

Cracking the code : an approach to developing professional writing skills

NELSON, Pete and WEATHERALD, Cal

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/10416/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

NELSON, Pete and WEATHERALD, Cal (2014). Cracking the code : an approach to developing professional writing skills. *Social Work Education*, 33 (1), 105-120.

Repository use policy

Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in SHURA to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

Cracking the Code - An approach to developing professional writing skills

Peter Nelson and Cal Weatherald

Introduction

This paper poses a number of questions about social work education in England and the needs of students facing the rigorous requirements of professional report writing. The focus is specifically upon students who share a common educational experience in the UK system, who have achieved the necessary entry requirements to enable them to enter University, but who have reported difficulty in meeting the professional demands of the Social Work degree for a high degree of clarity and comprehensibility in their written work. The difficulties they and their educators report are not ones of analysis but of writing skills. The students lack skills and confidence in dealing with grammar, vocabulary and spelling which inhibits their achievement.

While ethnically diverse, these students are predominantly first language speakers. The language backgrounds of UK students vary enormously. Many are monolingual, but there are also home students (those ordinarily resident in the UK) who are bi or multi-lingual, often fluent in spoken English, but sharing a similar educational experience to monolingual students who may be struggling with written English.. The challenge faced by UK educated students is very different from that of international students. While UK students may have no basic foundation knowledge of English language structure, many international students have learned English through formal methods and may be able to discuss the language while finding it a challenge to develop necessary levels of written fluency in a range of registers.

The paper describes and evaluates a project which emerged from a number of first language speaking social work students initiating discussion about the difficulties they faced in writing to the standard required by professional social work training. The difficulties had, in the majority of cases, been recognised when the students were on practice placement where their practice educator had identified excellent levels of analysis and comprehension in verbal presentations and in supervision, but which had not been replicated in their written work. The project developed into a partnership between academic staff from a social work degree course and staff from the Education Guidance Service, with the aim of improving the writing skills of social work undergraduate students. The partnership is discussed in the context of current pedagogical debate relating to student support and the development of writing skills. Finally, the paper sets out a range of challenges arising from experience of this project and consideration of theory.

The Professional Context

This paper focuses on an area of social work practice (and, by implication, social work education), which has been increasingly criticised as inadequate, namely the demonstration by social workers of adequate literacy skills. This theme was identified by the media in the aftermath of the death of Victoria Climbié (Rai, 2004:149). (There was a criticism of analysis too but the focus of this paper is on literacy.) The changing focus of statutory social work, has led to an increased emphasis on writing reports and those reports being scrutinised by outside bodies. As Healy and Mulholland (2007) indicate however, social work practice and training has tended to undervalue the development of writing as compared to verbal communication skills.

There is evidence that concern about university students' ability to write, whether academic essays or professional reports, is not confined to social work students or to the UK. Fallahi, Wood and Austad (2006:171) in reviewing evidence from the USA state that "Faculty bemoan the near epidemic of poor writing skills among students" and highlight psychology students as reporting that they lack the necessary skills for writing within their discipline. Alter and Adkins (2001, 2006) identify research evidence that indicates a growth over three decades in the number of students at all levels throughout the USA who are perceived as not proficient in writing. Focusing on research into one graduate social work programme they indicate that one quarter did not have adequate writing skills at the beginning of the programme (Alter and Adkins 2006:337).

Social Work education in England can be seen as addressing this issue of literacy, by making social work qualification degree level, and entry to the degree dependent on candidates demonstrating that they "can understand and make use of written material and are able to communicate clearly and accurately in spoken and written English" (DoH, 2002). Yet Sharpe et al (2011) in their study of 2008 and 2009 social work graduates' experience of employment indicate that although the degree has brought an increase in standards there has also been an increase in employer expectation. 'High standards of literacy in report-writing' were important to many managers and there was disappointment that the change from diploma to degree had not brought improvements in this area and indeed in Children's services they were thought to have deteriorated (Sharpe et al 2011: 100). Managers thought that newly qualified social workers should be able to write succinct reports using correct grammar and

spelling and where these skills were seen to be lacking, as in the preparation of court reports which can influence whether a child is removed from parental care, it was the responsibility of the university to support students to learn to write more effectively and to 'assess student's literacy and offer support where necessary' (Sharpe et al 2011: 100)

