

Arbitrating beliefs about learning to write in the PhD writing workshop

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Overview

- Background
- Participant expectations
- Workshop evaluations
- The study

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Theoretical background

- **episteme** - a body of ideas which give shape to theoretical knowledge
- **techne** - what people can do, the rational method involved in accomplishing a goal or objective
- **phronesis** - the capability to consider the mode of action in order to deliver change, the ability to reflect upon; practical wisdom

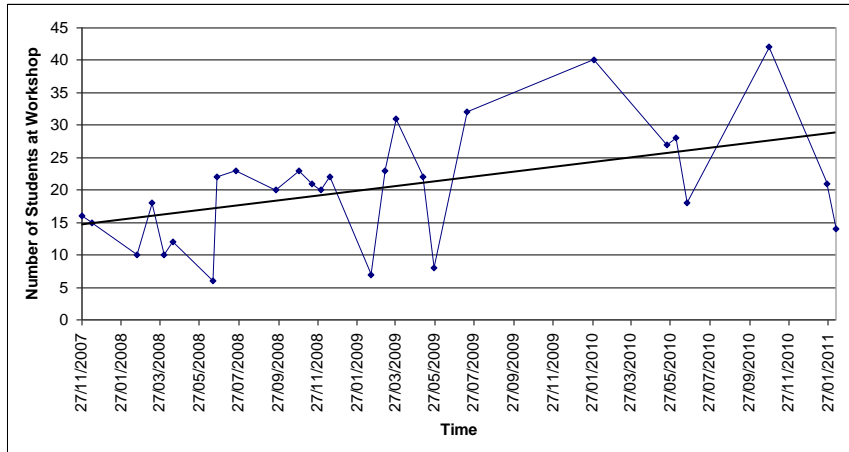
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Workshop background

- 12 - 15 workshops
- 3 hours
- 3 - 5 per term
- Team teaching
- <20 PhD students; mixed disciplines; at different stages of PhD
- Tutor selected materials and students' own work
- Individual and group activities
- Interactive and collaborative teaching style

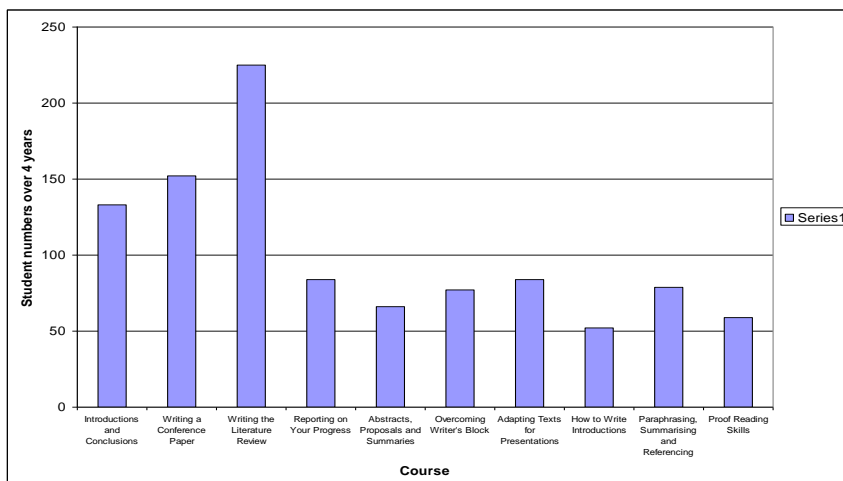
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Student attendance over four years

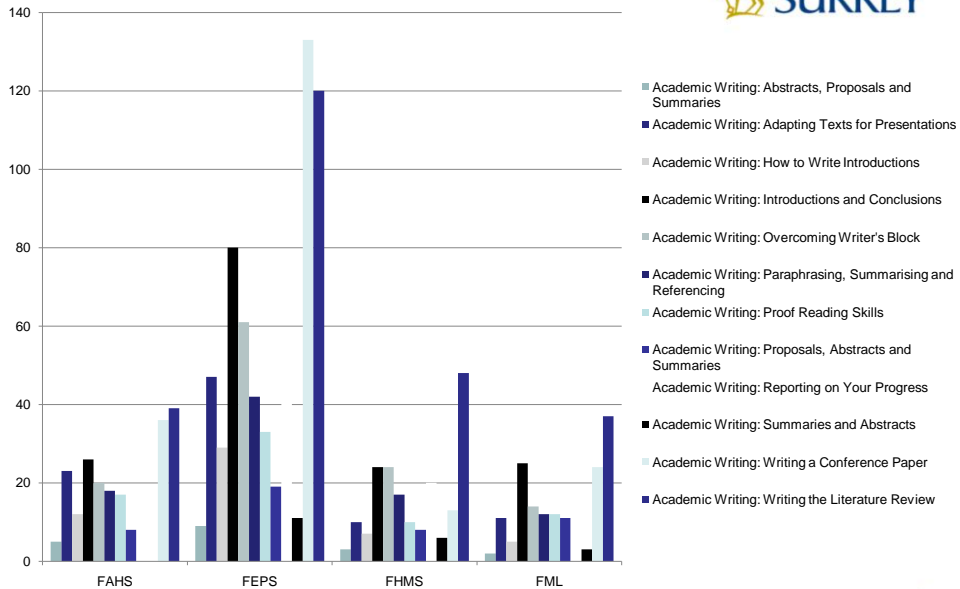


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Total attendance per workshop



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Participant background

- Participants have high expectations
- Participants have a clear notion of what they want
- Research students are trained to be critical
- They are time conscious
- The workshops are advertised as 'writing' rather than 'study skills' and they are process-oriented

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Perceptions

- Research students consider themselves to be a separate group
- EAP tutors see them as special: mix of language learners and 'native speakers'
- The institution treats them differently, cf Roberts fund for skills training

