

Introduction

Research training for postgraduate students has an increasingly high profile and high take-up rate. This is particularly the case with workshops on academic writing, which are often oversubscribed. In the course of the writing workshops we have provided for research students at the University of Surrey over the last four years, a challenge we have faced is that participants have mutually conflicting expectations of the workshop process and content. Since students may only attend one workshop on a particular theme, it is clearly important that content should match their expectations. At first, we sought to prescribe what we taught by defining the ideal workshop task and creating a template to satisfy everyone, but our desire proved to be misguided. Instead, adapting our modes of evaluation and learning in order to understand participants' needs and wants in terms of their writing stage proved more useful. Specifically, Aristotle's structure of knowledge and his concepts of *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*, recently popularised in education and technical writing (e.g., Eisner, 2002), helped us to interpret the range of student feedback we regularly received, to map it against stages of learning, and to include in each workshop a range of tasks to fit these stages; it also helped us to reflect on the nature of the opportunities for feedback we provided. Our rationale is that socialisation through iterative forms of evaluation enables students to express their needs more clearly and to attempt tasks of higher complexity in the writing workshops. This report describes the evolution of our feedback mechanisms, and our interpretation of participants' responses within the institutional constraints of our remit as writing tutors, and how we learned from both.

Theoretical background

Aristotle's conceptualisation of forms of knowledge continues to inform subsequent models of teaching and learning, for example Bloom's taxonomy of learning (1956), Lea and Street's (1998) approaches to teaching EAP writing and Richards' (2002) theories of teaching. Table 1 summarises the relationships between these conceptualisations of knowledge or their application, with the most concrete, external and objective interpretations across the top row. For example, a skills approach to writing might use explicit knowledge of form to teach sentence-level linguistic features such as grammar, spelling and punctuation; it is *epistemic* because the conventions being taught are systematic and widespread, and there is little need for personal judgements from writer or teacher. Richards (2002) sees much science research as necessarily proceeding at this descriptive level, e.g., accounts of empirical projects.

The second row of the table illustrates a genre approach to writing, applying the functions of texts produced by a discourse community to teach rhetorical patterns, which are often at

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paragraph level, e.g., identifying the gap in the subject literature in an introduction; it is *technical* because the conventions being taught are systematic and confined to a group of language users, and there is some scope for personal judgements from writer or teacher, e.g., in choosing the so-called block, chain or thematic organisation of paragraphs to compare and contrast subject material. In a similar way, Richards (2002) suggests that philosophy proceeds by manipulating models and theories.

The third row of the table illustrates an academic literacies approach to writing, which requires familiarity with power relations within a culture to evaluate a text; it is *phronetic* because the conventions being taught are a combination of the subjective and the social; it demands judgements from writer or teacher on how and whether to apply or adapt conventions. Richards (2002) considers arts and crafts subjects are taught in this way; actually, they cannot be taught explicitly because their production relies on the breaking of conventions, and so the texts produced are unpredictable. Aristotle's conceptualisations of knowledge forms are chosen to contextualise the work reported in this paper because they are the most general and have the advantage of making fewer associations with particular writing movements.

Table I Analogies between forms of knowledge, writing stages and workshop tasks

Aristotle: forms of knowledge	Bloom's taxonomy (1956)	Lea and Street (1998): approaches to teaching EAP writing	Richards (2002): theories of teaching	Language focus	Writing workshop tasks
<i>episteme</i>	knowledge	skills	science research	form	sentence level information giving
<i>techne</i>	application	genre	theory- philosophy	function	paragraph level patterned writing
<i>phronesis</i>	evaluation	academic literacies	art-craft	discourse	whole text writing with reflection

Situation

In October 2007 the Department of Languages and Translation Studies at the University of Surrey introduced an ongoing scheme of writing workshops and one to one consultations for PhD students. This project is financed through Roberts' funding, and focuses on a process approach to developing research students' writing skills across disciplines. The scheme runs across the University and is designed to appeal to all research students irrespective of their background, stage of research or level of skills. The workshops and consultations aim to increase students' awareness of the demands of writing tasks encountered in a programme of research. Samples of the students' own writing are used as a basis for study, analysis and development.

Since our programme of writing workshops began, approximately 500 students have chosen from a repertory of 15 themes and 3 to 5 workshops per term. Each workshop lasts 3 hours and is led by 2 facilitators and attended by up to 20 research students from mixed disciplines. The largest student attendance by faculty is represented by Engineering and Science, reflecting its relative size in the university. The teaching style is interactive and collaborative, involving individual and group activities, and combining tutor-selected materials and students' own work. The content is process-oriented and the sessions are specifically advertised as 'writing' rather than study skills workshops.

