

How Can We Handle the Specificity of the Writing Challenges that Face Our Students?

Kate Chanock

Humanities Academic Skills Unit, La Trobe University, Australia

Abstract

While composition is not taught in Australian universities, students are required to write extensively for assessment, mainly addressing questions in their disciplines rather than questions of personal or public concern. The challenge for academic language and learning centers, therefore, is how to help students to understand the purposes, structures, and styles of assignments in a range of disciplines, and to discern the commonalities and differences among them. This paper discusses how a learning centre in a Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences mediates diverse discipline expectations through one-to-one tutoring with students; collaborations with lecturers in the disciplines; and the implementation of an «Introduction to Academic Discourse» as part of the curriculum of first-year subjects across the Faculty. In all these modes of teaching, the aim is to make explicit to students the ways in which particular literacy practices stem from the disciplines' project of constructing knowledge.

Introduction

It is natural that, when institutions consider establishing a writing center for their students, they look to North America for models, for that is where writing centers began and have continued to develop with great success (Harris 1982; North 1984; Olson 1984; *Writing Center Journal*, esp. 10th anniversary issue [11 (1)] in 1990; Boquet 1999). However, in many of the places where such facilities are now being established, the educational systems and the cultural contexts are quite different. It may be helpful to expand our picture of writing centers to encompass the spaces, the structures and the people that perform a similar function in countries beyond North America. Here, I would like to do this for my own region of Australia and

New Zealand, where we draw on much of the same theory as do North American writing centers, but our practice, and our lore, are very different.

While no two writing centers are the same, those in North America broadly share some characteristics. North American colleges teach a four-year undergraduate degree in which students may choose from a wide range of subjects, but all study English composition. Writing centers have often been established by English departments to help students develop generic skills in writing for English or any other subject. Often, they are directed by English lecturers and staffed by peer tutors who elicit and respond to students' own concerns about their writing.

In Australia, our place in the organizational structure, and our staffing, reflect the more specialized nature of the degrees offered in Australian universities, where the undergraduate degree is normally three years, followed by an optional fourth «honours» year for high-achieving students who wish to extend their study. Australian writing centers are typically small, and may be based in a cluster of disciplines rather than serving the campus as a whole. They are staffed, not usually by peers or graduate students, but by middle-aged specialists in language and academic skills. These teachers' backgrounds are as likely to be in physics, commerce, psychology, or social work as in English. Our centers have not, historically, developed out of English departments, and our work does not complement the teaching of English or composition in regular classes, for there is, as seen also at most European universities, typically no teaching of composition anywhere on campus.

From their first week as undergraduates, our students' education is not aimed at self-development or citizenship so much as induction into disciplines or training for the professions. The work our students show us is not personal writing or opinion pieces, but assignments for the disciplines – most of them, inevitably, for disciplines we have not studied ourselves. We are always engaged, therefore, and usually from an outsider's perspective, with the cultures of the disciplines: their assumptions, their purposes, their questions, their values, and their language.

At the same time, we are much occupied with the cultures and languages of our students, because our campuses are typically multicultural and multilingual; apart from having international students, our universities draw on local populations of whom a large proportion were born overseas. We regard ourselves as culture brokers, both between the diverse cultures of our students and the culture of Australian higher education (cf. Fox 1994), and between the various disciplines to which our students are apprenticed (Ballard & Clanchy 1988; Ivanic 1988). On issues such as whether tutoring should be directive, or the degree to which students «own» their questions, their language, and their texts, we are closer to the European experience (Santa 2002; Petric 2002), and to the experience of North American writing centers that deal increasingly with ESL students (Blau, Hall & Sparks 2002), than to the more traditional ethos and discourse of writing centers in the U.S. which privilege students' own purposes for their writing over those of their institution (for a thoughtful critique of this ethos,

see Clark 1990 and 2001). We share the concerns of academic skills advisers everywhere about the degree to which our work should involve assimilation (Lea & Street 1998), or a critical engagement with the university (Bawarshi & Pelkowski 1999; Canagarajah 2002); but we are also aware of our responsibilities in helping «other people's children», as Delpit (1988) calls students who are educationally disadvantaged, to learn the codes of power.

In view of our position, one of the most pervasive issues in our work – and my focus in this article – is how to handle the specificity of the writing challenges that face our students: that is, how to write well in each of their specialized disciplines. I would like to address this through an account of the way that my center has developed as a bridge between our students and their teachers in the disciplines.