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Contrasting expectations

- Highlighted in one workshop after only 30 minutes on a task worksheet recording participants' responses to each exercise

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Participant expectations elicited via Post-it notes

- Enables simultaneous recording by participants
- Students sort into categories
- Post-its coloured to show student's year

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Most students wanted to learn about

- writing structure and organisation (few wanted grammar)
- how to improve own writing within the discipline

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Examples of tasks

- Information giving
- Free writing
- Guided writing with reflection

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Rhetorical moves in thesis introductions

Focus	Citation	Tense	Example
General statement	INFORMATION PROMINENT	present tense <i>is / are</i>	Dietary carbohydrates (CHOs) are known to have a strong impact on blood glucose levels (Jones, 2001).
Medium focus	WEAK AUTHOR PROMINENT	present perfect <i>has / have – ed</i>	A number of studies have suggested that high intake of low glycaemic index foods and non-starch polysaccharides (NSPs) may benefit diabetics (Green et al 2000, Ketab et al 2004, Wang 2007).
Narrow focus	AUTHOR PROMINENT CITATIONS	simple past <i>-ed</i>	Kim (2007) found that blood glucose and lipid levels improved after consuming a low glycaemic index (GI) diet
Identifying the gap	-	present tense <i>is / are</i>	However, the health benefits of a low GI diet remain to be fully analysed.

(Robert Weissberg and Suzanne Buker (1990) *Writing Up Research*, London: Prentice Hall)

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Non-stop writing exercise

- Write non-stop for 9 minutes on anything you like
- Read through and choose a significant word or phrase
- Use it as a starting point to write non-stop for 7 minutes

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Writing conference proposals

- Write a four-sentence proposal, one for each section of the paper
- Expand the four-sentence outline to the word limit of the Call for Papers (usually around 250 words)
- Exchange proposals.
- Take turns in vetting the proposals and applying editing filters, using the feedback sheets provided.

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Collecting student feedback

- Hard copy evaluation forms completed at end of workshops (discontinued)
- Online workshop evaluations
 - but
 - (1) feedback was not timely
 - (2) fewer students were completing it
 - (3) feedback did not reach tutors

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Methods of collecting student evaluation for this study

- Self-reflections on individual writing tasks during workshops
- One-to-one interviews
- Focus group

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Purpose of interviews

1. To investigate students' experiences of workshops
2. To provide comments as stimuli for focus group

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Interviewee selection criteria

- Had attended a writing workshop
- +
- Followed up with regular writing tutorials over a period of time (6 months - 2 years)

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Interviews

1. Face to face - not recorded (F) (Gk)
2. Face to face - recorded (M) (SL)
3. Not face to face - written notes (M) (J)

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Findings

- Interviewees had a heightened awareness of their writing weaknesses and what they needed to do to improve
- They were not necessarily expecting EAP tutors to solve their problems

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Focus group methodology

- Based on World Café procedure
- Comments from the evaluations were selected and classified to form prompts

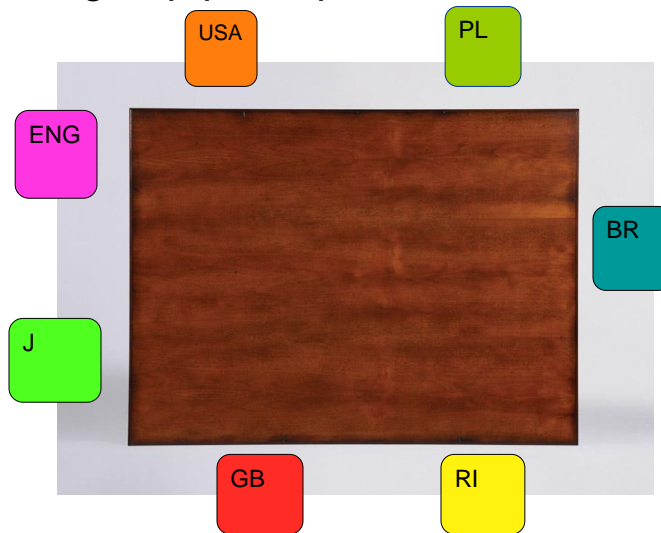
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Examples of focus group prompts from student evaluations

episteme	The course had many practical tips and suggestions
techne	I learned a lot from evaluating a text
phronesis	I always find it very valuable to meet and hear the views of other students


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Focus group participants



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Participant standpoints


episteme  RI

techne  ENG  BR  PL  GB


phronesis  J  USA

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Examples


episteme  RI Subject specific workshops needed at start of PhD

techne  PL Writing is best learned through practice

phronesis  J Could we set up a student writing group?

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Inherent contradiction within group

techne  PL I agree that attending a session at the beginning might be a good idea, but it may be too [unfamiliar] for you to participate unless it's a very general course. It raises questions of field-specific issues as well.

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Contradictory demands

- Timing: compulsory workshops for new students
- Content: subject-specific

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Question for discussion

To what extent do we try and meet conflicting student expectations?

- tailored workshops
- compulsory attendance
- subject-specific models
- style sheets

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Conclusions from focus group

- At least 3 types of student identified.
They agreed to disagree, eg 'OK, if you say so'.
- Impossible to meet the needs of all 3 completely because they are at different developmental stages in writing (irrespective of career stage).
- We too have to accept there are no easy solutions.
- Offer varied activities as luminous stepping stones

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What we have learned

- Students have developed a mindset where writing is very considered, whereas we expect instant and superficial output, cf free writing
- Students are paralysed by the notion of academic writing as polished production

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Our intentions

- To arrange occasional but regular student interviews / focus groups to access student views not expressed in other forms of evaluation.
- To set up a structured monthly writing group, to be run by students, starting 27 May

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