As researchers, the participants have been trained to be critical; they are time conscious, and have high expectations and a clear notion of what they want. They identify themselves as a separate constituency within the University, preferring to attend their own dedicated courses, which have been funded separately. EAP writing tutors, too, see the workshop participants as atypical, not least because of their mix of first languages, including English.

Issues

During the course of the writing workshops, several issues have become apparent from participant reaction within them and from post-workshop evaluations. The research students who attend them often have a mindset where writing is very considered and as a result they can be paralysed by the notion of academic writing as anything less than polished production. In contrast, we as workshop facilitators expect instant and superficial writing output, e.g., in response to a free writing exercise.

Initially, simple three-part student evaluations ('Why did you attend the workshop?', 'What did you learn?' and 'What change would you recommend?') seemed useful in helping us understand

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participants' needs, but there were a number of complicating factors in our interpretation and response: because workshops were attended as 'one-offs' rather than as a series, it was difficult to measure any long-term development in participants' writing, and their contrasting expectations were typified by the following comments given in response to the same workshop:

I want to know about writing, not actually do it in the workshop.

Excellent to be obliged to write something in the workshop. Even if it is just a draft, something was done.

In circumstances where a participant might come to only one workshop, managing expectations at the start of the session became an important way of responding to earlier evaluations. Participants were asked to sit in faculty groups, and a novel procedure was introduced whereby they were given coloured Post-it notes to record their expectations individually. They then worked in their groups to sort them into categories. The colour of the Post-it note showed the student's year, e.g., 1st, 2nd, 3rd or the equivalent for part-time students. The first time the procedure was tried, the participants collectively grouped the notes into three categories approximating style, format and content, confirming earlier feedback that most students wanted to learn about writing structure and organisation (comparatively fewer wanted grammar), and how to improve their own writing within the discipline. This was reflected in the popularity of the various workshop tasks, which could notionally be divided into three types: e.g., aspects of style, rhetorical moves, and critical feedback on writing (see samples of tasks below).

Use noun-based phrases instead of "wh" clauses

1(a) A road atlas can help in estimating **when we arrive** at our destination.

1(b) A road atlas can help in estimating **the time of arrival** at our destination.

Rewrite

2(a) A glance at a geological atlas will reveal **where these limestones occur**.

2(b)

Figure 1 Aspects of style

Write the number of the appropriate sentence in the table below:

1. 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).
2. Kim (2007) found that blood glucose and lipid levels improved after consuming a low glycaemic index (GI) diet.
3. Dietary carbohydrates (CHOs) are known to have a strong impact on blood glucose levels (Jones, 2001).
4. However, the health benefits of a low GI diet remain to be fully analysed.

Focus	Citation	Tense	Sentence
General statement	INFORMATION PROMINENT	present tense <i>is / are</i>	<i>Example</i> 3
Medium focus	WEAK AUTHOR PROMINENT	present perfect <i>has / have -ed</i>	
Narrow focus	AUTHOR PROMINENT CITATIONS	simple past <i>-ed</i>	
Identifying the gap	-	present tense <i>is / are</i>	

Figure 2 Rhetorical moves

(Adapted from Weissberg, R. & Buker, S. (1990) *Writing Up Research*, London: Prentice Hall. Authors named in Figure 2 are fictional.)

- With another participant, team up with two others (i.e., 4 people, 2 x 2).
- Exchange proposals you have written.
- Take turns in vetting the proposals and applying editing filters, using the feedback sheets provided.

Figure 3 Critical feedback on writing a conference proposal

The style and format tasks were most popular, and the critical feedback task elicited the polar evaluations.

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The comments of workshop participants could be seen in terms of the types of knowledge described by Aristotle, namely *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*, glossed as ‘theoretical’, ‘productive’ and ‘socio-ethical’ (Saugstad, 2002), and as ‘certain knowledge’, “savvy” knowledge’ and ‘ethical reflection’ (Schryer Lingard & Spafford, 2005) respectively (for related discussions, see Bridgeford & Moore, 2002; Beckett Agashae & Oliver, 2002; Birmingham, 2004; Hawk, 2004). These models make it possible to see the three task types as building on one another in terms of cognitive complexity. Further, because Aristotle saw these knowledge stages as progressive, it would be natural that the participants should be encouraged to move from a stage of *episteme*, or skills-based learning to write, expressed by the desire for ‘knowledge about’, to *techne*, a more practice-based form. The participant’s final aim should be the *phronetic* stage, as in academic literacies, the ability to self-consciously choose a style and approach to suit the situation. Thus, whilst information about writing is necessary for novice writers, it cannot be sufficient for them to produce texts suitable for the communities of practice they aspire to engage in (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For that, more specific examples and guidance are needed, as practised by representatives in the field. To become an independent writer capable of making original contributions requires an independence of approach developed only by a combination of critical self-reflection and an exchange of ideas with others in the field.