Future admissions procedures for social work applicants will be made more stringent by the introduction of a written test for all candidates, irrespective of previous academic qualifications, to measure their ability to write clearly and coherently (DCSF 2009). Reflecting on admissions procedures Dillon (2011:5) following Levidow, (2002) warns against credentialism where that refers to the stipulated academic credentials being beyond those required and not matching the demands of particular professional roles. She argues that social work educators need to counter issues of credentialism if they are to prevent widening participation in the social work profession from being compromised (Dillon 2011:17). The selection of social work students has long reflected the importance of previous work and life experience as a basis for the successful completion of social work training. There is a tension here in that those students with wide experience may not have had the opportunity to learn or work in an educational or employment context which has enabled them to develop and hone their written English skills.

Social Work as a profession has a core value base which includes a commitment to human rights and social justice (IFSW and IASSW, 2004). There would be a lack of congruence between values and practice if the students selected for training excluded those who because of race, gender, class or disability had not experienced a

traditional educational foundation yet demonstrated clear potential for professional training.

The Higher Education Policy Context

There has been a huge increase in student numbers in higher education in the UK over the last 25 years which has thrown into relief debate on the purposes and functions of higher education. One element of that debate is the diversity agenda, with the previous UK Government seeking to increase the participation of working-class students in higher education, whereas an increase in university student fees by the current government arguably challenges that agenda.

Inequality based on socio-economic status remains a defining factor of higher education in the UK. In a comprehensive synthesis of research evidence Stevenson and Lang (2010:31) indicate that there remain wide differences in participation rates based on where young people live, with one in five entering from disadvantaged areas compared with one in two from advantaged areas. Recent changes do however indicate that admissions from disadvantaged areas have increased at a faster rate (30%) over the past five years than those from advantaged areas (5%).

'Widening participation' was initially conceived in terms of the activities leading up to enrolment on a course of higher education study, but it has been recognised that it must also be reflected in the subsequent outcomes of students' higher education study in terms of degree qualification and employability. There is evidence that those from a lower social class, particularly young entrants, are more likely to drop out from university or receive a lower classification of degree than those from a higher class

(Stevenson and Lang 2010:35-39). To reflect the need to move from pre enrolment to a broader continuum of activities a more holistic conceptualisation of the widening participation task is required. The notion of the 'student life-cycle' describes 'the complete cycle of the student experience, and covers aspiration raising, pre-entry activities, admission, first semester/term, moving through the course, and employment' (Layner et al, 2002).

Learning, Teaching and Student Support

The 2004 Higher Education Act highlighted the importance of quality learning and teaching and the need to respond to the diversity of students beginning to enter higher education. New approaches to teaching, learning and student support began to be necessary (Crosling and Webb 2002, Biggs, J 2002).

Concepts of what constitutes academic study support are themselves diverse. One component is the development of academic 'study skills', but how these are defined and the process for their development is the subject of debate. Biggs (2002) focuses on the purpose of study skills development, which he proposes is the development of self-management skills. Biggs (2002: 93-5), argues that students need a range of skills, including generic study skills, skills that relate to learning particular content, and 'high-level meta-cognitive skills' building on the skill of self-evaluation, which is 'of prime importance in everyday professional life'. The challenge which this presents to the institution is to re-frame traditional approaches to learning and teaching and develop approaches which support students to develop these skills. The writing skills group discussed in this paper is one such approach.

Other studies (Lillis 2001, Crosling and Webb 2002) focus on the increasing diversity of the student body and the needs of non-traditional students. The challenge they identify is to address the cultural change necessary for the development of a broader and more interventionist approach to the development of study skills, which takes account of the previous learning experiences of students, and a recognition that required entry qualifications cannot always prepare students for the diversity of demand across all academic and professional courses.

