

WDHE

London 2010

Sustainable writing development: approaches and challenges

The 13th *Writing Development in Higher Education* biennial conference, held in London from Monday 28 – Wednesday 30 June 2010 at the Royal College of Physicians, brought together over 140 participants from 14 countries to discuss approaches to and challenges surrounding sustainable writing development. Over 80 presentations and workshops were offered during the three days of this stimulating event, during which delegates were encouraged to experience the additional dimension of interacting with peers, presenters and organisers through the medium of microblogging. As a result of this, a flavour of the conference in progress can be sampled by visiting Twitter and using the hashtag #WDHE10.

Opening remarks were made by Professor Malcolm Gillies, Vice Chancellor of London Metropolitan University, whose emphasis on writing as a potential force for inclusion, creative expression, personal development and bridging the gap between higher education and the workplace clearly resonated with the concerns of presenters and delegates alike. In the first keynote presentation of the conference, Dr Theresa Lillis of The Open University then argued that research into writing using an academic literacies framework has a fundamental part to play in realising this potential. Using the experiences of her co-presenters as illustrative examples, Dr Lillis stressed the importance of slow research and suggested that locally based research is essential for inquiring into local problems, and may also provide a way of connecting with global research and practice. Although there was limited time for questions, discussion of this presentation continued between delegates long after the session, during which a significant challenge was identified: that of incorporating the findings from academic literacies-based research into regular teaching practice.

A definite conference highlight was the second keynote presentation, delivered by Professor Andrea Lunsford, who shared some preliminary conclusions emerging from the five-year Stanford longitudinal study of student writing. Professor Lunsford began by affirming her ongoing belief in the importance of rhetoric, competence in which underpins the Stanford University writing development programme. She suggested that Stanford students' initial



Conference venue: The Royal College of Physicians

resistance in response to the term 'rhetoric' may be rooted in contradictory cultural beliefs concerning the power of language, and drew a distinction between the ethical use of rhetoric and 'rhetickery', its polar opposite. Examples of student writing collected as part of the longitudinal study were presented to illustrate the effective use of ethical rhetoric, and to demonstrate that the value of writing is primarily seen by participants to be its power to make "something good happen in the world".

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WDHE conference overview (continued)

The question 'What is writing for?' recurred during the closing plenary session, a conversation between London Metropolitan University's Fiona English, Lynn Reynolds, Digby Warren and the audience of delegates. This discussion sought to identify and explore some of the common themes uniting all of the topics presented at WDHE 2010. These themes were compiled into a mind map-style diagram which was used to guide the discourse, and which was later updated to include thoughts and comments made by the audience (this expanded image can be seen on the next page). As might be expected from participants in a writing development conference, many positive aspects of writing were suggested. Many of them underpinned the Stanford students' views in that they focused on personal and social development. Another point of accord however, was the idea that writing (and even talk of writing!) should not be seen solely as a good thing, but that its power to alienate and divide must also be appreciated.

In a similar vein, perhaps the strongest message emerging from the conference was the importance of making links between the rarefied activities of academia and what Husserl (1936) termed the 'Lifeworld' of the individual (their universe as it is directly, dynamically experienced). This was felt by the three panellists to be an overarching consideration for those concerned with implementing writing development strategies. An awareness of the benefits of honestly sharing writing experiences had been evident from many of the sessions offered over the course of the three days. Together with a keen interest in forming partnerships between teaching staff, students and other experts, the emphasis on negotiating a commonly owned language seemed to be a prerequisite for Lifeworld-led learning. One audience member commented that when conducting such discussions, the role of listening should not be forgotten.