A Faculty-based «Academic Skills Unit»

In my university, the academic skills teachers are based in the Faculties, as members of the academic staff. («Faculty», here, does not mean teaching staff but administrative divisions of the university: Humanities and Social Sciences; Science, Technology and Engineering; Law and Management; Health Sciences; and Regional Development.) For the 3000-odd students in Humanities and Social Sciences, I am the writing center – I, and whatever assistance with one-to-one tutoring I can obtain for \$5000 a year. Hiring peer tutors is not among my options, both because of the cost and because the discipline teachers would not be willing to entrust the work to students. Where peers are involved in advising fellow students in Australian universities, it is usually in a «mentoring» capacity, in which they talk to groups about how to handle the demands of university study, rather than in dyads devoted to sharing and responding to drafts of work-in-progress. This means that one of the ways in which institutions elsewhere may handle discipline specificity – by pairing tutors with students in similar subject areas – is not available to us.

I am employed, therefore, as a specialist in language and academic skills, to deal with writing in a broad cluster of disciplines. I am fortunate to have a colleague who comes in during the weeks of peak demand. Between us, we have relevant backgrounds in Sociology, History, Education, and TESL. Our students are enrolled, at all levels from first year through Ph.D., in twenty different disciplines, each offering a wide (and changing) range of specialist subjects. (A «subject», in our region, means

what Americans call a «course»: for example, «The Victorian Novel», one of four subjects studied over a semester. A «course» is a degree program, e.g. B.A., Masters or PhD.) In each subject, students write two or three assignments for assessment, and sometimes exam essays, adding up to a total of 15000 words per semester.

It is the nature of these subjects that has become central to our thinking about the way we work. While the students usually consult us, or are referred by their teachers, for language or «expression» errors – and we work on those – we find that the students' success or failure depends to a much greater extent on whether they understand what their essay questions mean. They have to understand why each question *is* a question in that particular subject in that discipline – how it is generated by the discussions of the discipline – and how, therefore, the assigned readings should be used to provide evidence for an answer (cf. Johns 1997). While U.S. writing centers are not commonly expected to address this kind of understanding, the «skills» we teach are not of much use to our students without it. Writing skills are generic in that every piece of writing requires decisions about relevance, breadth and depth, what can be implicit and what must be explained, how to organise a text and how to achieve cohesion within it. The purposes of academic writing are generic too, in that most tasks are designed to develop, in one way or another, the students' understanding of how knowledge is made in their discipline. But the ways in which knowledge is constructed through writing are different in crucial respects (Bazerman 1981; MacDonald 1987; Herrington & Moran 1992; Odell 1992; Chanock 1995; Saunders & Clarke 1997; Lea & Street 1998), and these differences need mediation. What counts as a worthwhile question, a sound method, relevant and reliable evidence, and appropriate lines of interpretation varies considerably between disciplines. Part of our role, therefore, is to help students to recognise what is generic and what is discipline-specific across their writing tasks.

In this role, we look both ways, to students and to staff. We try to help teachers in the disciplines to make the discipline apprenticeship comprehensible; and we try to help students to comprehend it. This is done through one-to-one tutoring with students; participant-observation of lectures, and reading of some of the books and articles assigned for students to read; collaborations with teachers in the disciplines; participation in planning the curriculum; and input into

institutional policy (to support and disseminate these practices)

One-to-one tutoring

Most of our time in my unit is spent with individual students in consultations lasting from half an hour to an hour. Around two hundred students a year consult us in this way; some get what they need in a single visit, while others come two or three times a semester, or as often as once a week. Some come only in their first year, while others come back each year as they encounter new challenges in taking up new disciplines, or simply moving to a higher level within a discipline. The one-to-one mode allows us to be completely flexible in addressing each student's particular needs, working at their own level, and moving at their own pace.

As well as helping individual students with writing problems, one-to-one sessions are equally useful for conveying to us what students commonly understand – and misunderstand – about the project of constructing knowledge. Students and subject teachers often share a «deficit view», believing that students falter in their writing because they have been poorly prepared for university. The concern with preparation at school is generally misplaced, however. Rather, problems arise in the first year of university because students are mystified by the cultures of their disciplines – their purposes, forms, and language – and by the differences between these cultures. The characteristics of discipline cultures that students need to know about are so deeply internalised by their subject teachers that, in large part, they literally «go without saying» (cf. Langer 1992; Johns 1997, pp. 34, 46). These include such matters as the purposes of essay questions; the reasons for using sources; the teacher's role as a representative of a larger discourse community which is meant to be the imagined audience for students' writing; or the choices of positioning, tone and language involved in constructing a «discoursal identity» as an academic writer (Ivanic 1998).