Collecting feedback

As workshop facilitators, we have used four different means of collecting feedback from participants: hard copy, online questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Conventional means of collecting feedback in hard copy at the end of each workshop was discontinued by the programme administrators in favour of online evaluations. However, these were less timely, completed by fewer participants, and did not always get passed to the tutor concerned. In response, the workshop facilitators introduced a self-reflection sheet on which participants recorded their response task-by-task. It was these self-reflection sheets that produced the contrasting comments.

We also conducted a small number of semi-structured interviews with former participants to get a better idea of their experience. After identifying students who were available for interview, our criteria for selection were whether the student had attended a writing workshop and had followed up with regular writing tutorials over a period of time (six months to two years). We felt such participants would have a better understanding of the rationale behind the approach we offered and therefore be in a better position to evaluate it. Three interviews were conducted, using questions suggested by the questionnaire responses (see Figure 4).

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The findings suggested that interviewees had a heightened awareness of their writing weaknesses and what they needed to do to improve, and were not necessarily expecting EAP tutors to solve their writing problems for them.

What writing workshops have you attended? Why that one / those?
What did you expect from the writing workshop(s)
Do you think they've made any difference (to your writing)? How?
What did you think of the format of the workshop?
How would you run a writing workshop?
Is there anything else you do / have done to develop your writing? What?
What kind of writing do you think you'll do in the future?

Figure 4 Semi-structured interview questions

Following the procedure adopted by Flint, Oxley, Helm and Bradley (2009) and Oxley and Flint (2008), comments extracted from the interviews then provided some of the prompts for a “dialogue sheet” that became the stimulus for a focus group meeting. Other prompts came from the student evaluations. A dialogue sheet is a tool developed at the Royal Institute of Technology (RIT), Stockholm, to encourage student reflection (Blomqvist, Handberg & Naeve, 2003). At RIT, dialogue sheets were used to socialise freshers with their peers and get them talking positively about learning. A dialogue sheet is simply an A0 sheet of paper, on which are printed a number of questions and tasks. (See Appendix Figure 5 for an example.) The questions and tasks are stimuli for the six to eight people who sit around the paper, each in front of a particular question or task. Each person is responsible for reading theirs out, and then commenting on it, to initiate a round of discussion. The same person is also responsible for noting the outcomes for that stage on their part of the sheet. The procedure means that everyone takes the lead at some point and everyone has the chance to contribute to each point; it reduces the possibility of the event being dominated by one or two people. The aim is to stimulate the sort of discussion that encourages participants to reflect on the prompts.

The focus group at Surrey lasted for 90 minutes. Seven participants were invited to attend on the basis of their workshop attendance and availability and rewarded with book tokens. They represented a range of nationalities and first languages: Polish, Indonesian, British English (two), American English, American English/Japanese, and Brazilian Portuguese¹. The quotations were

¹One participant was also an interviewee but had not participated in a face-to-face interview.

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transferred to three A0 sheets, each sheet containing quotations judged to represent a particular knowledge stage. Representative quotations were:

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

With hindsight, it was probably unnecessary to produce separate sheets because, firstly, participants made similar points regardless of the quotation and sheet they were working on and secondly, there was insufficient time for the focus group to work its way through all three sheets.

The method for conducting the focus group meeting was based on World Café: Café to Go! procedure (www.theworldcafe.com), with one variation: to allow for differences in self-confidence, a particular consideration in groups of speakers of various first languages, participants were given two minutes to reflect on the comment in front of them – e.g., ‘It’s good to be in a workshop group from the same faculty or department to make discussion easier’ - before introducing it and giving their response. In the event, other people around the table then gave their response to the original comment and to others’ reactions to it - in what became a discussion - before the second quotation was read out, and so on. It was not the case that each person around the table gave their reaction in turn before a general discussion occurred. Participants were also encouraged to write their comments on the dialogue sheet. The focus group discussion was audio-recorded on two MP3 players placed on the table. The size of the group suggested that it might be difficult to hear all participants on the recording if only one machine was used. The recordings were afterwards listened to by both authors and transcribed.

