence in one’s ideas and a full understanding of the assignment and the issues involved
- “…to produce better writers, not better writing.” (North, 1984, p.438)


- Approximately 400 students
- Approximately 675 tutorials

A comparison of gender distribution of students at London Metropolitan University and the Writing Centre in 2006-07

The ethnic group distribution of students who visited the Writing Centre in 2006-07

The ethnic group distribution of students at London Metropolitan University in 2006-07
Year of Study of students who visited the Writing Centre in 2006-07

- 62% Year 4
- 35% Year 3
- 2% Year 2
- 1% Year 1

Is English the native language of the students who visited the Writing Centre in 2006-07?

- Not Stated
- Yes
- No
Brainstorming activity

In pairs, discuss and take brief notes on the following:

- What do you think your students struggle most with in their writing?

- How do you think the Writing Centre and the Mentoring Scheme may be able to help?
Researching the scheme: method

- Random selection of mentors’ open-ended reflections collected after each tutorial, spread across the 11 mentors
  - Mentors asked to comment on how session went:
    “Please reflect on your session. (E.g. How do you feel you were able to help the student? What could have gone better?)”

- Thematic analysis
  - Informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
  - Independent readings of same text by 3 researchers, followed by comparison and discussion of findings
  - 1st reading of 10-page selection to compare coding patterns and establish common themes
  - 2nd reading with additional 20-page extract to validate and further refine themes and sub-themes
Four emergent themes

**Theme 1: Interpersonal relationship between student and mentor**
- Building a rapport
- Encouragement/emotional support
- Setting expectations
- Non-directive enabling

**Theme 2: Student’s relationship to own writing**
- Confidence/anxiety
- Finding own voice

**Theme 3: Student and mentor working together**
- Collaborating/writing together
- Informal talk

**Theme 4: Mentor self-reflections**
- Challenges
- Satisfaction
Theme 1: Interpersonal relationship between student and mentor

Building a rapport

- Rapport was easy. Conversation was fun and interesting. ... I enjoyed it and I think Tom at least felt he had an ally.
- Once we got going, she started to fly.
  - Student’s comment on the same session:
    • Had a long session today – probably longer than either one of us expected, but we made it through and I’m well on my way with the essay!! Cheers.

Encouragement/emotional support

- By the time our session had finished, Jessie looked much more confident and was able to discuss the essay without her anxiety levels increasing. A lot of the session was directed towards overcoming this anxiety.
- She needed to be encouraged, as she said writing her ideas down had always been a problem.
Theme 1: continued

Setting expectations

- They seemed very keen to have me provide a template for them to adopt, and I was very careful to stress that I would not do this.

- I did need to re-clarify that we can’t give specific advice about how assignments are graded, and strongly recommended that she speak to individual tutors on this point.

Non-directive enabling

- She was getting dependent on my suggestions which was something I challenged in this session. Keeping silent, I waited for her to answer her own questions and she did.

- She still looks for guidance but I continue to turn it around and ask her.

- My contribution seemed to be simply to help her regain a perspective from which it was possible for her to improve her work.
Theme 2: Student’s relationship to own writing

Anxiety/confidence

- Anya came to the session having collected research material and come to a panic-induced halt. She seemed to have little faith in her critical powers.
- She had lots of ideas but did not have the confidence to organise her thought into structured ideas.
- Bashira seemed to be a confident, competent writer whose challenges came from occasionally becoming lost in her writing process.
- At the end of the session, she remarked that she had renewed enthusiasm for doing the essay.
Theme 2: continued

Finding own voice

- We talked a lot about writing in German and in English, as she is a native speaker of German ... and Hanna felt she eventually reconnected with the ability to say what she wanted to say.

- The writer felt timid, and was taking refuge in over-long sentences, generalisations and pseudo-technical language. ... she [said] that this was a consequence both of feeling slightly nervous about the strength of her theoretical understanding and a lingering suspicion that good disciplinary writing needed to include jargon.

  – Student’s comment on same session:
    - The session was very helpful. Charlie helped me to find a different way to express myself in writing.
Collaborating/writing together

- We both did some freewriting around the question, and Rebecca produced quite a concise account of what she needed to do in order to address it. I suggested this could be the template against which she addressed each idea for relevance. Using highlighter pens, we picked out each idea and constructed an essay plan. Then, I encouraged Rebecca to freewrite what might serve as an outline conclusion. In doing this, she came up with a completely new angle on the topic, which she was able to write into her essay plan.