None of these matters is obvious; none is simply an aspect of «good writing» in any generic sense; and none can safely be ignored. All are different, in university writing, from writing outside the academy – and this includes not only creative or personal writing, but writing found in contexts such as schools, workplaces, and journalism, which have been the training-grounds or models for our students' writing about factual matters before they come to university. Thus, what the academy regards as remedial is in fact

developmental: there is a sense in which academic discourse is a «second language» for every student, not just for those from foreign cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

«Academic discourse» is not, however, a single, standard style. We cannot, therefore, in one-to-one tutoring tell students how they should write for a particular subject. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we have to retreat into a more safely-defined space of teaching decontextualised «good writing» (Spack 1988), nor does it mean we have to try to become expert in every discipline our students study. Rather, we need to develop questions that students can ask in order to figure out what they are meant to be doing in any particular subject; and, at the same time, we need to develop practices by which subject teachers can encourage students to ask such questions routinely.

Resources for developing routines of questioning

Although the Arts disciplines are so different, there are common patterns in the kinds of thinking they require and the activities they use to develop this thinking. And while we have not studied the subjects our students are enrolled in, we have access to plenty of clues in the subject guides they receive, the readings they are assigned, and the essay questions by which they are assessed. At the beginning of the academic year, I attend the opening lectures in a range of subjects, to get the handouts and to hear how the subjects are introduced to the students. Usually there is an emphasis on the epistemology and method of the subject as well as on the content to be covered, and while I know this goes unnoticed by many of the students, it shows me where the lecturers' priorities lie. The same combination of emphases is found in many of the subject guides, often understated but occasionally flagged quite prominently, as in this introduction to a history subject (all quotations in this section come from unpublished subject guides that lecturers in my Faculty have supplied to their students):

AIMS AND OBJECTS OF STUDY: In our view, «studying history» is not to learn a set of pre-selected «facts» and dates relating to a broad chronological span. Rather, we see it as an enterprise in *creating and communicating understandings of «others» – people of other eras and other cultures*. Integral to this is reflection on what is involved in creating such understandings (emphasis in original).

We believe that «history» is *not* «the past», which

has gone and cannot be recovered. Rather history consists of *interpretations* of the past: anything written or told about a past is an interpretation made in a present, whether contemporaneously by a participant or observer, or later by a historian.

The construction of knowledge is similarly foregrounded in a subject guide from Anthropology:

Each of [the ethnographies assigned] is, first of all, an example of superb ethnographic description. The three books demonstrate the ways in which different styles of analysis produce different kinds of accounts of social life. And this is the process we will examine in the second half of the course: the ways in which the facts of social life, the scientific imagination of the ethnographer, and the canons of anthropological investigation all combine to produce what we know of other societies.

Along the way you will not only learn a good bit about anthropology and about other societies, but you will also begin to consider how it is that anthropology and the social sciences generally can claim to provide meaningful knowledge about social life. In other words, throughout the course we will not only be concerned with what we know, but also with how we come to know what we know.

This concern with «how we come to know what we know» is further evident in the design of many subjects as they unfold. Students are introduced to the current questions and concerns of the discipline; in tutorials, they practise mining the primary sources for information relevant to the concepts explained in lectures; in their secondary readings, they encounter arguments which they are asked to read critically, examining their assumptions, purposes, soundness and utility; and they are invited to think about current debates between various schools of thought.

Similarly, many of the essay questions that students show me require them to think about how knowledge is made in the discipline, and most of their essays would be more successful if they could recognize this purpose. Question after question focuses on the ways that scholars construct accounts and theories. Some questions ask students to identify or evaluate a scholar's argument; some ask them to test a theory against evidence; some ask them to engage in a debate within the discipline. We see these purposes, for example, in a sampling of questions from different disciplines in my Faculty:

- Politics: «How does each author [of the current week's readings] define a nation? ...Which of the two analytical frameworks did you find most helpful and why?»
- Sociology: «Examine the central argument in one of the pieces of sociological research listed below, analyzing the degree to which it exemplifies a symbolic interactionist approach to deviance.»
- Archaeology: «Discuss the emergence of urban centers in West Africa and the challenge they pose to conventional accounts of the dynamics underlying the rise of complex societies.»

All these clues suggest that, despite the great variety of subject matter studied in humanities and social sciences, first-year subjects are designed to induct students into the project of constructing knowledge; and however different their tasks appear to be, students will be more successful if they can see how each particular task is related to this project. They should be able to get a handle on any assignment by asking themselves, «What is this task supposed to teach me about making knowledge in this discipline?»

When I work with students one-to-one, I encourage them to start with this question; and because every student could benefit by asking it, I have also been working with the Faculty to introduce a focus on the purposes and forms of academic discourse into the regular teaching of the disciplines.

