'So wotz rong wiv dat?' The importance of context and creativity in developing students' writing skills

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Abstract

Wherever academics gather, the subject of student writing skills, or rather lack of them, is sure to surface. Tales of 'text message' exam answers and essays in 'soap-opera speak' abound. This article contends that students are in fact highly literate. Problems arise because their literacies are increasingly divergent from those of their tutors, and are therefore inappropriate when employed in the academic context. An awareness of context is crucial to the effective support of writing skills development. Clear delineation of what is and is not appropriate within the academic context can provide students with a bridge, which allows them to channel their existing literacies into the academic environment. Different contexts can also be used to make clear the requirements and processes of effective academic writing. Techniques more familiar to the creative writing classroom can allow students to rediscover their motivation for writing academically, and offer strategies for meeting assessment criteria successfully. Similarly, using examples from the popular culture with which most students are familiar can illustrate effective writing techniques by making plain the processes at work while simultaneously removing the negative perceptions that often accompany student approaches to the academic context.

On 17th March 2004, lecturer Adam Fox wrote in *The Guardian* about a new phenomenon that he had encountered while marking student exam scripts: answers written in 'text' language. He gave numerous perplexing and amusing examples, but this was his favourite:

> In Shxpeare's Eng u had 2 b rich 2 go to schl but sumX bys + grls lrnd reading and ritng at Om (Fox, 2004).

So wotz rong wiv dat? Nothing, if you were sending a text message on a mobile telephone. However, Fox contends that 'as teachers we must insist that our charges learn to select that form of the written language, from the many now available to them, which is most suitable in the context'.

The language of 'text' is an emerging written dialect. It is no more or less valid than the 'academic' dialect that is still the common currency of educators. However, its use in a formal exam situation is deemed unacceptable by most examiners. Whether it is right to insist upon students adopting the formal dialect of academia in order for them to progress through their educational careers is beyond the scope of this paper. Given that, at present, the requirement is still largely for them to do so, my intention is to explore how awareness of context can be used to support students in developing their academic writing skills.

Academics and the students they teach are rooted in increasingly disparate contexts. While most lecturers are longstanding members of Academic Culture, and write 'academic' so fluently as to be unconscious of it, the student body is subject to 'changing demographics, multiple literacies and generational differences' (Mullin, 2004). It is not that students are illiterate, rather that many are literate in contexts other than Academic Culture. If, for example, students were assessed on their ability to communicate via text message, to interpret song lyrics, or comprehend the instruction manual that comes with a DVD player, most would probably excel on all counts.

As supporters of writing development, our task is to show students how to access these alternative literacies and apply them to the academic context. In other words, to provide a bridge that allows students to transfer their literacy skills from one context to another. This approach underpins the support work undertaken by the Writing Centre at Liverpool Hope, and although evaluation is ongoing, interim results indicate that it is effective (Writing Centre Annual Monitoring Report, 2004).One of the most popular reasons for a Writing Centre consultation is uncertainty over what academic writing is. Many students describe it as 'a whole new language'. They feel unsure as to what is expected of them, likening the process to one of 'trial and error' where there are no clear ground rules. One student commented that 'it was not so much that I didn't know where the goal posts were, rather that I wasn't even in the right stadium' (Hurley, 2004). Often the major difficulty is not students' understanding of their subject, but being able to translate that understanding into formal language. A recent article in the Daily Mail reports concerns voiced by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance over the 'soap opera' language in which students tend to express themselves. Particular cause for concern was the assertion that Hamlet should 'get on with his life', and the observation that Cleopatra 'wears the trousers' (Education Correspondent, 2004, p.25). The Daily Mail's observation chimes with the experience of a student who attended the Writing Centre, bemused that their tutor had objected to the use of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Shakespeare* (Rozakis, 1999) in their bibliography. Again, this illustrates that most students are highly literate in the dialects of Popular Culture. It is not their understanding of Shakespeare's work that is at fault, rather the language with which they attempt to demonstrate that understanding. Given that the differences in context and the process of translation from one context to another appear to be major issues, what strategies can be used to address them? The Writing Centre has road-tested techniques that seem to work effectively with most students. One such technique is to start from a place familiar to students,

and build them a bridge into the alien territory of academic writing. The text message offers an ideal opportunity. Students are asked to translate the example given above into 'normal' English. So:

In Shxpeare's Eng u had 2 b rich 2 go to schl but sumX bys +

grls lrnd reading and ritng at Om (Fox, 2004).

Becomes:

In Shakespeare's England you had to be rich to go to school but sometimes boys and girls learned reading and writing at home.

Most students are swift and confident in performing this task. They are then asked how they could make the 'normal' English more academic in character. After some head scratching, 'posh', 'longwinded' and 'airy-fairy' are proposed. Eventually something akin to the following emerges:

During Shakespeare's lifetime (1564 – 1616) the cost of attending school in England meant that usually only children from wealthy families were able to go (Wells, 1993). However, according to Weller and Ferguson (1991) some children did acquire literacy in the domestic setting.

Through a tutor-led analysis, key characteristics are identified:

- Precise – defines exactly what it means

- <u>Tentative – no sweeping generalisations</u>

- Thoughtful – considers different perspectives

- **Uses evidence – references back up the claim**

- Register – 'learn to read' = 'acquire literacy'

This is one example of how students' existing literacies can be helped to flow from areas of familiarity and confidence into areas of confusion and trepidation.