The 'academic literacies' model of learning (e.g. Lea and Street 1998) proposes that the culture and practices of the organisation must take some responsibility for placing barriers in the way of the successful development of writing skills in higher education, in particular the use of specialist and opaque academic language. Theresa Lillis (2001) through four years of case study research has explored the experiences of non-traditional students in a new university and argues that the findings highlight a lack of transparency and clarity between academics and students on what constitutes good practice in written English. She challenges traditional approaches ('official discourse') which problematise student writing in relation to the production of what she terms 'essayist literacy', the dominant form in higher education writing. This view, she argues, commonly generates a non-contextualised skills-based approach based on the assumption that writing conventions are generally transparent and simply have to be described rather than explained. She terms this 'the institutional practice of mystery, whereby the institution fails to teach the conventions of the literacy practice it demands' (2001:76). The 'problem' is not only textual, but one of conceptualisation and relationships.

Lillis advocates further exploration of what she terms the 'socialisation' approach which builds on the recognition that there are specific written genres relating to different academic subjects within higher education. As she describes it, this requires a process of acculturation, which is most effectively undertaken through a dialogue between tutor and student. This requires a shared 'meta-language' with which to describe language structure and vocabulary.

Other writers affirm the message that support needs to be closely integrated with the subject of study. Crosling and Webb state categorically that:

"Support programmes need to embed these activities within broader academic preparation and global tasks. This is based on research that shows that decontextualised programmes are not effective in developing skills and understanding for academy study."

(Crosling and Webb 2002:5)

Lucy Rai (2004) focuses on approaches to the teaching of writing skills for social work students. She argues language, history and identity are significant factors in developing writing within this context and advocates a 'social practice' approach to student writing in social work education, which "involves reflection on the influence of both the disciplinary and social context of any writing act and also the recognition of writer choice." (Rai, 2004:151).

For students who have not been introduced to explicit patterns and protocols of written English language structure, these choices may be severely limited. The move

away from the teaching of English language structure impacted on all pupils going through English state schools over a period of 30 years from the early 1970s. Non-traditional students for whom aspirations may have been limited (as described by the students in this study), or where opportunities to develop confident written English through experience, for example, in higher level employment, may have been restricted, are most likely to find new and complex demands on a narrow range of skills most challenging. Although not the specific focus of this article, it is recognised that these difficulties are further exacerbated for some (not all) UK bi-lingual students from working-class backgrounds.

Lillis and Rai focus on academic writing which takes place in the controlled environment of the university, and their arguments were reconsidered in this project in the light of practice learning. The writing of professional reports whilst on placement and the production of placement portfolios is particularly important for social work students as this is an apprenticeship for writing future professional reports.

The student on placement in a social work agency does not have access to the same level of support and feedback available in relation to academic assignments. Whilst on placement, the demands of producing written material in differing and unfamiliar guises and within strict time pressures can test the most able student. Strategies that worked well in producing academic pieces of work can be found wanting. For this reason, the experience of placement is often the point at which issues of written English, particularly aspects of structure and punctuation, are brought to the attention of students.

The problems of assessment and support that are present in university are replicated in practice learning, in that the work-based practice teacher may feel that it is not their responsibility to teach or correct grammar and spelling but to assess student competency in practice. The dilemma the practice assessor faces is that of passing a student whose direct work with clients may be excellent, but who is unable to record or write about the work to a professional standard. There is a difference between a student whose inability to record reflects a lack of theoretical understanding, and one who demonstrates good understanding through discussion in supervision but lacks the literacy skills to adequately demonstrate that understanding in writing. The consequences for both students, however, are that they are likely to fail the placement. The feedback that students often receive is that they should “seek support with written skills before their next placement”.

The question then arises of what form that support should take in order to embed support for writing skills within the student experience of learning. As Rai (2004) indicates, an academic approach which replicates a non-traditional student’s poor experience of early learning, or one which takes a remedial approach to study skills in isolation from the course itself, is likely to be ineffective.