Time only allowed for discussion of the *episteme* and *techne* sheets, but, as noted above, participants’ contributions tended to follow set themes, e.g., the Indonesian student considered compulsory subject-specific writing workshops were needed at the start of a PhD programme; the Polish student thought writing was best learned through practice; and the North American student thought anything was worth trying once. Their comments were summarised from the transcription and classified into Aristotle’s knowledge types as follows:

- *Subject specific workshops are needed at the start of a PhD (techne)*
- *At home, it’s assumed I’ve already learned what I need (episteme)*
- *Could we set up a student writing group? (phronesis)*

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A contribution from the Polish student, viz.

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.

revealed the inherent contradictions within the group's thinking, which could be summarised as:

- **Timing:** compulsory workshops for new students
- versus
- **Content:** subject-specific.

As the Polish student pointed out, subject specific content is difficult for newly-arrived research students to relate to as they have not yet acquired sufficient background knowledge. Faced with such diverse opinions and the dilemmas they produced, the participants agreed to disagree: 'OK, if you say so' was a blunt rejoinder at one stage.

The data collection reported in this study was an iterative process that can be summarised as:

1. Students' evaluations of workshops via individual hard copy collected at the end of workshops, online evaluations and self-reflection sheets recording a student's response task-by-task.
2. Students' expectations via groups and, later, individually classified as
 - style
 - format
 - critical feedback on writing
3. Semi-structured interviews using questions based on expectations and comments in evaluations (see Figure 4).
4. Focus-group prompts from student comments in interviews and evaluations organised and analysed in categories similar to those in Table 1.

Outcomes

What we learned from the focus group was that we too have to accept contradictions in the needs of writing workshop participants. There will never be a silver bullet (a favourite metaphor used in the focus group meeting) to devise the perfect task or the perfect workshop. Workshop participants will inevitably be at various points in the Aristotelian stages of

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knowledge, irrespective of their language, culture, subject and career stage. What facilitators can do is offer within each workshop a varied set of activities as luminous stepping stones, enabling participants who are ready to proceed from one stage of knowledge to another. Facilitators can also seek to offer a varied set of evaluation modes, so that participants, rather than being constrained by *techne*-like forms that are convenient to administer, are encouraged to express themselves in *phronetic* dialogue. This allows their voices to be heard. As a result of the suggestion by one of the students in the focus group, we set up a structured monthly writing group, run by the research students but with a tutor present. The aim of these group meetings is to peer review each other's writing. One of the participants expressed her surprise that having first come to a workshop with a sample of her writing for study, analysis and development twelve months ago, she was now being invited to read this paper and do the same for us. We began the programme of workshops seeing ourselves more as information givers; now, we see ourselves as collaborators involved in a cyclical process with the students.

Conclusion

We set out to establish a process approach to developing research students' writing and we as facilitators have also gone through a process of learning and development. The collection of formative evaluations highlighted the differences in participant expectations and prompted us to create different workshop tasks, to manage the sessions differently, and to change our methods of collecting feedback.

It seems that the workshop expectations of the PhD students need to be managed in three ways: (1) providing information about each task before and after, so satisfying students' needs for *episteme*; (2) providing a mix of tasks focusing on writing form, function and discourse in every workshop, so satisfying students' general and specific needs for *techne*; (3) providing group feedback and eliciting student discussion of each other's work wherever possible, so satisfying students' needs for *phronesis*. Meanwhile, the structured monthly writing group run by the research students focuses more on peer editing and review, so providing an additional forum for *phronetic* learning for a minority.

We propose to arrange further student interviews and focus groups to access views not expressed in other forms of evaluation. Personal interviews and focus groups have provided the qualitative feedback that has led to critical analysis of what we as EAP tutors do and what we seek to continue to do: to try and engage with writers on several levels – as students, subject experts, participants and informants.

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Appendix

You don't teach information in a writing workshop.

1 The course had many practical tips and suggestions.

2 I would prefer more specific instructions/ conditions from journals in my subject area because their structure differs able.

3 It could be helpful to read good models/ maybe to have different models from different subject areas so we can have good examples.

4 Options for faculty/ hold specific advice would be helpful as a next step.

5 I want to know about writing. Not actually do it in the workshop.

6 Need more expert comments, more explanations and examples.

7 I found that the workshop stayed a little too generic for what I was expecting - likely because of the diverse mix of students.

8 What I expect from the workshop is based on other SPLASH courses and matches a generic approach. The writing workshops do not currently address what I want.

9 PhD students have very specific needs and are focused on what they need to do in their subject. The benefit of writing tutorials is that they enable reflective learning through writing up.

10 I really enjoyed the relaxation exercise.

11 Was the session both demanding and interesting?

12 Absolutely useful for my writing especially in the field, report read, research proposals, conferences.

13 It would be helpful to read good models/ maybe to have different models from different subject areas so we can have good examples.

Figure 5 The *techné* dialogue sheet

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