Informal talk

- She just wanted someone to sit down and talk to in a non-formal environment where she could voice her concerns with regards to writing in a foreign language.
- We discussed the evidence she had gathered and I prompted her playfully for her opinions.
Theme 4: Mentor self-reflections

Challenges

- In some ways this session was quite frustrating because I couldn’t offer any absolute answers except advising the student to go and speak to her lecturer. … This session was an example of the prevalent problem of the divide between what the student thinks and what the lecturer is looking for.
- The student was not very satisfied as I was not a political glossary.
- I don’t think it went that well. The student came in assuming I know everything about counselling psychology, which I didn’t. … When I said I didn’t know, she looked shocked and then started talking as if I didn’t know anything.

Satisfaction

- Although her writing was probably far better than mine: brilliant choice of vocab., lovely flow, immaculate punctuation, and so on, I was still able to help her with the structure of the work. This has been concrete proof of the value of our role as writing mentors!
- This was a very interesting session which helped me believe I can attempt to advise on any piece of writing, no matter how large or small.
- It was quite good fun.
Relationships between the four themes

- Interpersonal relationship between student and mentor
- Student’s relationship to own writing
- Student and mentor working together
- Self-reflections of the mentors

Direct relationship

Indirect relationship
Bringing it all together: 1

Rose came to the centre after failing one of her assignments. She has no prior experience of academic writing and was not confident about improving by herself in time to submit her next piece of work. She wanted to talk about some specific problem areas highlighted in the feedback for her last assignment, but did not bring a draft of her work with her (she hadn’t expected to be given an immediate appointment). She did have the module handbook and assignment title with her, and we referred to this throughout our session, discussing ways in which she could improve for the next essay.

She initially identified her problem as one of inadequate preparation, which I understood to mean insufficient development of ideas. I began to introduce the idea of freewriting, and Rose mentioned that she already practised this when preparing for an essay. Indeed, it seemed that she had a large number of ideas about what she wanted to include in this assignment. She also seemed able to link her own reflections to counselling theory in our discussion, but said that this had been a problem for her in writing. We worked on this, with Rose practising written examples which integrated her observations with theory, until she felt sufficiently confident. After this, we then discussed and practiced ways of building each point into a coherent whole, properly referenced.

Although Rose had seemed quite demoralised when we met, over the course of the session she did become more relaxed and seemed much happier. At the end of the session she remarked that she had renewed enthusiasm for doing the essay, and said that she would make another appointment at the centre once she had produced a second draft.
Bringing it all together: 2

Jennifer brought an almost complete draft of a law report to discuss. She said that she finds essay writing and research difficult, but that she keeps a private journal and finds less formal writing more enjoyable. Her research and writing difficulties are, she feels, complicated by her dyslexia. She has also experienced highly punitive tutor feedback in the past, and this has contributed to the block she experiences when she tries to write something for formal assessment.

After hearing that she has tried free writing and found it enjoyable, I tried to encourage Jennifer to use this technique to access her thoughts on the assignment topic, hoping that it would form the basis for a more substantial conclusion than the draft she arrived with. Although at first rather inhibited by nerves, she managed to come up with a number of clear ideas, and was able to begin shaping them into something which she was satisfied with. She is a trained journalist, so we also discussed the differences between journalistic and academic writing, and we discussed how it might be possible, with thought, to bridge the gap between the two. Near the session’s end, we went on to discuss how freewriting can be used when starting an assignment, to arrive at a central thesis and to inform further research.

Jennifer seemed much more relaxed by the end of our time together, and I got the sense that she had realised how easily her existing skills can be adapted from journalism to academic writing.
The mentoring experience

• My role as a writing mentor
• Student variety (undergraduate, postgraduate, international students, subjects)
• Assignment variety (essays, dissertations, reports)
• My experiences…
The mentoring experience (cont...)

- Positive experiences
  - Grades
  - Gradual improvements
  - Acknowledgements!
  - A simple thank you!

- Challenging experiences
  - Expectations
  - Subject backgrounds

- What have I gained?
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