

TAKING ACTION IN BUSINESS

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Introduction

This chapter contributes to the emerging discussion around student writing through its focus on writing for Business for first-year students at the London Metropolitan University Business School. We focus on the student writing experience in one compulsory Management module, which was introduced as part of a broader revision of the first year Business syllabus designed to make transparent to students the discourse of Business studies and of Higher Education more generally. The London Met student body is remarkably diverse in nature and the university has a long history of welcoming non-traditional and more recently Widening Participation students. The Academic Literacies approach pioneered by Lea and Street (1998) and others (e.g. Lillis, 2001 and 2004) has reminded us that writing cannot be detached from the social contexts in which it takes place. Therefore, integral to our approach has been the examination of the student voice in order to gain a wider understanding of the strengths and weaknesses associated with students' academic writing and how any weaknesses might be resolved.

One of the key findings of the chapter is that academic writing cannot be divorced from the reading that is required for academic writing assignments, as we have discovered that it is often at this early stage in the writing process that some students stumble. We argue that, for first-year students especially, in particular for students from Widening Participation or non-traditional backgrounds, encouraging motivation for both reading and writing is key and that attention to these issues can bring positive results. Hence, one of our priorities in this project has been to learn from students about their reading experiences. Lecturers who may be unwilling to assume responsibility for student writing – perhaps seeing this as a skill which students should bring with them to a degree programme rather than something to be taught or developed – may be even less willing to take on responsibility for student reading. However, we suggest that attention to reading, like attention to writing, is something that does not need be taught or emphasised apart from disciplinary content, and that a few modifications to what we ask our students to do can lead to tasks which are more do-able for less prepared students and hopefully at the same time more stimulating for better prepared students. We also argue that Academic Writing (and the reading that this involves) offers a powerful lens through which broader issues of student motivation can be addressed. While there is no quick fix for deeply-engrained concerns, attention to writing does potentially offer a long-term solution for helping lecturers do what they can to contribute to increased student success.

Redesigning the first-year experience

In the academic year 2005/06, almost 1 in 7 of all students in the UK were studying business and management. This represents nearly 300,000 students at all levels of higher education: from foundation degree, through traditional three and four year undergraduate courses, specialist Masters, MBAs and Doctorates. During the last eleven years, the number of undergraduate students studying for a degree in the UK has increased by 28% while the number of those studying business and management has grown by 59% (ABS, 2008 p.19). Given this increase, it is not surprising to find that broader concerns across the academy concerning retention, progression and achievement (RPA) have also occupied the attention of UK Business Schools as students enter higher education with increasingly diverse biographies, expectations and constraints (Holley & Oliver, 2009).

Against such a background, many Business Schools have recently embarked on re-designing large parts of the curriculum (cf. Parrott, 2010). New approaches that have emerged often challenge traditional tutor-led lecture/seminar delivery and highlight the development of “key skills” in accordance with a government-driven “skills” and employability agenda (Leitch, 2006). The increase in introductory “academic skills” modules is testimony to such an approach. At London Metropolitan University, for example, all undergraduate courses are required to incorporate a higher education orientation module (HEO) to prepare students for the demands of HE. This model has been much debated across the University as these HEO modules are often expected to develop all the skills students require at University and as such can legitimate the inclinations of many lecturers to disclaim responsibility for their students’ academic reading and writing. Dissatisfaction with this one-module fix all approach in part led to the decision by the new Business School to embed attention to all aspects of student learning within the discipline and across the curriculum in order to more effectively empower all students to profit from their studies.

The London Met Business School is a large business school with around 4500 students from a diverse range of backgrounds and as such a coordinated approach to curriculum design was needed. In 2007/8 LMBS embarked (with the support of the Learn Higher, RLO and Write Now Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) on a redesign of the Business and Management curriculum to include a specific focus on pedagogies for diversity, retaining critical challenge without ‘dumbing down’ (Haggis 2006), improving formative feedback and offering more personalised modes of delivery. The redesign was informed by a discussion regarding the purpose of the first year (for the importance of the first year experience of students, see e.g. Parmar and Trotter, 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2008). The new common core first year co-ordinates and “joins up” the curriculum and attempts to engage students in their studies, provide ongoing feedback, raise their aspirations and motivation to study and develop their abilities and confidence to prepare them for success in HE and beyond. “Skills” are no longer relegated to a single module. Instead, attention to reading, writing, referencing and other aspects of student learning are embedded within the subject matter across the curriculum (see figure 1) and all lecturers are

expected to focus on these as a fundamental aspect of their disciplinary teaching.