University support structures

One source of support may be located outside of the faculty. There is a growing awareness of the close connection between student learning and student support. (Ramsden 2004) For students with dyslexia, specialist staff support has been made available following sector pressure leading to national legislation (Disability

Discrimination Act 1995, as amended, Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001). However, study support available to other learners is organised and funded in widely different ways across HE institutions. Centrally-located academic services are taking a strategic rather than reactive approach to supporting students and placing their activities firmly within the learning and teaching context.

"A major benefit of this co-ordination, we believe, is the development of *curricula and pedagogy that promote a culture of achievement...A culture of achievement recognises and values student attainment and progression and counters the perception that non-traditional students are deficient and therefore require remedial help to catch up or, at worst, just to survive.*

(Universities UK, 2002, Recommendation 16)

Case Study

A social work student approached the Education Guidance Service in response to feedback that she needed to improve her written English skills. An assessment had indicated that she was not dyslexic and therefore not eligible for support from this source. The student wanted to know "*What am I entitled to?*" The response negotiated is an example of partnership working between academic and education guidance staff.

Student identification of need

The student concerned was a female second year, African Caribbean student in her mid thirties, who was referred to the Education Guidance Service by the Disabled Student Support Team. She had been referred by her tutor for assistance with writing

and reading skills, and the Assessment Report confirmed that, although not dyslexic, she would need help in this area. Subsequently, a second student from the same year of the course came to the Education Guidance Service with the same issue. In this case, the student had undertaken her first period of practice learning but had found writing the placement report difficult and had been unable to locate support specifically geared to her needs.

Both these students had substantial experience in the voluntary sector and were confident in relation to the practical context of their placement. The education guidance interview produced a picture of their broader social and educational experiences of learning. One described a secondary education which offered her little help in developing writing skills, due, in her opinion, to low expectations of the kind of career for which she would eventually be suitable. The secondary schooling of both these students also took place at a time when the focus of the English curriculum in schools included very little explicit teaching of language structure.

The social work tutor who had initially encouraged these two students to seek further support confirmed that these experiences were not isolated. The tutor identified a number of students who had struggled on placement to produce file records and reports to a professional standard as they included grammatical errors which inhibited meaning and did not demonstrate complexity. These students were competent in verbal reporting but their professional writing and their assessed work on placement did not replicate that competence. A small grant was secured from the University's

Widening Participation Premium Fund* for a pilot programme to be undertaken by a member of the Student Services Centre Learner Support Team, with a group of students from this second year cohort, many of whom were mature students from working-class backgrounds.

Developing the Writing Skills Programme

The aim was to design and deliver a short intensive programme to introduce participants to some of the key patterns of written English structure, punctuation and vocabulary. The programme tied in as closely as possible to the Social Work degree course itself by accommodating the course in Social Work teaching rooms and making maximum use of Social Work materials and examples of practice, particularly relating to placements. The programme would be negotiated with students following an individual guidance interview, and based on what they identified as their immediate needs on the Social Work course. The programme would be evaluated as a possible model for future social work students. The initial group was small in order to enable the tutors and students to respond actively to the individual needs of these students over what was a very short and intensive period of time.

Students participating

Five students took part in the programme. All were female mature students from working-class backgrounds. Two of the students were Black British, one was Asian British, and two were white. They were self selecting in that all had proactively sought help by approaching their tutor or Education Guidance services. All but one

* This is a fund awarded to UK universities by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to support work in the recruitment and support of students from non-traditional backgrounds.

had recently undertaken an education guidance interview, talked through their approaches to learning, reflected on some of their previous experiences of learning, and discussed the nature of support which they were seeking.

Negotiating the programme

The structure of the programme was agreed at the first meeting, based on the education guidance interview, suggestions by Social Work course tutors and discussion of professional writing requirements. The content of each week's programme was negotiated subsequently with the students through discussion of their ongoing experience of written work and detailed analysis of (marked) social work assignments. Students specifically requested work on punctuation, vocabulary development and style, particularly, although not solely, in the context of report writing on placements.