Of course, a particular approach to 'listening' is through research. Research as the bedrock of sustainable writing development was a notion raised repeatedly throughout

the conference. At the level of the individual practitioner and beyond, approaches informed by both 'fast' and 'slow' research were presented. The outcomes of interventions which aimed to augment or challenge traditional methods of teaching and assessment were of particular interest. Several of these, including the use of creative writing techniques to improve the learning experience of biology students and of 'visual dissertations' in art and design, had yielded promising results. Methods of further expanding the research knowledge base were also suggested as a way of tackling a more challenging issue: that of embedding writing development in the disciplinary curriculum. Research, it seems, may ultimately help educators concerned with writing development do as one audience member suggested, namely to make tangible offerings to subject tutors and programme administrators. This could well be the most effective move which can be made towards sustainability.



Coffee break on the lawn



Evening reception on the lawn

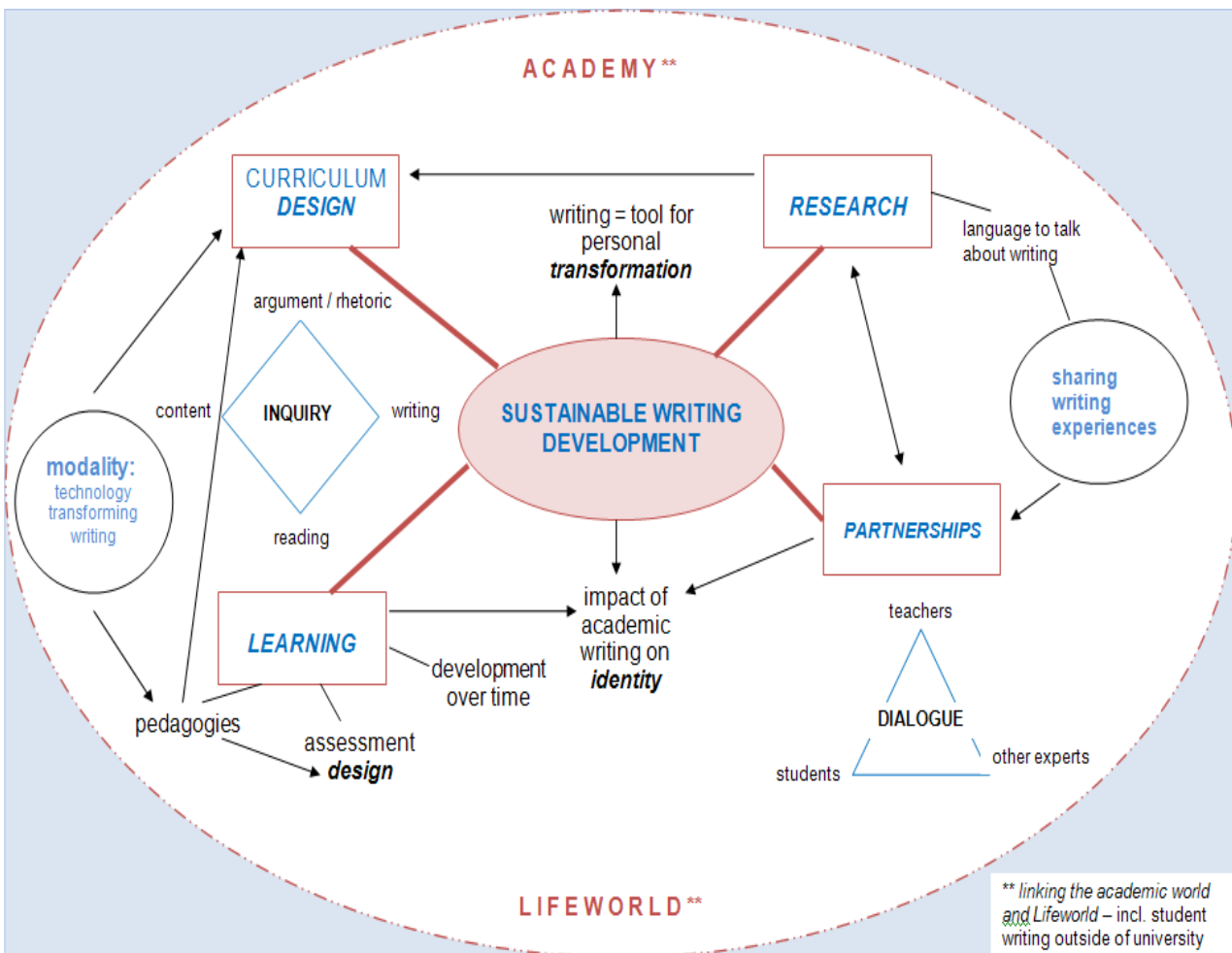
And finally we would like to thank all those who contributed to making the conference so successful, namely our conference organisers, Jill Rogers Associates; the Write Now team and representatives from London Metropolitan; and both our keynote and all other speakers, who ensured that the content of the conference was stimulating and informative.

