Arbitrating beliefs about learning to write in the PhD writing workshop

Hilary Arnold
Simon Williams

Overview

• Background
• Participant expectations
• Workshop evaluations
• The study
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

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
Student attendance over four years

Total attendance per workshop
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
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

Contrasting expectations

- Highlighted in one workshop after only 30 minutes on a task worksheet recording participants’ responses to each exercise
Participant expectations elicited via Post-it notes

• Enables simultaneous recording by participants

• Students sort into categories

• Post-its coloured to show student's year

Most students wanted to learn about

• writing structure and organisation (few wanted grammar)

• how to improve own writing within the discipline
Examples of tasks

- Information giving
- Free writing
- Guided writing with reflection

### Rhetorical moves in thesis introductions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General statement</td>
<td>INFORMATION PROMINENT</td>
<td>present tense</td>
<td>Dietary carbohydrates (CHOs) are known to have a strong impact on blood glucose levels (Jones, 2001).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*is / are</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium focus</td>
<td>WEAK AUTHOR PROMINENT</td>
<td>present perfect</td>
<td>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).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>has / have – ed</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrow focus</td>
<td>AUTHOR PROMINENT CITATIONS</td>
<td>simple past</td>
<td>Kim (2007) found that blood glucose and lipid levels improved after consuming a low glycaemic index (GI) diet</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>-ed</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying the gap</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>present tense</td>
<td>However, the health benefits of a low GI diet remain to be fully analysed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*is / are</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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

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.
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

Methods of collecting student evaluation for this study

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

1. To investigate students’ experiences of workshops

2. To provide comments as stimuli for focus group

Interviewee selection criteria

• Had attended a writing workshop
  +

• Followed up with regular writing tutorials over a period of time (6 months - 2 years)
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)

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
Focus group methodology

• Based on World Café procedure

• Comments from the evaluations were selected and classified to form prompts

Examples of focus group prompts from student evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>episteme</th>
<th>The course had many practical tips and suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>techne</td>
<td>I learned a lot from evaluating a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phronesis</td>
<td>I always find it very valuable to meet and hear the views of other students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Focus group participants

Participant standpoints

episteme  RI

techne  ENG  BR  PL  GB

phronesis  J  USA
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?

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

Question for discussion

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

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

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
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

REFERENCES

Eisner, E W (2002) ‘From episteme to phronesis to artistry in the study and improvement of teaching’, Teaching and Teacher Education 18: 375-385
Contact details

Hilary Arnold
h.arnold@surrey.ac.uk

Simon Williams
simon.williams@surrey.ac.uk

www.surrey.ac.uk