Informing students about conventions of academic writing in the disciplines: two kinds of «bridges»

The first step in enhancing discussion on academic writing between the academic skills adviser, students, and subject teachers was to offer a regular series of lectures open to all staff and students of the Faculty. I have progressively adapted these to provide «guest lectures» for particular subjects when lecturers invite me to talk about reading and writing for their subject in their regular class time. For relevance, I focus on upcoming essay tasks, and urge the students to ask themselves, whenever they are given an assignment, «Why is this question being asked in this subject? What am I supposed to learn *about* (in terms of content), and what am I supposed to learn *how to do* (in terms of method)?» I explain that each assignment plays a role in showing them how knowledge is constructed, and getting them involved in constructing it. While they read

a lot of facts, the assignments are not primarily asking for the facts, but focusing on matters of interpretation. Knowledge is constructed by people asking particular questions of particular subject matter, and going to particular sources for answers. What, then, are the questions with which this subject is concerned, and how do people in this discipline go about answering them? I show them how to identify the dual concerns of the subject – its content and its method – by reading all the way through their subject guide, noting the aims at the beginning, and thinking about how all the questions in the study guide relate back to these aims and to each other.

I show them, too, how the concern with making knowledge is reflected in the structure of the texts they are asked to read. Choosing a piece they have read recently, I show them how the writer begins by building a nest in which to lay her egg – her thesis – by reviewing and problematising what other scholars have said.

The rest of the article develops this thesis with an argument: a series of points each fleshed out with explanation and evidence, linked together by cohesive devices and transitions, and brought together formally in the conclusion. Using examples lent by earlier cohorts of students, I show them that essays take a similar form (and though the students are not yet in a position to provide much scholarly context, it is often provided for them by the type of prompt that quotes some scholar's view as a springboard for discussion: ««Blah blah blah». Discuss».) In this way, my lectures cover the purpose of academic work and its implications for the kinds of reading and writing that students will encounter.

Because teachers as well as students have told me that they find these lectures on the nature of academic discourse helpful, I have gone on to try to integrate the focus on academic discourse into the curriculum of first-year subjects across the Faculty, so that every student encounters it as a matter of course. Several years ago, I produced a kit for students and teachers (now published as an appendix in Chanock 2004), and more subjects have taken it up each year until, this year, it has been incorporated into the Faculty's Teaching and Learning Plan, with every first-year subject expected to adopt it. It consists of brief generic readings for students, up to two pages each week, explaining the following topics:

Week	Topic
Week One	The project of constructing knowledge (each subsequent week shows how the various characteristics of academic discourse flow from this purpose)
Week Two	Investigation of primary evidence
Week Three	The use of secondary sources
Week Four	The apparatus of attribution
Week Five	Critical reading and debate

Table 1: Structure of the Introduction to Academic Discourse

For each week, teachers are equipped with activities to show their students how each of the aspects of academic discourse mentioned is manifested in the work they are doing in that subject, in that week. For example, in Week One the students read their subject guide together, colour-highlighting and discussing the questions they find there. In Week Two they examine a primary source and pool their observations to see how different these can be. In Week Three they find the thesis and topic sentences in an article they had to read that week. In Week Four they look at examples of quotation, paraphrasing and referencing in one of their readings for that week, noting how the writer uses other scholars' work and deciding why s/he has chosen to quote in one place and to paraphrase in another. In Week Five they examine a passage of flawed argument or a clash of views between scholars on some common topic, and try to identify where the problem lies. In this way, my generic insights into the common purpose and design of Arts subjects are translated into discipline-specific strategies that help students to deal with the work of each particular subject.

Conclusion

This «Introduction to Academic Discourse» makes the work of each subject more comprehensible to students by focusing on the purposes of the subject and the ways in which these purposes generate the tasks that students are asked to do, and shape the discourse they are expected to read and write. The «Introduction» has been well-received by teachers because it requires no extra preparation beyond identifying which parts of which assigned readings they are going to use as examples; it does not ask them to detour from the content they had planned to cover; and it gives them a

coherent framework for drawing students' attention to the features of academic reading and writing that they were previously expected to learn by «osmosis». At the same time, it has made them aware that the academic work they expect students to do is quite complex, and that it is better to integrate the topic of academic discourse into disciplinary work from the beginning of the semester than to wait until some students fail an assignment and then send those students to me for «remedial work». Moreover, it has helped to establish the idea that the responsibility for students learning academic discourse is one that teachers, students, and the academic skills advisers share.

Little by little, the collaboration between academic skills advisers and teachers in the disciplines is becoming institutionalised as the activities it engenders become part of my Faculty's «Teaching and Learning Plan». This is, in turn, part of the «Quality Assurance» process through which the university is made accountable to government and community stakeholders for its performance overall. Embedding this collaboration in the planning and reporting procedures of the university helps to ensure continuity in, and further development of, the integrated academic skills program I have described.

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