

That's writing talk: reflections on the community of practice approach in the Academic Writing Readers Group

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Abstract

Despite being comprised of 'academic communities' Higher Education often provides colleagues from different disciplines with few opportunities to discuss common practices or concerns. Some topics, such as student writing, are so widespread that there is, however, a need for staff to have the opportunity to work collaboratively. A focused community/network provides staff with the opportunity to share good practice and develop new ideas. Such a group has been established at Nottingham Trent University to explore the topic of student writing. This article examines the 'Academic Writing Readers Group' and discusses the challenges and benefits of using a community of practice approach to the topic of student writing.

Keywords: academic writing; communities of practice; reading groups; social capital.

Background

The Academic Writing Readers Group (AWRG) project was originally established in response to increasing staff complaints about poor standards of student writing. During workshop sessions some academics were highlighting that they felt uncomfortable teaching students about academic writing claiming they had little knowledge of the prominent practical approaches and current theoretical developments, such as Academic Literacies or Writing Across the Curriculum. It became clear that whilst academics were subject specialists, some had little knowledge about academic writing and how to help students develop this aspect of their studies. As part of a team of learning developers based centrally in the university, it became clear that it would be beneficial to provide a forum in which those that were expert or knowledgeable about academic writing could

interact with those who wished to develop this aspect of their students' work. Thus the initial driver for establishing the group was to provide an opportunity for colleagues to meet and share ideas and practices, whilst being made aware of developments in the field, such as a focus on the transition of writing from Further to Higher Education (Foster, Bell and Salzano, 2008)

New ideas and resources in the learning and teaching of academic writing are constantly being developed by experts in the field. However, there is often little scope for teaching staff to engage with and develop these ideas into practical activities to be used in teaching sessions. The AWRG attempts to address this by helping staff to access and engage with current literature and research from the field of academic writing. Colleagues are then able to examine their own practices of teaching writing in terms of the ideas and developments they have encountered both in the literature and through discussions with their colleagues.

Who was involved and what happened?

The group was established in 2007 and has been running at different frequencies since then; it is transient in nature and colleagues attend as and when they are able. Sessions have between 10-15 participants from across the university, including PhD students, learner development staff, student support staff and subject specific academics. The sessions are based around a relevant paper from the field which is initially selected by the learner developer (myself) and circulated to those who have registered to attend. The main topics discussed focus on a student academic writing activity or issue. The articles come from numerous disciplines and are written in various styles; previously covered topics have included reading lists (Stokes and Martin, 2008), the one minute paper (Stead, 2005) and written feedback (Pitts, 2005). Attendees are expected to read the paper and come to the session ready to discuss it. Colleagues often suggest papers and themes to be covered by the group including practical sessions which, if appropriate, are developed for future meetings. Although attendees are required to undertake a reading to inform the discussion, the sessions operate on a relatively relaxed basis and follow no specific agenda. As facilitator to the group I also draft a number of questions beforehand to encourage and promote debate, although the conversation evolves as attendees see fit.

The debates so far have covered numerous areas including: Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) methodologies and academic literacies, whilst also sharing ideas about specific activities and resources. Some discussions prove particularly fruitful: after one meeting discussing Lea and Street's (1998) 'Student writing in higher education' paper attendees continued to debate the issues via e-mail.

Consequently, the establishment of an online forum on which the group can continue their discussion is being considered.

At an institutional level the group may be seen to produce very little. It attracts no funding, conducts minimal research and does not offer a concise answer to the question of how to improve students' academic writing. The group's value, however, lies in the networks it creates amongst its members and the social capital and knowledge that is shared through the discussions (Woolcock, 2001). The approach is beneficial for learning developers as it helps to highlight which issues of student writing concern staff across the university, enabling centrally based funding and research to be allocated to areas of heightened importance to colleagues.

Feedback from participants

In response to growing interest in the group from external colleagues, an online survey was sent to all staff members who had enquired about or attended an AWRG session. This was done to gather more detailed feedback about the group. The findings gave an insight into reasons for attending, the benefits they felt they had gained and any concerns attendees had about the group. Those who had expressed an interest but not attended cited lack of time as the main reason for this.