Semester	Semester 1	Semester 1	Semester 1	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 2	Semester 2	Semester 2
Module	Creative & reflective Bus. Practice	Global Challenges for Business, Management and Leadership	Understanding Information	People Management: Challenges and Choices	Introduction to Business Law	Economics for Business	Business Accounting	Principles of Marketing
1. Academic Reading								
Textbooks	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	
Newspapers	IPA	IPA	IP	IP	IP	IPA		
Journal articles		IPA		IPA	IP		IPA	
Internet sites	IPA	IP	IP	IP		IPA		
2. Researching								
Identifying sources	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	
Evaluating sources	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	P	IPA	
Research methodologies	IPA	IP	IP	IPA	IPA	P	IPA	
3. Analysing Data	IPA		IPA			IPA	IPA	PA
4. Presenting Data	IPA		IPA			IPA		PA
5. Academic Writing								
Reports	IP		IPA			A	IPA	
Essay				IPA	IPA(exam)	PA		IPA (exam)
Short tasks	IPA	IP			IPA	PA		
Referencing	IPA	IPA		IPA	IPA	A	PA	
6. Note-making	IPA	IP		IP		P		
7.Oral presentation	IPA	IPA				IPA		IPA
8.Written presentation style, grammar and spelling	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	IPA	PA	IPA	PA
9. Problem solving			IPA	IPA	IPA	PA	IPA	
10. Memorising strategies	IPA				IPA			PA
11. Self assessment / reflection	IPA	IPA	IP	IP	P	P	P	

Figure 1: “ACADEMIC SKILLS” – BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUITE CERTIFICATE LEVEL Introduced (I) Practised (P) Assessed (A)

Analysis of the first cohort has provided a useful basis for further discussion and development. There is some evidence that our strategy has impacted positively on RPA but we will obviously need to carry out further analysis of future cohorts and to monitor the progress of students now on the second year of their studies.

People Management: Challenges and Choices (PMCC)

The module leader for one of the new LMBS year-one modules had earlier worked together with the Write Now CETL Writing Specialist on an intermediate (year two and three) module and this initial collaboration flowed naturally into and has become embedded in the new first-year module, "People Management: Challenges and Choices". In general terms, we saw this new collaboration as informed by action research. In common with most action research, it grows out of real issues faced in teaching and determined by the practitioners; interventions implemented grow out of reflective practice and listening to students rather than focusing on results alone; the aim is improvement – in terms of student learning, the curriculum, the department, the institution, and the wider sector; interventions are evaluated and followed by further reflective practice; and the process is repeated in the light of previous experiences (see Norton 2009 p.54-56 for the features of action research). As Norton says (building on M.K. Smith), "what we have to be aware of is that action research is interpretative and needs to be thought of in terms of further refinements in following studies. I think this is an important point, as it is by carrying out further cycles of research that we begin to form a holistic view of our practice and the elements that need progressive refinement" (2009 p.55). Certainly, we do not view our project as complete but we hope that others will be interested in what we have learned so far and our plans for the future.

The main aim of PMCC is to support a cross-curricular introduction to people management in contemporary organisations and to focus on empowering students to succeed in academic writing as a key aspect of their learning. The module runs at both the university campuses in the autumn and spring semesters. It is a very large module with several hundred students from diverse backgrounds and is ring fenced for all Business and Management students within the Business School. PMCC adopts the traditional one-hour lecture followed by a two-hour seminar format supported by independent study.

The module was designed to include two assessment strategies, a summary of which is shown below. The assessments were designed to assess students' knowledge and understanding of people management as well as assessing their research, reading, analytical, evaluative and written communication skills.

Assessment Type	Description of Component	% Weighting	Due in Week
Coursework	Individual written assignment	40%	8
Coursework	Individual paper and personal reflection	60%	14

Figure 2. Assessment of module.

In thinking about how writing could be approached developmentally in this module, we were somewhat constrained by module specifications designed by others which had already been approved. The specifications required of students two separate writing assignments of 1500 and 2000 words. One of the main outcomes of our initial discussions was that we decided that these two independent assignments might be perhaps unnecessarily onerous for first year students. Rather than require less of them, we wanted to find a way to use the first writing assignment as a way of helping new university students to learn about the requirements of academic writing and to have a chance to explicitly put into practice the elements that they involved. We then wanted the opportunity to give students feedback that would be useful for students' writing development and which they could benefit from in writing the second assignment.