WDHE conference concept map

At the final plenary session of the conference Fiona English, Lynn Reynolds and Digby Warren used a concept map to identify and explore some of the common themes uniting all of the topics presented at the conference and to guide the discourse during the session. Digby Warren has updated this concept map, as shown below, to include thoughts and comments made by the audience.



Digby Warren



The value of local research for sustaining writing development in higher education: the case of ‘academic literacies’

Dr Theresa Lillis, The Open University



Dr Theresa Lillis, Senior Lecturer in the Open University’s Centre for Language and Communication, gave a keynote speech on “The value of local research for sustaining writing development in higher education: the case of ‘academic literacies’” at the start of the WDHE conference on Monday 28 June 2010.

Dr Lillis gave an overview of the three types of research on academic writing which have been carried out in the UK context over the past ten years, namely: nationally funded research projects, traditional academic research through doctoral studies, and action-interventionist and pedagogic oriented initiatives, such as the Write Now CETL. Dr Lillis’ colleagues at The Open University, Sally Baker, Dr Lucy Rai, Jackie Tuck and Lucy Coleman, gave brief presentations reflecting on their reasons for engaging in the more traditional research route – PhD research – and the value they see in ‘academic literacies’ research for sustaining their particular research and curriculum design interests. Their contributions reinforced Dr Lillis’ view of the important role of ‘slow research’ .

Dr Theresa Lillis

The presentation looked at the importance of building a local research base (e.g. at the level of the UK) which seeks to sustain writing development in higher education and to make sense of locally generated ‘problems’ and understandings. This raised the question of how locally based research can engage with research and scholarship from other local contexts, and vice versa, and how focusing on the local can key researchers into global practices.

Throughout her talk Dr Lillis teased out the key methodological, epistemological and ideological principles reflected in ‘academic literacies’ (drawing on Lillis and Scott, 2007) in order to explore what this particular framework offers to writing researchers and teachers in their efforts to contribute to a higher education premised upon values of diversity and inclusion. She posed the key question “What is writing for” and briefly mentioned several issues and challenges raised by the ‘academic literacies’ approach (see box on right).

Dr Lillis also looked at the question of revising the textual goal of academic writing production and evaluation. She talked about “pushing at the design spaces allowed in assessed student writing”, that is, finding ways to design something a bit differently through creative use of existing institutional spaces.

Dr Lillis’ talk provided a stimulating jumping-off point for the conference and highlighted many of the issues which were discussed further over the three days both in conference sessions and amongst delegates - not least her question which was returned to time and again: ‘What is writing for?’.

Literacy as social practice

Invisibility of writing

What is the work of the reader?

Who are the readers?

How to read student writing differently

Student not “lacking” but ideologically shaped by language and culture

Engaging with student fears – exams, writing, reading

Empowering students to move from surface to deep learning

Radical solutions such as play; but how can these be embedded?

Finding ways to allow students to incorporate ‘feeling’ into their academic writing

The changing yet enduring nature of writing and rhetoric: findings from the Stanford longitudinal study

Professor Andrea Lunsford

On the evening of 29 June 2010, London Metropolitan University hosted the third and final lecture in the Write Now CETL-sponsored Expert Lecture Series. This event was also the second keynote address of the WDHE conference. Around 150 delegates gathered to hear Professor Andrea Lunsford, Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor of English and Faculty Director of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric at Stanford University, talk about 'The Changing Yet Enduring Nature of Writing and Rhetoric: findings from the Stanford longitudinal study'.

