

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Writing for the discipline in the discipline?

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This article explores the issue of students' writing skills in the discipline of Engineering and beyond. It is the result of a discussion between three academics from different discipline backgrounds: Teaching and Learning, the Humanities and Engineering. We start with a review of the strategies commonly used to address problems in students' academic writing skills, with an emphasis on the notions of 'writing across the curriculum' (WAC) or 'writing in the disciplines' (WID). Taking into consideration the issue of students' perception of their 'real curriculum' and the need to embed writing' in the disciplines, we propose a strategy aimed at implementing an efficient teaching of writing skills targeted for a specific discipline. In so doing, we argue that the increasing recourse to independent Learning Development services decontextualises students' understanding of writing.

Keywords: academic writing; Learning Development; cross-disciplinary; discipline

When an academic in Engineering asks a colleague in the Humanities how to tackle the issue of academic writing skills, and when the latter includes in the discussion a colleague from the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the conversation that takes place occurs at the meeting place of any number of intersecting entities and interests. One of the best-argued positions on the suitable locus of ownership of higher-education writing instruction, and the one with which these three academics from the University of Newcastle felt themselves most comfortably aligned, is that offered by Jonathan Monroe, who deliberately elects not to tease out a best-of-both-worlds synthesis from the competing interests of 'writing across the curriculum' (WAC) and 'writing in the disciplines' (WID); instead, he locates writing as the common currency of all disciplines and – and not *but* – one that is best dealt with within each discipline. What makes this a worthy point of departure, perversely, is the fact that Monroe's analysis of 'Writing and the Disciplines' was published as far back as 2003, since which time the business of learning and teaching, and especially writing instruction, has morphed from a meta-discipline into a discipline in its own right and with its own interests to serve. For, as universities seek to bolster the quality of learning and teaching, in conjunction with and not at the expense of excellence in research, dedicated centres, with their own suites of courses and national awards,

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have elevated higher education's core business to a point where it too is endangered by the tricky matter of 'perception'. For Monroe and the US context, the discussion compares 'writing experts' with discipline expertise while in our context these 'writing experts' are contained within Learning Development (LD). 'Learning Development' at our university is the name given to the work of a group of people who traditionally supported students through 1:1 and group sessions focused on academic literacies, of which writing is just one. This group has increasingly moved into areas of traditional academic/discipline responsibility to assist students through the teaching of writing and other skills alongside the original course context. Some academics are happy with this move as they can effectively 'leave' the teaching of writing to 'writing experts' – not discipline experts. Others are unhappy to see writing skills divorced from the discipline context. Most do not have the time, with increasing workloads, to think about or question the move. Indeed if you are teaching a large course with problems in terms of academic skills (first year, diverse cohorts, postgraduate international cohorts) you may be 'required' to accept 'help' in this way, in the name of improving the student experience (the institutionally required student feedback on courses and programmes). This institutional push is accelerating as use of student satisfaction grows as a measure of effective teaching (Australian Universities Quality Agency [AUQA] and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA] measures e.g.).

The rise of LD cannot be easily be detangled from what Richard James (2007) refers to as the 'real curriculum': for students to engage with a subject it must, in addition to being formally assessed, be perceived as being part of their real curriculum, or what they consider to be the real business of their degree programme. And such is now the case with academic writing, which has increasingly been taken out of the disciplines and reinserted in areas where it is quite demonstrably the 'real curriculum'. The negative aspect is, of course, that this practice dislocates writing from that other programme, the one in the students' chosen discipline. Monroe's suggestion is that such practice 'give[s] students a false sense of security by suggesting they can master the diverse kinds of writing they will encounter in the wide range of courses a liberal education necessarily involves' (Monroe 2008).