An initial five week programme was agreed. The sessions were based primarily on the exploration of language structures and patterns, and analysis of examples from the students' writing. Students worked on practice worksheets using newly learned patterns and generating their own sentences. All examples were taken from broad social work contexts, reflecting the content of discussions in which they had all participated. Homework was set and discussed.

How the programme evolved.

How we write

This discussion enabled students to explore understandings and apprehensions about written language and challenged the ‘deficit’ model as an example of individual failure. Students discussed the various functions and possibilities of written English, (personal, academic and professional), and explored the differing protocols of spoken and written language. It introduced and named the three key aspects of written language: structure (including punctuation), vocabulary and style.

Writing for Social Work

Each session began with an aspect of style posing the questions: “Who reads our writing?” and “Why is meaning important?” It explored the differences between academic writing and professional writing and considered what students needed to understand in order to be able to proof read their own work. First principles of sentence structure and basic punctuation were introduced, alongside an introduction to the roots of some key social work terms.

This pattern of discussion, comprising of an introduction to an aspect of language structure, punctuation and vocabulary, was repeated each week and included practice sheets and homework. Links were given to useful text and electronic resources, although it emerged that the students were uncertain how to make best use of these resources and re-acted negatively to abstract or non-contextualised advice.

Progress and immediate outcomes

Students appreciated the focus on their own written work, which, with each student’s agreement, was used as a source of group discussion and analysis. Individual pieces of work were reviewed on the basis of aspects of language which had been discussed

drawing attention to the match between meaning and expression, highlighting common mistakes, and suggesting details to be checked in proof-reading. Full attendance was maintained from the students despite competing pressures.

Key knowledge about language covered on the programme

Language structure:

Sentence structure: why a sentence is important for the reader. What happens without sentences? Ways of separating and joining sentences. The function of verbs. What happens without a verb? How we change and manipulate verbs and what they can tell us about time and certainty. Generating richer sentences: the function of clauses and phrases and how they are indicated. Examples were provided from professional writing.

Punctuation:

When and why does it matter? Function in a sentence. Commas and full stops in relation to sentences, clauses and phrases. Confusion between plurals and apostrophes. Relating what someone has said - quotations and reported speech.

Vocabulary:

How academic and professional areas develop their own vocabulary.

Identifying and recording key professional terms and vocabulary.

How spelling has meaning. Why numbers matter: singulars, plurals and collective nouns-how they help us with what we want to say.

Evaluation

Positive verbal feedback was received by the programme tutor and Social Work course tutor. An anonymous evaluation questionnaire was sent out to all students with separate signed consent for the anonymised wider dissemination of findings. The questionnaire findings are summarised below.

Overall satisfaction with the Developing Writing Skills programme

All respondents recorded that the sessions had been 'very useful', and this judgement related in all cases to the detailed work on language structure. One student commented:

"I found them all useful (the sessions), as going back to basics seemed to show where and why I was failing academically".

Another commented on the level of anxiety which embarking on a piece of written work had hitherto evoked.

"I found this stressful and it would have been a great relief to know this was available".

Satisfaction with the approach

Comments related to previous knowledge and experience of the structure of written English. One slightly older student had some memory of having been introduced to language structure, but her life and education since then had provided no opportunity for her to hone and practise this:

"You forget how to use these if you are not using them on a regular basis".

For another, this was entirely new:

"I have never come across verbs, nouns, phrases and prefixes".

The connection between an understanding of language structure and the ability to exert greater control over her use of written English was made very explicit by one student:

"The verbs helped me recognise mistakes within my sentences".

Respondents all wished to continue with the programme, and expressed interest in further development of both this work and broader academic skills. Interestingly, whereas academic staff are likely to have clear ideas about what constitutes 'higher level' study skills; the students did not differentiate between the detailed work of language analysis and broader issues of academic style and protocols.