Professor Lunsford began the talk by giving a background to the Stanford study, which commenced in Autumn 2001. 189 first-year Stanford University students were randomly selected to contribute class and out-of-class writing of their choice to the study. The sample included male and female students from 33 states, nine countries, and different ethnicities - 57% classified themselves as non-White. Furthermore, a mix of 'techie' (i.e. science) and 'fuzzy' (i.e. humanities) majors students were included. Over the course of the six-year study, 19 different kinds of writing were collected and each participant was required to complete two questionnaires a year. 36 face-to-face interviews were also conducted, to investigate how the students managed to sustain their writing development over the six years.

After giving a short overview of how spoken and written rhetoric has developed over the years, Professor Lunsford gave three examples of how students have used out-of-class writing activities to make a difference to how spoken and written rhetoric is understood and used outside academia. The analysis showed that writing development can be made sustainable for students, if: 1) class and out-of-class work is linked, 2) they are able to work with others, 3) they have an interest in the projects they work on, and 4) they are able to engage in 'dialogue interaction' (i.e. talking one-to-one with someone about their ideas). The latter point, in particular, led to the biggest breakthroughs in creating ideas and taking steps to develop their writing projects. Professor Lunsford concluded the presentation by summing up how the project findings have been incorporated into the writing programme at Stanford. An out-of-class component has been added in which students can work on current

political and cultural projects they identify with, in order to enhance engagement. The need to make something happen in and outside of their academic studies is what motivates and drives Stanford University students to sustain their writing development.



Professor Andrea Lunsford

The lecture was followed by a garden party, with wine, a barbeque and live music, during which the audience was able to discuss aspects of the study with Professor Lunsford. The abstract and lecture notes are available at: www.writenow.ac.uk/news-events/wdhe-conference-2010/conference-presentations/tuesday-29-june-2010/#Keynote2 and a video of the lecture will be added to the Write Now website soon at www.writenow.ac.uk/news-events/expert-lecture-series/expert-lecture-recording/

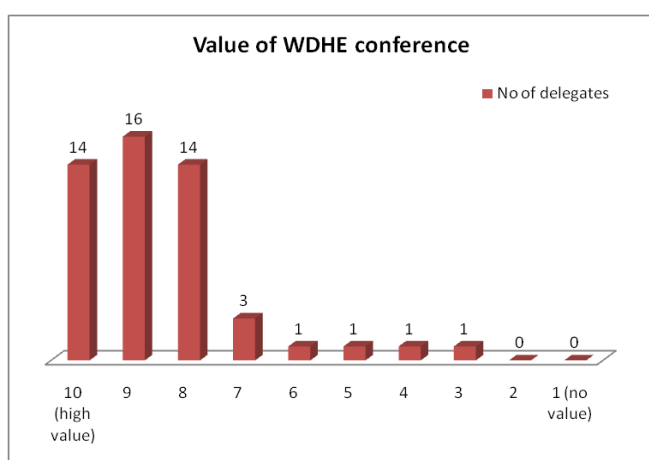


Delegates enjoying the barbecue in the College gardens



Feedback on conference

We are grateful to the 51 conference attendees who filled out evaluation forms at the end of the conference. As the chart below shows, 86% of respondents felt the conference was of great value to them. Also shown below are some of the many positive comments about the conference. All feedback will be passed to the organiser of the 2012 WDHE conference to ensure the success of the next event.



Some positive comments

Varied and challenging content

Combining researcher and practitioner focus

Very good administration

Excellent keynote speakers

Lovely venue

Great food

Wanted inspiration - got a lot of it, sometimes in unexpected ways

Press coverage for WDHE

Times Higher Education included an article on the WDHE conference on 8 July 2010 at:

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=412329&c=1>

The piece was written by Matthew Reisz, who attended the first day of the conference.

