

Mini Research Project

TITLE OF PROJECT:

Student writers and referencing: 'Mimics or Managers' (Student perceptions of the role of referencing in academic writing)

INSTITUTION:

University of Bradford and London Metropolitan University

PROJECT LEADER:

Colin Neville

DISCIPLINE/DEPARTMENT:

University of Bradford: Learner Development

CONTEXT:

The project involved research on the perceptions of students toward referencing in assignments.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

The aim of this study was to identify how students perceive the roles of referencing in academic writing; to identify the main referencing problems for students; and to consider the implications of the findings for higher education institutions, and in particular for staff development.

METHODOLOGY:

Drop in workshops and an online survey of students' views. During 2008-10, over 600 home and international students were contacted across 17 UK institutions of higher education. Stage 1 focussed on views of 278 students across 14 UK HE institutions; Stage 2 focussed on the perceptions of international students.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT:

Project looked at the roles of referencing in academic writing, the referencing problems they encountered, and the implications for staff development. Stage 1 findings were presented and discussed at the 'Referencing and Writing' Symposium, 8 June 2009, University of Bradford. Stage 2 findings were presented and discussed at the 'International Students, Writing and Referencing' Symposium on 9 June 2010.

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*'. Both 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 as to understanding 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?

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT OF PROJECT:

Too early to report, as results are still being disseminated.

DISSEMINATION:

Findings were disseminated at the Write Now and LearnHigher CETLs :

- Symposium on the role of referencing in academic writing at the University of Bradford, 8th June 2009 <http://www.brad.ac.uk/lss/tqeg/conferences/referencingandwriting/index.html>
- International Students, Writing and Referencing' Symposium on 9 June 2010
- Article in Write Now News, September 2010 issue.
- Paper presented at the 4th International Plagiarism Conference, Newcastle, June 2010.
- Workshop at the Widening Participation Conference, Open University, Milton Keynes, June 2010
- Findings from Stage 1 included in second edition of 'The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism' (see 'References')

AVAILABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES

Report from the Stage 1 survey available at the 'LearnHigher' website: www.learnhigher.ac.uk (Referencing Learning Area – Resources for Staff); report from Stage 2 will appear on the LearnHigher site in the autumn 2010, or both reports can be obtained direct from Colin Neville at C.Neville@bradford.ac.uk.

FUTURE PLANS FOR PROMOTING PROJECT WORK/OUTCOMES:

Findings from both Stages now inform own teaching and have shaped the resources for staff included now on the LearnHigher website (Referencing Learning Area). Prospective academic journal article in progress that synthesises findings from both stages of the research. Synthesised results will also be offered to selected conference organisers 2011 as a basis for workshop or paper presentations.

REFERENCES:

Neville, C. (2010). *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism*. 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.