Therefore, rather than setting two separate writing assignments, we decided that the first assignment should be a "briefing paper" in which students are asked to give an overview of the key elements which will make up the final paper. This seemed appropriate for business students as it would have relevance to the types of writing that might be expected from them in a professional business requirement (see MacAndrew and Edwards, 2002 on the benefits of "authentic writing"). For the briefing paper, students were asked to be explicit about the elements where confusion sometimes is apparent. For example:

- the reasons for choosing the question they have selected
- an exposition of exactly what the final essay is asking students to do
- what they already know about their chosen topic
- what their particular focus might be
- their chosen title for the final paper
- what their preliminary argument / thesis will be
- an overview of the proposed structure of the final paper and how this will support their argument
- what arguments they might include
- what evidence they will use
- their sources of information which are referenced appropriately
- their preliminary introduction for the final essay
- an action plan for writing the final essay

The briefing paper had two pedagogical aims. The first was to allow students to gain an understanding of the reading and writing processes involved in the writing of an academic paper. The second was to provide students with detailed oral and written formative feedback on their academic writing within

two weeks of submitting their briefing paper. This was expected to improve performance in the second assessment.

For the final coursework essay, students are expected to take into account this feedback. Students are asked to submit a 2,000 word individual paper drawing on their knowledge and understanding of the challenges facing contemporary organisations and the current issues facing HRM managers, choosing a topic from a previous list provided, together with a 500-worded reflective piece evaluating their performance in completing the assessments for PMCC. The reflective piece presented the opportunity for students to comment on the feedback received from their seminar tutors about their briefing paper and to reflect explicitly on their learning with respect to academic writing.

In addition, the lecturer customised a generic LearnHigher CETL/Learning Development essay-writing pack to produce a course-specific “workbook” for use in seminars and out of class which took students through key study and research skills focusing on writing their specific module essay and which was designed to encourage continuous engagement with the assignment and frequent writing activities.

Challenges delivering PMCC in the first semester

Post-semester student evaluations of the first delivery of the module were encouraging as most students stated that they were happy with the module overall. In particular students seem to like:

- The idea of gaining formative feedback for their briefing paper
- The introductory reading text which was edited by one of our London Met colleagues, Wendy Bloisi
- The structure of topics and effectiveness of the lecturers’ styles and how relating people management theories to real life situations helped to further students’ understanding of the subject
- The overall organisation of the module including the teaching and learning materials for the lectures and seminar.

However, this enthusiasm was not matched by students’ results and failure rates for the revised module remained high. This was in large part due to factors beyond our control, including late-starting students who missed early opportunities to engage with assigned readings for the briefing paper and students failing to attend lectures. We also experienced issues relating to the assessments. Although we had indicative assessment criteria there were concerns about the disparities found in the marking of the briefing paper and the individual paper. This was due to the differences in opinions amongst tutors on whether high marks should be awarded for form, structure and academic referencing or for original thinking and strong arguments, even with

the absence of academic structuring and referencing. These are aspects we can learn from in designing future assessments but they highlight the difficulty of such a collaboration between writing specialist and module leader in the case of a course which is delivered by a large teaching team and highlight the need for clarity and for bringing everybody fully on board and in agreement.

Following the relatively disappointing results, it was clear that – as we had expected – we would need to continue working on the module. We decided that, given the relatively high number of students failing to pass the module, it was important to learn from the students themselves what had worked well and what worked less well. Based on the author's own observations and on several discussions with seminar tutors who had taught and marked the students coursework, it was clear that some of the problems that students were experiencing with their writing were partly due to their difficulties with fulfilling the assigned reading which affected their gaining a better grasp of the subject. As noted by Hobson (2004), although reading skills are essential they are often ignored within the context of HE students. Against this background the module leader decided to hold a focus group towards the end of the Spring 2009 delivery of the module exploring student experiences with reading as well as writing as part of the investigation of student experiences in the module.

A focus group interview was chosen since it was a convenient way of exploring the student's voice on reading and writing for PMCC. It is also a useful way of capturing broader data from students who are already familiar with each other. Eleven PMCC students from our City Campus volunteered to participate in a focus group study. Most of these students were international students from Asia, Africa and Europe whilst only two were home students from the UK. The students who attended represented the academic range of students who completed the module. It is perhaps true that we really needed to hear from students who failed to produce assessments or attend lectures at all (cf. Gorard *et al.*'s 2006 critique of much Widening Participation research as too often neglecting students who fail to participate). However, we were convinced that it was important to learn from students and that this would be a good start to the investigation.