Follow up to WDHE conference

In order to help delegates, and those unable to attend the conference, to benefit from the wide range of papers and workshops presented, we have added the conference abstracts and as many of the presentations as possible to the Write Now website at:

www.writenow.ac.uk/news-events/wdhe-conference-2010/conference-presentations/

In addition a video of Professor Andrea Lunsford's keynote talk will be made available soon at:

www.writenow.ac.uk/news-events/expert-lecture-series/expert-lecture-recording/

WDHE conference in 2012

We are delighted to announce that Edge Hill University will be hosting the next Writing Development in Higher Education conference in 2012.

Write Now guides

Over the coming months Write Now will be preparing a number of online guides on key aspects of our work including the following:

- Using student writing mentors to develop academic writing
- Writing in the disciplines
- Assessment design, feedback and marking practices

These guides are designed to outline Write Now's research and practice in these areas and to assist other HE institutions which may be looking at similar issues. The guides will be available at www.writenow.ac.uk/outcomes/resources/ and we will email the UK HE writing community and WDHE conference delegates when they are available.

The challenge of referencing

A Write Now/LearnHigher funded mini research project

Over the last two years Write Now has collaborated with the LearnHigher Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning by awarding mini research grants to the Referencing Learning Area of LearnHigher. This has enabled Colin Neville of the University of Bradford to conduct research on the perceptions of students toward referencing in assignments. During 2008-10, over 600 home and international students were contacted across 17 UK institutions of higher education, including students at London Met University. This led to two survey reports: 'Student Perceptions of Referencing', and 'International Students, Writing and Referencing'. The reports have been presented at two Symposia at Bradford, in 2009 and 2010 respectively, attracting on both occasions the venue maximum of 70 delegates from Britain and overseas.

The surveys found that the main practical issues for students were related to understanding when they should reference and the kind of referencing detail required. However, the practical difficulties were compounded by the range of referencing styles they encountered, inconsistent advice and feedback from tutors, and a lack of clarity about when and how they could integrate their own experiences into assignments.

For many students in the survey, particularly international students, a fear of being accused of plagiarism was at the core of their difficulties and

resulted in referencing being regarded as a form of defence against such accusations. This, for a number of students, resulted in writing they felt was akin to editing, rather than authorship.

One of the challenges for institutions is how they can encourage students to select and manage evidence and to use referencing as a tool to develop their own identities in assignments; another is to consider the wide range of referencing styles that students encounter across UK higher education: do we really need fourteen? Might a smaller number of adopted referencing styles encourage more consistent advice from tutors and learner support practitioners?

The 'Student Perceptions of Referencing' report is available now at <http://learnhigher.ac.uk/Staff/Referencing.html> (the second report will be added in October 2010). Alternatively the reports are available from Colin Neville at C.Neville@bradford.ac.uk or via the Write Now CETL website at: www.writenow.ac.uk/outcomes/resources/miniprojects.



Recent articles by Write Now staff

Agombar, M. & Holley, D. (2010). Overcoming Student Fear and Loathing of Exams: a collaborative project. *Investigations in university teaching and learning*, 6 (2), 102-108

Bakhshi, S., Reynolds, L., Harrington, K., & O'Neill, P. (2010). Using Wikis to support Student Writing mentors' reflective practice: a brief overview. *Investigations in university teaching and learning*, 6 (2), 178-181

Bakhshi, S. (2010). London Metropolitan University Writing Centre research projects update. SIG Writing Newsletter, Issue 2, July 2010, page 1.

Harrington, K. (2010). How do you really know? In D. Upton and A. Trapp (Eds.), *Teaching Psychology in Higher Education*, Chichester: BPS Blackwell.

Llewellyn-Jones, C. & O'Neill, P. (2010). The potential for One-to-One Synchronous Writing Support in UK Higher Education: a report from the London Met writing centre. *Investigations in university teaching and learning*, 6 (2), 171-177.