Timing

All expressed the view that this should be an intrinsic part of their academic development, introduced at the earliest possible stage, whether during preparation for the course, induction, or in the first year of the course itself.

Longer-term outcome

In evaluating longer term outcomes it is important to be aware that the overall student cohort tends to demonstrate an improvement in grade between years two and three. All the students attending the group experienced an increase in their academic mark profile. More importantly all successfully passed their second placement including tests of their ability to record and write professional reports. All passed their social work degree with two students attaining an upper second class degree from an original grade profile of a projected third class degree. (The English degree classification includes the range first, upper second, lower second, and third, equating to a mark allocation of 70+, 60-69, 50-59, 40-49.)

No conclusions can be drawn from the findings of such a small study, but the experience provided sufficient optimism for the writing skills group to be brought within the mainstream curriculum and run as an elective with approximately 15 students from a yearly cohort of 90. The writing skills group is not a guarantee for success. A grade profile relating to marks awarded to the student's final practice placement from one cohort of 15 students is typical: 2 attained a first, 1 attained a 2.1, 7 attained a 2.2, 2 attained a third, and 3 failed. This gives grounds for cautious optimism given that all the students were referred following a poor performance on placement one, with writing skills identified as an inhibiting factor in their obtaining marks for that placement of a third or below. A full evaluation of the mainstream group was presented atconference (ref).

Discussion

This paper has sought to explore current pedagogical debate relating to student support and the development of writing skills, and relate this debate to meeting the

needs of social work students engaged in practice learning by means of a practice example. In reflecting on the theory and practice a number of key challenges arise in developing an effective approach to improving student writing skills in higher education.

Pedagogy

The first challenge is to develop a reflective and theorised pedagogy which includes the wider context of learning extending beyond the academic into the professional. The case study draws attention to the increasingly rigorous demands of professions, such as social work, for clear and well-constructed written English. This requires conformity in writing which may extend some way beyond what is acceptable within an academic environment sensitive to the diversity of students' previous educational experiences. The work described represents an experiment in moving towards a 'social practice' approach, as described by Rai. The first key decision was to use the course and, in particular, the practice placement, as a source of materials and texts. This was partly for motivational purposes, but also recognised that the context determines the nature of the language needed.

Writing in this context involves careful use of the past and present tense, ability to express degrees of certainty and provisionality, accurate use of negative and adjectival forms and subtle and sensitive use of vocabulary. These are patterns of language usage which, if mastered, can radically improve a student's ability to describe and articulate a complex situation.

The students in the study were highly motivated to 'crack the code', a term used by the students whom Rai interviewed, and by Byrom (2009:220) as a way of explaining how the education system is structured to favour those who are able to “‘crack the code’ of schooling and willingly enter the game”. This term expresses very clearly how the students perceived the challenge. They were keenly aware of the professional importance of being able to produce clear and well-constructed written English and felt that this was knowledge to which they were entitled as part of their preparation for professional practice. The opportunity to reflect on past experience, and on personal attitudes and fears in relation to their use of language, clarified for the ‘interviewed’ students an awareness that this was not about personal inadequacy but about acquiring the tools which would enable them to understand and manipulate language.

A further factor was the use of group work. The focus of this particular programme on the linguistic aspects of writing, tackling sentence structure, vocabulary and punctuation worked well as a group activity. Even more importantly, understanding a skills deficit as part of a shared experience de-pathologises the experience and counters the anxiety with which language work can otherwise be associated.

Consistency of feedback

One reason why support for students in developing written language skills at this level is not widely available in higher education may be the ambivalence of universities in relation to their role in supporting the development of what are seen as ‘basic skills’. One illustration of this ambivalence within the Social Work teaching

team was the diversity of approaches taken to providing detailed feedback. A small evaluation made apparent that there was a range of practice around marking assignments. Some tutors did not correct mistakes on the script “*so as not to dishearten or stigmatise students who were struggling*” whereas others systematically corrected every mistake “*so the student can see where they have gone wrong*”.