There was commonality between the moderators (one of whom was the module leader and the other the Head of Teaching and Learning for the Business School) and these students who were keen to address the issues associated with student writing (Wall, 2001). Although the module leader provided the focus for the questions, the data stem from the students' interactions within groups (Morgan, 1997). Flip chats and post-it notes were used to facilitate the students' expression of ideas and solutions and to record key issues. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The focus group lasted 90 minutes and semi-structured questions were used to explore students' experiences of reading and writing. In the first part, students were asked questions about what they read, the usefulness of their recommended text, when they started reading for their assignments and the difficulties they encountered with their reading. In the second part, questions centred around students' experiences of writing for the module, when they started writing for

the assignments and the difficulties they encountered in writing their assignments. In what follows, we highlight what emerged from the group and its implications for our thinking about writing – and reading for writing – in this module.

Reading for PMCC

With regards to the semi-structured questions on the issues students were facing with their reading it was pleasing to note that students found the main introductory text and recommended website useful and easy to understand. This may be because the reading was closely aligned with the characteristics of their assignment topics. Students seemed to like reading the introductory text and the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) websites as the recommended weekly reading chapters and the various sources available on the CIPD as these were relevant to the course content (Maleki and Heerman, 1992). However, with respect to the reading of other texts and journals students expressed less satisfaction: *'some of the chapters are quite boring and not useful'...* *'...when reading journals I found a lot of the journals useless as I found I had difficulty finding a useful reference or quote to use in my assignment'*. Such attitudes echo the view of academic reading and writing scholars who have found that the recommended reading texts in academia are usually designed for audiences who are highly skilled and specialised and as such these texts may seem irrelevant for novices such as first year higher education students (Bean, 2001; Leamson, 1999; Hobson, 2004; Maleki and Heerman, 1992).

In addition, some students revealed that they faced problems with understanding the individual paper question and with assimilating information from their readings into their essays: *"There was too much information within the books regarding my chosen subject, so to make sure I was using the appropriate information was not always easy'...* *'Did not know which part of the information to extract. How much information to extract'*

Overall, it seems that the difficulties students encountered with their reading and assimilation of information links to various issues relating to their recommended reading list. This suggests that in some cases the required reading text adds little value to the student's learning process and the overall performance of the module (Hobson, 2004). Moreover, the fact that students have problems with understanding the individual paper question is a useful indication of the need to include sessions on understanding the assessments and the question well before students engage with reading the recommended texts. If students understand more clearly why they are being asked to read and what the purpose of the reading is for (being able to relate it to the essay they are writing), they may be more able to read actively and strategically and so feel in command of a reading list rather than intimidated by it.

There were also some issues with the timing of students' reading as most started to read for the briefing paper much later in the module than we intended (most starting around week 6), even though the briefing paper was

due to be submitted in week 8. The same pattern occurred with reading for their individual paper. Moreover, some of the students acknowledged that engaging with the reading much earlier in the module would have helped to enhance their grades for their briefing paper which subsequently would have facilitated their individual paper. When we asked students why they started reading late their responses revealed issues associated with the lack of understanding of PM concepts and vocabulary, difficulties with assimilating information, note taking and time management challenges. In this instance, it is important to note that for these students, difficulties associated with reading were more of an obstacle than lack of motivation to read.

The responses were a salutary reminder that practices which we take for granted in first-year students – for example, identifying readings which are relevant to an assignment and using them appropriately in academic writing – may in fact be skills which need to be acquired and reinforced. If this was the case for the students who completed the module successfully, it is likely to be even more the case for less successful students. This also suggests that attention to academic reading in the first year is likely to benefit all students and can be seen as something empowering rather than remedial, particularly if attention to reading is related closely to actual assignments students are working on. Indeed, such an approach might well resemble approaches in many universities in a pre-modular era where development across a three-year course was often given more attention than in programmes made up of discrete modules which often allow less scope for intellectual and practical scaffolding of the academic rigour of the degree years.