The question of how best to improve the writing skills of Engineering students sees us therefore not so much at a point of departure as of re-departure. We are at a point where the rise of LD risks decoupling the skills from the original purpose of learning them, with relevance and authenticity lost in the process (as noted by Monroe 2008). Academics are now facing what Trowler (2011) has labelled the 'unbundling of academic work and academic integrity'. Academics may be right to feel that the removal of writing from the heart of the discipline, where it is most effectively taught (Monroe 2008), is predicated on that other 'e' word, efficiency. At worst, the centralisation, or adjunctification, of LD takes writing out of students' real 'real curriculum', and stigmatises it as something other than the 'intellectually stimulating work that is articulated in higher education through the disciplines' (Monroe 2008). As high-school geography lessons have taught us, centralisation and decentralisation follow on from each other cyclically. And so the political landscape has shifted since Monroe's analysis was published and the time is again ripe to question whether writing is a core discipline skill and thus part of the disciplines' core teaching responsibilities.

Observations by lecturers from Engineering and Humanities that students' writing skills are below standard serve not only to stimulate interdisciplinary discussions around learning and teaching commonalities but also to remind us of the discipline-specific contexts of the 'standards' by which we judge students' abilities. What we understand by writing skills, however fundamentally and generically deficient, is the ability to articulate the knowledge and skill sets of the respective academic disciplines. A survey of online tools for writing in the sciences demonstrates that the 'basics' of writing are always already deployed to specific ends and in specific academic registers: in other words, it is always writing *in* science and therefore requires input from academics from the relevant disciplines. See, for example, the websites developed by the University of New South Wales (Wise, <http://learningcentre.usyd.edu.au/wise/home-B.html>), by Swarthmore College (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/x10548.xml#top>) or by Penn State University (<http://www.writing.engr.psu.edu/exercises/grammar1.html>). In the case of Engineering, Beer and McMurrey (2009) discuss the importance for engineers of good writing, but their aim is explicitly to promote communication by and between engineers.

Investigation of the various strategies being used to improve this situation has included collegial conversations, sharing the problem, investigating the learning and teaching scholarship, and developing resources to facilitate writing instruction in the individual disciplines. The decade-long debate around WID, mentioned by Monroe, has continued in the decade since. Thus, the higher-education sector continues to grapple with the perception of declining literacy discussed by Lillis and Turner in 2001; writing for the disciplines (Storch and Tapper 2000) has made way for writing across the disciplines (Yalvac et al. 2007) via discussions of the need to import expertise and to support writing development (Sommerville and Crème 2005). Creative, freestyle writing techniques developed by Peter Elbow have been prescribed across the disciplines (Li 2007). Furthermore, the number of guides being produced by academics to address the issue does not suggest a lack of engagement; neither does it suggest a lack of strategy. It does, on the other hand, suggest that teaching is part of our academic identity. It also, of course, speaks of inefficiency and reduplication across the university campus, hence the need to relocate the debate firmly in the disciplines in an interdisciplinary conversation.

The thrust of our argument here is that the rising power of LD is exploiting interdisciplinarity arguments and common interests at the expense of discipline specificity. As we have suggested, this removes writing concerns from students' perception of relevant and legitimate areas of study (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Turner 2001). As Jacobs (2005) has suggested, writing specialists do not have to be outsourced; collaborative links between disciplines and writing specialists can be used to make implicit knowledge explicit; and links to the writing process can equally usefully be made within the disciplines' 'real curriculum' in the course of their teaching of disciplinary knowledge (Wingate, Andon, and Cogo 2011). Indeed, there is a lot to be said for retaining writing instruction among the disciplinary basics, or keeping it *in house*; not only does this promote effective learning and teaching (Monroe 2003), but it also latches onto that all-important perception, from which efficiencies stem, as high-profile discipline experts add kudos and cachet to matters of academic writing (Haggis 2006). In Australia, for example, the high student-satisfaction ratings of institutions such as the University of Wollongong are due in no small measure to the deployment of professors with strong research profiles in

generic first-year undergraduate courses. This strategy is clearly designed to inspire students and to reinforce the profile of teaching itself within the university, but it also has the effect of confirming the interdependency of research and basic discipline skills. If we follow the example of Beer and McMurrey, we can suppose, and indeed argue here, that this same strategy, of bringing high-profile academics from what the students recognise as their ‘real’ curricular home, into the classroom will also function in the case of academic writing.