The online survey predominantly consisted of short-answer qualitative-based questions which required attendees to think in more detail about their involvement in the group. Of those people surveyed, the majority of respondents had attended at least one meeting (58%) with a large number having attended more than once (41%). This is a positive sign indicating that out of those who attended most felt that it was a useful experience and thus participated again. The most surprising finding was perhaps that attendees were not new to the sector: over 82% of respondents had been working in higher education for more than five years, bringing a raft of knowledge and experience to the group. Further

questions asked attendees about their motivations for attending and any benefits or issues they had identified. When asked why they attended sessions staff expressed that they liked 'the opportunity to meet other colleagues involved in the same thing,' (anon staff member). Another motivation was that many of their students 'find academic writing a real challenge' (anon staff member). Overall the main reasons for attending the sessions included personal interest, concern regarding falling standards, the opportunity to share good practice and networking. Colleagues identified the group as a good place to meet and discuss common concerns, whether to create solutions or simply to share ideas – something that is harder to do as individuals. Whilst others appreciated the chance to develop – 'the reading and discussion has broadened my professional knowledge and outlook' (anon staff member).

Staff seem to value the opportunity to use the group as part of their own professional development through interaction with their peers. Attendees seem to be particularly interested in hearing how colleagues work in other disciplines. Participants often mention an activity or resource they use and other attendees then consider how they could adapt it to fit their subject area. The development of generic transferable resources (non-subject specific writing activities) that staff can tailor to their discipline may provide a way of tackling writing support in higher education, as such an approach requires students to learn only one or two key activities that can then be tailored to individual subject areas. The Reusable Learning Objects developed by the RLO CETL (2005) also use this approach, developing a range of generic activities to assist learning in a variety of subjects and although their effectiveness is still being evaluated it seems to be a popular approach. The information gathered from the survey allowed an invaluable insight into not only how the attendees viewed the groups' purpose but also how the group might develop in the future.

A community of practice?

The AWRG may be conceptualised as having a community of practice approach as it highlights the value and importance of people working together and sharing practice (Wenger, 1998). The group unites staff from numerous fields and this multi-disciplinarily approach promotes innovation and development by enabling attendees to gain a better understanding of how colleagues tackle similar problems in differing subjects. This

knowledge is then often used in the development of similar activities in their own subject areas. The group provides a neutral space 'separate from the pressures of people's jobs' (Wenger et al., 2002: 61) in which to discuss relevant issues. Attendees frequently raise the point that they feel very isolated from colleagues through the strata of schools, colleges, departments and modules. The readers' group provides one of the few forums in the university where learner development staff and academics can come together and share ideas and concerns. By being able to share their experiences, both receive a greater perspective of the overall student experience which can help in developing their practice. The AWRG helps to develop a sense of community through both the physical group and the networks that it nurtures.

Outcomes and altered practices

An important aspect of a community of practice is that it ultimately works towards a common goal and seeks to develop attendees' practices (Wenger, 1998). When asked some of the respondents (31%) stated that they have changed an aspect of their practice as a result of attending a session. This change in practice had occurred in numerous ways 'I have disseminated some of the information gained to colleagues, and have used some ideas informally in class' (anon staff response). Some attendees have used small writing activities that they discovered at the meetings such as the 'one minute paper' or 'minute writes' (Bean, 2001) in their sessions. A growing interest in the use of such activities instigated the establishment of the Writing Across the Curriculum Project which promotes the use of in-class writing, evaluation of which is still underway.

Many of the respondents stated that they have increased their awareness of the issues and have changed their attitude towards student writing, with some stating that the group had changed them, 'certainly in terms of awareness, if not actual practice' (anon staff response). Raising awareness is often seen as the first step in change management and therefore whilst there have been relatively few practical changes so far it is hoped that this will increase in the future.

Despite some colleagues' interest in the matter, issues of time and resource management restricted their engagement with the topic – 'I have become aware that there is a whole literature on writing that I could get into if I had the time' (anon staff member). The views

expressed by attendees reflect a slow but steady culture of change toward the topic of student writing highlighting that some staff are now not only identifying the problems but also beginning to challenge them.

Summary

This article has attempted to demonstrate that the AWRG is a highly valuable project that provides a much needed forum for staff to identify, solidify and reflect on their practice. Nevertheless, in terms of research and publication the group may appear to be a low value exercise as it seems to produce very little. However, in higher education such networks and informal discussions provide valuable social capital in terms of development and innovation. Until recently, the project has not been discussed at conferences, produced papers or resources and activities for use beyond the group. Whilst this has created a relaxed environment at the meetings, it creates concern that the group may languish with such a small internal group of participants. It is hoped that by disseminating the project more widely it may engage other colleagues in discussion thus strengthening the group overall. Enhancing the group's profile at a national level may heighten engagement and awareness across the sector (among students and senior management), thus highlighting that the development of academic writing is valued by all those involved.

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