A particular finding seems to be that students cope generally quite well with the essential reading (textbooks etc), but find it harder to assimilate additional readings where the relevance of texts may be harder to gauge. It may be that in the first year, students need support in ascertaining the relevance of such additional reading and that an approach which leads to a few texts being well-understood - and where opportunities are given for students to actively and critically engage with such texts - may be more useful than intimidating reading lists which may lead to lower self confidence and self-efficacy. This is in line with Australian research which emphasises the effectiveness of “preparing before reading”, using class time to ensure students have the background knowledge needed to understand and engage with texts (Rose *et al.*, 2008, p.169; cf. p.178).

Our findings give impetus to future syllabus and pedagogical changes which will make the reading experience of first-year students more rewarding and also more formative for their future development as students where they will be expected to read more extensively. Indeed, reading activities have already been implemented for the current delivery (Autumn 2009) of the course, embedded in workbook and seminar activities. We should note that our findings in some respects support educational psychologists’ work into reading. Nearly all such work relates to younger children, but an important finding is that motivation to read is a crucial factor in reading success (Guthrie *et al.*, 2004 and 2006; for a useful overview of motivation theories in education, see Wang 2008). And some educational psychologists have

spoken of a “Matthew effect” (Stanovich, 1986), a vicious cycle whereby the successful at reading get further ahead and those who fall behind early on continue to fall behind. In such cases, bad learning experiences leads to lower motivation and reduced self-efficacy. It is not our intention here to make excessive claims about university students’ reading, but – especially at universities with large number of Widening Participation and non-traditional students – it is important to bear in mind that many of our students may have had very bad learning experiences concerning reading and may be quickly alienated if they encounter negative reading experiences in their first weeks of university. Care taken to ensure that chosen texts – especially at the beginning of the first year – relate to students’ experiences may lessen the risk of such alienation (cf. Rose *et al.* 2003 p.43; also Guthrie *et al.*, p.2004 on choice of text and motivation for reading).

Experts suggest that motivation for reading is likely to increase where there are social and strategic elements to and active engagement involved in the reading activity (Wigfield *et al.*, 2008; Guthrie *et al.* 2004 and 2006) – perhaps involving group work where reading is carried out to fulfil a group activity (for example, groups of students could use class time to choose a text from a reading list which they will read and report back on). This involves a recognition that many of our students may be extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated (with “performance goals” rather than “mastery goals”; cf. Ames 1992) and so need to see clearly the point of what they are being asked to read and how it will benefit them in writing their assessed papers. Workshop activities early in the semester perhaps need to be designed to allow reading to take place within this social component, and preliminary steps in this direction have been taken in the autumn 2009 seminars. Such activities need to be part of an authentic management exercise and not seen as a “reading workshop” which may alienate students at both the high-achieving and lower-achieving end of the spectrum. Experts also suggest that disadvantaged students (who may lack the orientation to reading very often provided by middle-class parents; Rose 2006, p. 40) may need reinforcement that they are reading correctly in order to provide them with the confidence and self-efficacy to progress further themselves (Bandura 1997 on self-efficacy; Margolis and McCabe 2006 on the role of feedback – and also non-expert, peer modelling of successful performance – in fostering self-efficacy; Rose 2006, p.58 on affirmation as central to Vygotskian learning theories).

The Briefing Paper can be used better in the future to bring this about opportunities for such feedback but we think that any other activities (including class discussions and debates) where understanding of texts is manifested and acknowledged will be useful. In revising the module in the future, these are areas which we would like to continue to emphasise as part of an on-going solution to these difficult problems (increasingly acknowledged by lecturers at most universities throughout the world; cf. Hendricks and Quinn 2000).

Writing for PMCC

With respect to students' writing for the briefing and the individual paper, the focus group indicates that students appear to face challenges with writing less than reading, though once more we are aware that the students who formed the focus group are students who completed the module successfully. There seem to be very positive responses concerning students' experiences with writing. In exploring the students' perception on the importance of writing it was pleasantly surprising that students felt that academic writing was very important for studying Business Management as it develops their researching, their critical writing and referencing skills, aids in their learning experiences, develops their organisation skills and helps them to familiarise themselves with the vocabulary of business. : *'Good writing experience, did not have any major problems writing for this module'...* *'Writing made me see that I can do things that I never thought I will do. Like writing an essay and getting a B.... well done me!'*,, *'I understand new ways of writing a business report. Get familiar with business terms and new key words and how to structure a report'*.