Within tutorials, some tutors only addressed writing skills as an issue if the student told them they were struggling or had failed assignments. They would then refer them to centrally- based student support services or to IT based packages. Other tutors took a more pro-active stance, asking to see essays and picking up on grammar, spelling and sentence structure as a matter of course.

The lack of consistency was confusing and unsettling for students, but this review of practice also exposed the lack of a shared understanding between tutors and students about the structures of language and their significance. As one student commented: “*if you are not clear about what a noun or a verb is, being told a sentence lacks a noun or verb is not helpful*”. There are blocks to learning apparent here in that the student felt she should know about basic grammar but was embarrassed to admit to a lack of knowledge. Consequently the explanation and tutor feedback was never at the appropriate level to enable learning.

Sharing a meta-language

The effectiveness of detailed feedback, which staff may or may not feel qualified to offer on aspects of written English, is limited if staff and students do not share a ‘meta-language’ with which to discuss and understand this dialogue. Teaching and learning the fundamentals of this meta-language was one of the key objectives of this

project. This is not an easy task to fulfil when marking essays or proof-reading a piece of written work. Written feedback on assignments can only ever be part of a reactive and individualised dialogue. Tackling these issues as a group establishes a more powerful dialogue shared between the students themselves. It is possible that central concepts are learned most effectively not as abstract concepts but through practice, and particularly through practise in using and generating sentence structures relevant to the course of study. This raised questions of how learning materials are to be developed, by whom, and how they are to be presented.

Collaborative working

Lillis (2001) and Rai (2004) highlight the marginalisation experienced by non-traditional students within a culture whose codes and protocols are assumed to be understood. A ‘social practice’ approach to developing written language skills is thus defined as a course-based approach where staff engage directly with students in explaining the linguistic requirements of all aspects of the course. Where levels of staff confidence and approaches to feedback on written English are inconsistent, there is an opportunity to work closely with specialist staff who may welcome the chance to engage in a more contextualised form of support.

The challenge is to build a joint understanding about the specific demands and ethos of the course, the students’ experience of the support available, and effective ways of building a response. There also has to be a shared understanding that an effective approach is about dialogue with individual students and engagement with their experience of language.

Self-evaluation

The student whose question started this project asked “*What am I entitled to?*” and in so doing was asking a question of the University itself. This demonstrates that students who may be struggling with various aspects of academic writing may well be pro-active and resourceful in the skills of ‘self-management’. This is not a simple task for students who may feel that raising issues about their concerns and lack of confidence will expose a fundamental level of inadequacy. The lack of writing skills is viewed by the student as a problem, or a ‘deficit’. However students may raise these issues more easily in the impartial and independent environment of an education guidance interview rather than with teaching staff responsible for their assessment. This environment may be less visible, but no less powerful, as in the education guidance discussions related here.

The debate is whether, recognising the centrality of language to a student’s identity, tutors should refute a perspective which views the lack of writing skills as a deficit with the aim of affirming student’s use of language, or whether it should be acknowledged openly and used as a starting point for development. Social work students are well aware that the professional environment is less negotiable than the academic environment and that they require support in the development of their written language skills to equip them to succeed across the full range of assessment areas. If the aim of self-evaluation is self-development, it is important that higher education institutions demonstrate that the processes of education guidance and course teaching are connected.

Conclusion

The 'social context', so important to the development of writing confidence and competence in higher education, relates not only to the student's identity as a writer in an academic context, but also to their multiple and complex identities as parents, workers and students which define their experience of language. Social work courses, by intention, recruit cohorts of students with highly diverse backgrounds, so inevitably the levels of knowledge and competence relating to the varying academic and professional dimensions of the course vary.

The higher education institution in which students are enrolled, as mediated through the course, can represent little more than the administrative structure of their degree, or may be a source of a rich and varied range of support. Ultimately, the institutional distinctions, which shape and define the work of academic staff in various parts of the University, are not meaningful for students. Conversely, activities generated through cross-university partnerships have the capacity to surmount the barriers of specialism and discipline which characterise universities and generate positive and creative solutions.