Another technique is to make clear the processes underlying academic writing by taking them out of context. Giving students permission to experiment, and get it wrong, can be liberating for those who are so concerned with grades and percentages that they lose sight of their own learning process. Techniques derived from the creative writing classroom provide a safe space in which students can practise until they become confident in translating ideas from one dialect to another.

There are very few cross-disciplinary Writing Centres in UK universities at the moment, and even fewer that seek to combine creative and expository writing (Hurley, 2004). It is therefore necessary to look to the United States for a model in which creative writing techniques are employed in the support of academic writing.

The Writing Center at Washington University, St Louis, is one of the only U.S. Centers to combine expository and creative writing strengths. It is keen to promote "crossover work", which involves a free flow of ideas and techniques between the traditionally separate fields of 'academic' and 'creative' writing. What is also attractive about this Center as a model is its underlying philosophy:

> Our tutors will not edit or proofread student papers. Instead, they will identify errors . . . and make some model corrections, leaving the student responsible for correcting any remaining errors (The Writing Centre at Washington University in St Louis, 2004).

This model of the student as active learner rather than passive recipient of 'correct' writing is one that Hope's Writing Centre seeks to emulate.

Students often see academic writing as a burdensome task that has to be performed to a certain level of proficiency in order to gain their degree, but ultimately something that they do not enjoy. To counteract this perception The Writing Centre has developed a series of writing workshops that aims to show students how their creativity can be productively applied to academic writing tasks. Underpinning these workshop sessions is the assertion that forms of writing usually perceived as 'academic' (essays, reports, literature reviews, and dissertations, for example) are a part of the same continuum as traditionally 'creative' forms such as screenplays, novels, letters and diaries.

The first session begins by asking students about the kind of writing that they most enjoyed doing as a child. Invariably the response relates to some kind of creative task, usually 'writing stories'.

As a group, we then try to define what it was that made writing stories so enjoyable. Responses usually include: 'freedom of

expression', 'rewarded for being creative', 'not restricted by rules and conventions about what is or is not acceptable within that genre', and 'wrote because I wanted to'. Students are asked to contrast these responses with their perceptions of academic writing tasks. Student perceptions of academic writing are: 'too formal', 'stuffy', 'not sure why I'm writing', 'no clear motivation', 'you just have to do it', 'restrictive', 'boring' and so on. We go on to examine how and why that sense of creativity has been lost. Students are asked to think of a favourite novel (this exercise will work with comics and magazines for the less well-read), and answer the following questions:

•Why do you like this book?
•What is it that makes you want to read it?
•How does the author engage with the reader?
•How is the book structured?
•How is the language used?
•What was the author's motivation for writing?

Students are then asked to think of themselves as authors of academic texts. They are asked: 'what is your motivation for writing?' The first round of responses is usually negative (see above), but with some coaxing they reach a discussion about their general motivation for learning and studying at this level. The use of creativity as a tool in the active learner's kit is then discussed (Learning and Teaching Support Network, 2004), and the concept of applying 'creative writing' techniques to academic texts is introduced. A tutor-led analysis of the novelist's techniques (structure, transparency, coherence etc) and how they can be applied to academic writing follows.

   Further workshop sessions cover common academic forms and frequently encountered problems. The potential to extend the 'academic as creative writing' paradigm is almost infinite, and can be tailored to demonstrate practical solutions to most student writing issues. For example, the use and purpose of

paragraphs can be explained by reference to any popular television series that contains commercial breaks. Students are asked to consider the material that occupies the space between commercial breaks. Their observations are guided towards the following characteristics: something must happen to keep the viewer's interest, it must link with what has happened previously and what will happen next, and it must also be a discrete unit of material that has its own internal logic. Students are asked to apply these principles to the use of paragraphs.

One student commented: 'there is nothing "academic" about our conversations. If you were trying to teach me academic writing by disguising it, I have swallowed it hook, line and sinker.' It is not so much that the 'academic' element has been disguised, more that the hidden rules of what can seem like a vaguely sinister secret society have been made plain, thereby rendering membership of Academic Culture open to anyone who is willing to apply themselves. Awareness of context allows us to delineate the rules and expectations of academic writing with clarity and precision.

What, then, are the implications for busy educators trying to teach an already crowded curriculum? The most important point to emerge from the Writing Centre's experiences is that students do not always absorb the academic context instinctively. As student literacies become increasingly diverse, a process of osmosis cannot be relied upon for the acquisition and implementation of academic writing skills. The difference in context needs to be made explicit. The characteristics of academic writing need to be identified, described and explained. This process could be as far-reaching as re-writing a pathway or module to include writing skills development. Writing skills development can also be supported via relatively minor changes, such as the use of relevant subject-specific material to teach concepts like register, structure and critical thinking side-by-side with curriculum content. It could be as simple as making sure that, before attempting their fist essay, students know that phrases such as, 'if you ask me,' and 'Viola gets it sorted,' are not acceptable. There is no such thing as bad writing, just

writing that is inappropriate for the given context. Our job is to make sure that students are aware of the academic context and what is appropriate in it.

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