In particular, the briefing paper and the subsequent feedback seem to have been valued. The students who experienced problems with the planning of their briefing papers were able to plan their writing for the final paper because of the feedback they received from seminar tutors. Students also found that the action plan that they were asked to submit as part of their briefing paper was very useful. Verbal and post-it note responses echoed these views. *'I think the action plan is helping me a lot during the process of writing. Feedback on the briefing paper was very useful'...* *'When I started writing for my individual paper I was more confident and I knew exactly what the assignment was asking me to do'...* *'The feedback helped me write the final assignment, pointed me in the right direction and has showed me what I need to elaborate on and what was good about my briefing paper'...* *'The feedback from the briefing paper did help me to write the final assignment because I was told where I was losing marks in terms of writing, structure, punctuation and hence I know how not to make these mistakes'....* *'Yes it helped me to understanding that I will need to be more specific when relating my theories with real life experiences managers had encountered'*.

Overall, the briefing paper was useful in terms of pointing students in the right direction, helping them to present their ideas and with the use of relevant theories. There was a clear indication from the responses that the briefing paper was a success in terms of enabling students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses that subsequently helped them to progress in their individual papers.

However, similar to the responses on reading for PMCC, quite a few students indicated that they started writing for their briefing paper later than we intended i.e. in week seven even though the briefing paper was due to be submitted in week eight. Once more, some students noted issues with assimilating information as their reasons for starting writing for their briefing paper and individual paper at such a late stage.

Solutions for getting students to engage in reading and writing:

Towards the end of the discussions students were split into two groups to engage in a debate on what they would do, as seminar tutors, to help students read for both assignments. Students drew a list of the following points which were then categorised as enablers and disablers.

Enablers:

- Schedule extra reading lessons to allow more time for reading
- Show students what reading is most useful for the coursework in order to get students excited about the subject
- Getting students to focus on the question from the beginning of the module
- It helps if tutors give encouragement and are passionate about the subject as this helps to engage students with their reading and to work harder. Most students revealed that the tutor's style was an important factor in helping students to gain success in reading for the assignments
- Allow students to read a book followed by a set of questions
- Compiling a list of recommended readings for the assignments
- Discuss reading topics with friends or in group discussions
- Action planning – this is already part of the individual paper
- Attendance was seen as an important factor
- Clear explanations on what is expected from students
- Provide appropriate examples regarding the module assignments
- Activities to engage students to research widely on their topic
- Encourage students to submit drafts for tutor's feedback

Disablers:

- Tutors just telling students to read for their assignments was not useful
- Tutors not having a passion for the subject
- Not giving students recognition for reading
- Tutors' lack of explanation and clarity on a topic
- Lack of encouragement

We were pleased with the students' suggestions, as they paralleled our own feelings, particularly concerning the need to make the point of reading clear (as it relates to assignments) and also in providing feedback on reading and also on incorporating more reading activities into workshops. And we note that some students suggested that reading take place in a social rather than isolated environment. It was also striking that students acknowledged the

importance of the passion and enthusiasm of the lecturer and their need to be inspired. This brings us back to motivation, which is clearly key for students' reading and writing. It also supports the recent findings of Freeman et al. (2007) who show that academic motivation among first-year American students relates to students' sense of belonging and stress above all the role of the teacher – and in particular the importance of enthusiasm, openness, friendliness, encouragement of active participation, and good organisation. These are salutary reminders that a focus on writing only takes one so far and that the passion and competence of academic staff remains key for student success. However, this suggests that well-designed writing and reading tasks and exhibiting enthusiasm for the value of academic reading and writing are likely to provide a positive experience for students writing their first university essays.

Conclusion

This study has renewed our determination to continue to work on the module, and in future years we will focus in particular on more reading in workshops, taking into account our conclusions identified above: using authentic readings relevant to the assignment and in workshops involving a social element and providing feedback that encourages self-efficacy in reading. We will also continue with the Briefing Paper which seems to be working, although greater clarity is needed in terms of how this is assessed by a wide team of lecturers. This writing collaboration has been very useful in that it has enabled us to believe that we can attempt to tackle solutions which are often seen as systemic or something which somebody else should be taking care of. It is true that writing – and even reading – are not the only reason – and perhaps not even the major reason - for student failure. Nevertheless, focusing on these areas offers a constructive way to do what we can as lecturers to make our modules as conducive to student success as possible; and the very fact that we are engaged in the question of student writing is likely to mean that we exhibit a greater enthusiasm for the assignments we are asking students to do, which we hope in turn will lead to students who are more motivated to succeed. There may be quite a long way to go, but attention to writing seems to offer a uniquely rich vehicle for keeping us on track.

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