A new way to give presentations Using Prezi at London Met

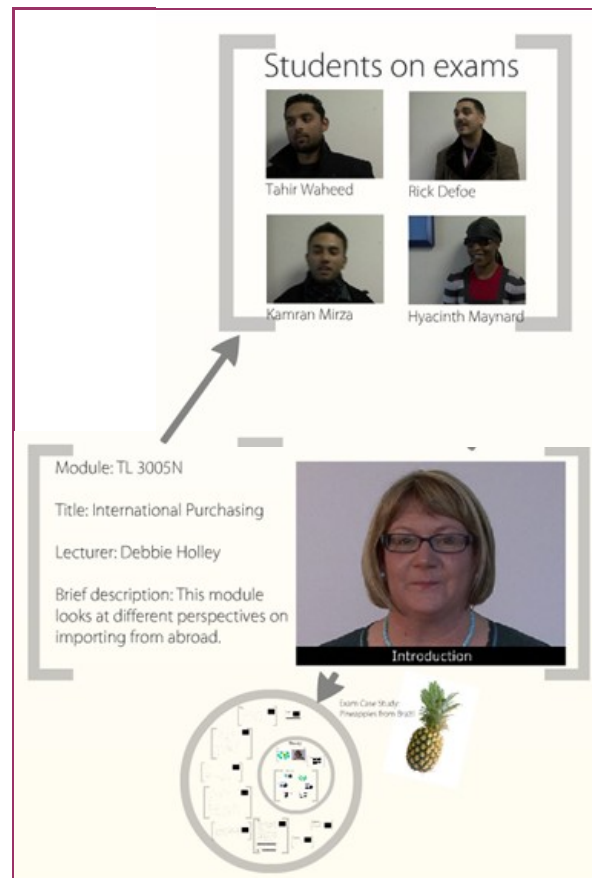
Anyone used to seeing PowerPoint presentations will know how dry they can be. Prezi is an online presentational tool that offers a potentially more engaging experience. The main difference is that Prezi does not use slides to get you from one idea to the next. Instead it allows you to organise your resources spatially, on an infinitely zoomable canvas.

In a PowerPoint presentation you are limited to moving forward one slide at a time, revealing your argument in steps. There is nothing wrong with this approach except that by its nature it enforces a linear flow of ideas. In reality ideas are not necessarily linked this way and Prezi offers the possibility of making connections in a more free-flowing way, similar to mind-mapping.

You can include text, images, video and audio on a canvas that you can zoom into as many times as you like. At the top level you can see the whole presentation, and you can zoom into any specific area to see more detail. You can then zoom in even further and make more connections at a deeper level. The advantage is that you never lose sight of the overall picture.

The Writing Centre at London Met has used Prezi in several projects including one with Dr Debbie Holley, Principal Lecturer at the London Metropolitan Business School. In order to help students do better in their International Purchasing module exam, Prezi was used to give an overview of related subject matter, including videos of Debbie giving advice relating to course materials.

Students were invited to comment on the resource after the examination feedback document had been uploaded onto the Blackboard VLE. Only three did so (see below), although several students did make extremely complimentary comments when calling in to collect their coursework. However these complimentary comments were all from students who achieved high scores in their exam/coursework.



Section of Prezi presentation - including video introduction by Dr Debbie Holley (pictured)

Student feedback on the Prezi for the International Purchasing exam

Student A: "I found the exam project extremely useful, as it gives students a very structured way of learning how to answer a question."

Student B: "Thank you so much for your feedback, you have been so helpful".

Student C: "Having [the] case-study as an example and theory linked to it makes it much easier to understand and learn".

The VLE tracking tools are not sufficiently sophisticated to show in detail which students accessed which page in the 'prepare for your examination' folder. A sample of students attaining an 'A' grade for their examination (5 students) and the lowest performing 5 students were individually tracked. This revealed that students who did well had regularly visited the 'prepare for your exam' section of the VLE; those from the lower profile had either never accessed the section or had, like most students, looked at it the day before the examination.