The pedagogical approach described in this paper builds on the role of the student in defining and describing their learning needs. It recognises the genuine difficulties faced by students who are unconfident in the use of a wide written vocabulary and complex linguistic structures, and incorporates a social practice approach to teaching writing skills which is firmly embedded in the course and is closely integrated with other sources of expertise across the University. The model demonstrates that creative solutions are possible when staff, students and central support departments work together.

References:

- Alter, C and Adkins, C (2001) "Improving the Writing Skills of Social Work Students" *Journal of Social Work Education* Vol 37 (3) pp 493- 505.
- Alter, C and Adkins, C (2006) "Assessing Student Writing Proficiency in Graduate Schools of Social Work" *Journal of Social Work Education* Vol 42 (2) pp 337- 354.
- Biggs, J (2003) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (2nd ed.) Buckingham: SRHE/OU
- Bunting, C. (2004) 'Worrying Case of can't write, won't write?' *Times Higher Education Supplement*. 23.7.04 pp 18-19.
- Byrom, T (2009) "'I don't want to go to a crummy little university': Social class, higher education choice and the paradox of widening participation'. *Improving Schools* 12 (3) November 2009 209-224
- Crosling, G and Webb, G (ed.) (2002) *Supporting Student Learning: Case Studies, Experience and Practice from Higher Education*. London: Kogan Page.
- DCSF (2009) *The final Report of the Social Work Task Force: November 2009*, London, DCSF.
- DfES (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*. London: HMSO
- Department of Health (2002) *Requirements for Social Work Training*, London: The Stationery Office
- Dillon, J (2011) *Black Minority Ethnic Students Navigating their Way from Access Courses to Social Work Programmes: Key Considerations for Selection of Students* *British Journal of social Work* pp1-20 Advanced Access published April 2011
- Durkin, K and Main, A (2002). 'Discipline-based study skills support for first-year undergraduate students', in *Active Learning in Higher Education* Vol 3 (1) pp 24-39. London: Sage.
- Fallahi, R, Wood, R, Austad, C, and Fallahi, H (2006). 'A Programme for Improving Undergraduate Psychology Student's Basic Writing Skills' in *Teaching of Psychology* Vol 33 (3) pp 171-175
- Garner, M. 'Universities exaggerate dyslexia epidemic for own gain, experts claim' *Times Higher Education Supplement* 10.9.04. p.1.
- Healy, K and Mulholland J (2007) *Writing Skills for Social Workers*. London: Sage
- International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, (2004) *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles*. Berne: IFSW and IASSW

Layer, G, Srivastava A, Thomas, L and Yorke M. (2002) 'Student Success: Building for Change' in Student Success in Higher Education, University of Bradford: Action on Access

Lea, M and Street, B (1998) 'Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach' Studies in Higher Education. Vol 23 (2) pp157-172.

Lea, M and Stierer (2000) Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts. Milton Keynes: SRHE/OU

Levidow, L (2002) 'Marketizing higher education: Neo – liberal strategies and counter strategies', The Commoner, available on line at www.commoner.org.uk

Lillis, T (2001) Student writing: access, regulation, desire. London: Routledge.

Rai, Lucy (2004) Exploring Literacy in Social Work Education. Social Work Education Vol 3 (2) pp 149-162. Oxford: Carfax.

Ramsden, P. in Times Higher Education Supplement 15.10.04 p.1.

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2000) Subject Benchmark Statement: Social Policy Administration and Social Work, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Gloucester

Schwartz, S. (2004) Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for good practice. www.admissions-review.org.uk

Sharpe, E, Moriarty, J, Stevens, M Manthorpe, J and Hussein S (2011) 'Into the Workforce Report from a study of new social work graduates', Sharpe Research Ltd and Social Care Workforce Research Unit, Kings College, London

Stevenson, J and Lang, M (2010) Social Class and higher education: a synthesis of research, www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet

Universities UK (2002) Student Services: effective approaches to retaining students in higher education.