Several lecturers of the discipline of Civil, Surveying and Environmental Engineering at the University of Newcastle have recognised the need to bolster their students’ writing skills. However, their initiatives have tended to lack the sustained, coordinated strategy, which studies such as that by Beer and McMurrey (2009) suggest are required across the whole curriculum. Consequently, our suggestion is that the academic staff responsible for the delivery of the discipline’s curriculum should be involved and coordinated, as a pedagogical team, in the development of a targeted writing strategy. While this view runs counter to the LD-intervention model, we see it as potentially more efficient than the outsourcing of writing as a ‘discrete problem’ as it addresses two critical points: students’ perception of their real curriculum on the one hand, and, on the other, the specificity of the discipline-writing context (in the case of Engineering, e.g. laboratory and design reports). This view is well supported by the work and research in this area by academics such as Monroe (2008).

As academics with belief in the ownership of the discipline being with the discipline, the solution lies with discipline members. The advantage of this strategy is that it avoids the perception by the students that writing is not relevant for their ‘real curriculum’. Responsibility for developing ‘new’ discipline members sits with current discipline members, preferably those who are recognised and successful in it. To send students elsewhere to ‘learn to write’ is necessarily to decontextualise the students and their learning.

We propose therefore that writing skills be taught over all years of the undergraduate programme, and that the most fundamental aspects of writing as well as, but also *in conjunction with* and *in relation to*, recognisably discipline-specific writing requirements be covered. This would be done within a core sequence of courses in the traditional curriculum rather than via separate ‘writing courses’. The sequence detailed below is a first attempt to include writing in the curriculum and, as such, is by no means exhaustive:

(1) Year 1:

- Documents produced: assignments.
- Topics possibly covered: emphasis on the relevance of writing for the future engineers (perception of a real curriculum), basic English writing and grammatical issues, importance of logics, importance of explanations/transition in assignments.

(2) Year 2:

- Documents produced: assignments and laboratory reports.

- Topics possibly covered: formatting issues (e.g. figures, tables), typical structure of scientific documents and application to laboratory report.

(3) Year 3:

- Documents produced: assignments, laboratory and design reports.
- Topics possibly covered: notion of noise in communication, of conciseness and of logics, structure of design reports and importance of adapting the written document to the reader.

(4) Year 4:

- Documents produced: assignments, design and research reports.
- Topics possibly covered: Literature review: concept, objective, referencing, critical thinking; importance of logics, structure of a research type document.

Each year should see the production of a set of documents targeting each course (laboratory report, design project and final project) and the inclusion of ‘writing’ in the marking rubric for written assessments. The four-year sequence will also allow for the provision of feedback designed to promote learning rather than as a hole-patching exercise. Note that the sequence has been developed for the specific requirements of Engineering but that a number of these steps can be directly transposed onto Humanities and other disciplines.

As academics from three different backgrounds, we believe that this approach will help improve students’ writing skills in an efficient way within a discipline, but we submit this idea and the above sequence as a point of departure in order to get the feedback and opinion of our peers who might be facing the same issue. A teaching project has been submitted for funding by the University of Newcastle to study the feasibility of implementing for such a strategy in Engineering. As we have noted, the interdisciplinary discussion, out of which this point of departure developed, revealed a need for a discipline-specific writing strategy; at the same time, and seemingly perversely, the same discussion of discipline-specific solutions to discipline-specific problems also highlighted the extent to which writing is a problem, indeed *the same* problem, across disciplines appearing to have little in common. And it is precisely this commonality, the outsourcing solution that it has engendered, which is (today as in 2003) creating this gap between writing and the disciplines.

LD tends to decontextualise writing. What we propose as a better model is the re-contextualisation of writing within disciplines. This will have two advantages: first, by encouraging students to actively engage, by writing, with the various elements of their curriculum, it will improve their learning in their discipline; and second, it will focus all disciplines on their common currency, which is undergraduate teaching, including the articulation of information in English (i.e. writing), and thus improve communication between faculties.

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