View Debbie's exam Prezi at:

<http://prezi.com/t6gsdnytc7oj/exam-case-study-pineapples-from-brazil/>

Visit the award winning student Prezi site at:

<http://prezi.com/ssuuvqkdx9uz/uni/>

To create your own Prezi site go to: www.prezi.com

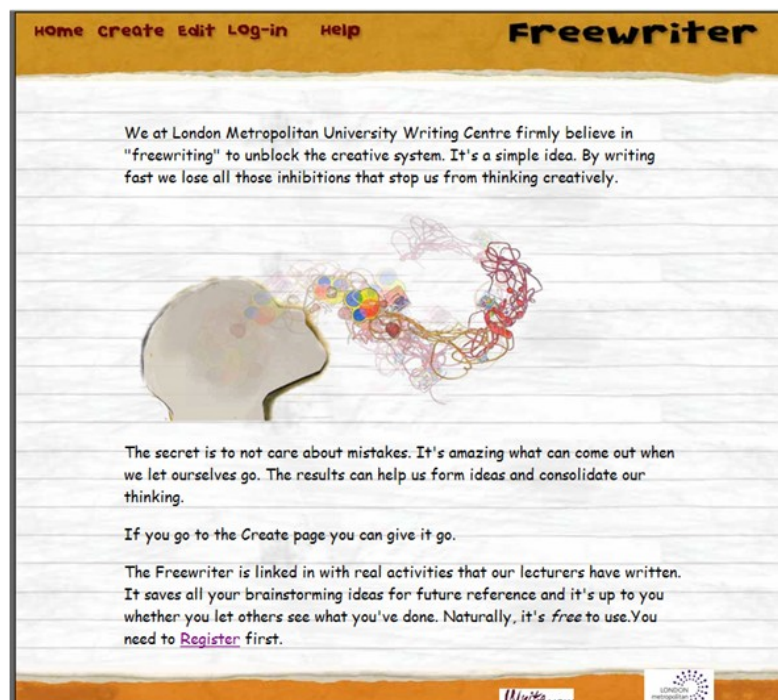
Freewriter tool

Freewriting is a well-known technique for helping people to unlock their writing creativity. The idea is simple: if we write quickly and continuously, without worrying about mistakes, a flow of ideas can be released as a by-product of the mental associations we are making. Often that flow of ideas will contain the gist of something we can use later in a more considered piece of academic or creative writing. Peter Elbow, Professor and writing teacher at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has done more than anyone to popularise the role of freewriting in universities and to outline its many benefits for creating ideas, getting words on the page and overcoming writing blocks.

Peter O'Neill, Martin Agombar and Celine Llewellyn-Jones of the London Metropolitan Writing Centre have developed Freewriter, a tool which provides an online space for writers to practise freewriting. The tool also enables lecturers to create specific exercises for their students. It has a number of special optional features, including one that prevents users from making any corrections, thus compelling them to continue writing.

Lynn Reynolds, a writing mentor and associate of the London Met Writing Centre, devised a specific exercise to help students to freewrite. In the "Egg and Sperm Exercise" the user is provided with random terms for the "egg" (the subject matter) and the "sperm" (the thing that will bring the egg to life). For example the egg could be "surgery for obesity" and the sperm "an investment banker". It is then up to the writer to freewrite without inhibition about how these two terms are linked - the results are always interesting! The "freewrites" are stored on a database for later access.

Freewriter is located at www.writethink.co.uk/freewritetool and can be used free of charge by students and teaching staff. If you would like to be set up with administrative rights, so that you can create exercises for your own students, please contact Dr Peter O'Neill, peter.oneill@londonmet.ac.uk.



Articles in this issue were contributed by: Martin Agombar, Dr Savita Bakhshi, Jane Ferguson, Dr Debbie Holley, Lynn Reynolds, Colin Neville and Digby Warren.

For further information: Visit www.writenow.ac.uk or email j.ferguson@londonmet.ac.uk