

Teachers' Approaches to Research Writing

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Abstract

The amount of curriculum autonomy afforded to many teachers means that their duties often involve creating and designing their own courses. The uniqueness of these courses can mean it is difficult or impractical to collaborate with colleagues, leading to a lack of awareness of the approaches that other teachers take in their courses. However, even when it may not be possible to work together directly, a great deal can be learned from exploring our peers' knowledge and expertise. All full-time instructors in the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) program at International Christian University teach a Research Writing (RW) course, with shared language learning outcomes yet with differing content based on teachers' individual area of inquiry. In this paper, I report on the findings from informal discussions I had with 15 ELA teachers about their RW courses and reflect on the implications for my own RW course. This includes a particular focus on our approaches to course content, the writing process, and feedback from both teachers and peers.

The role of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioner at university is a multi-faceted one: as well as being teachers and researchers, EAP instructors are also often required to be course designers, creating and managing their own materials and curricula (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). The amount of *curriculum autonomy* (Pearson & Hall, 1993) that teachers are afforded varies greatly depending on the context, ranging from "high-constraint contexts" in which teachers have little room for individual flexibility to "low-constraint contexts" in which they have "considerable autonomy" in deciding the content and direction of their courses (Wette, 2010, p. 569). While the self-direction and curriculum autonomy permitted by a low-constraint context are embraced by many teachers, the blank canvas can be intimidating by others, especially those who are relatively new to a program.

Within the English for Liberal Arts program (ELA) at International Christian University (ICU), the lowest constraints exist on the Research Writing (RW) course. The overarching aims of the ELA program are to equip ICU students with the necessary academic English language skills (e.g., writing academic essays and reading academic papers), critical thinking skills, and other study skills to succeed during their time at university (English for Liberal Arts, 2021). The RW course is the culmination of the ELA program and aims to enable students to hone and apply their academic English skills, "choos[ing] a topic based on their interest, conduct[ing] thorough research, and writ[ing] a research paper [of between 1500 and 2000 words] in English"

(Iwata, 2019, p. 80). To this end, all teachers on the RW course adhere to a standardised set of language learning outcomes, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Language Learning Outcomes for the Research Writing Course

1. Select and narrow a topic for a research paper.
2. Develop a thesis and research question(s) for a research paper.
3. Demonstrate library and online research skills.
4. Develop a formal outline for a research paper.
5. Evaluate, synthesize, and incorporate 7 to 10 secondary source materials into a research paper.
6. Use primary source materials to support points in a research paper. (<i>optional</i>)
7. Develop and revise elements for a research paper (an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion).
8. Demonstrate knowledge of one or more source referencing systems.
9. Understand the benefits of collaboration as part of writing processes.
10. Demonstrate the ability to use digital technology to draft, review, revise, edit, and share research writing tasks.

Note. Adapted from *ELA Staff Handbook* by English for Liberal Arts, 2021. Adapted with permission.

Despite these shared language outcomes, each teacher offers a different “area of inquiry” meaning that the course content varies significantly from teacher to teacher. These areas of inquiry cover a wide range of faculties, including natural sciences, social sciences, psychology, education, literature, and linguistics. Within their area of inquiry, teachers have relative freedom to approach the content as they see fit, e.g., selecting course texts to read and deciding upon methods for assessing students’ understanding.

As one of the two current coordinators of the RW course, one of my duties is to “further the exchange of new ideas and techniques among RW teachers” (English for Liberal Arts, 2021, p. 10). I therefore decided to carry out a qualitative study to explore the different ways that RW teachers approach their courses. It is important to emphasise here that this study is not intended to judge or evaluate the quality or effectiveness of any aspect of the RW course. Instead, by examining other teachers’ approaches I hope that I (and my ELA peers) will be able to critically evaluate our own courses from a more informed position. I therefore began this study with the following (intentionally broad and holistic) research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do my ELA colleagues approach their RW courses?

RQ2: What implications do the findings in RQ1 have for my own RW course?

Methodology

According to Richards (2003), the role of the interviewer is to extract from the interviewee “the richest and fullest account possible” (p. 50). Considering the participants were my peers, I felt that the best way to achieve this was for the interviews to mirror authentic

collegial dialogue. I therefore decided to use an unstructured, conversational interview approach to collect data, which “puts emphasis on informality, reciprocity, interviewer disclosure, and more equal roles in terms of turn taking” (Mann, 2016, p. 99). By playing a more active role in the interview myself and volunteering my own approaches to my RW course, I hoped to create a sense of shared experience and “conversational intimacy” (Ramos, 1989), enabling both researcher and participants to eschew the usual dynamic and, instead, to participate in a more authentic conversation between peers. By doing so, I intended for the interview to be an “enriching experience” for participants, and that they would also “obtain new insights into their life world and the research theme” (Kvale, 1996, p. 32-33).

Interviews were carried out with 15 of the 28 RW instructors (53%) taking place between April and July of 2022. Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, though I occasionally returned to participants to clarify or expand upon aspects of our initial conversation. The interviews were documented through audio recordings and extensive interviewer notes during the interview. This data was then organised into a summary of the conversation, which was shared with the participants to ensure an accurate representation of our discussion (Page et al., 2010). In many summaries, I included a list of “questions I wish I’d asked” based on my reflections while listening back to the recording. Several teachers took the time to respond to these questions, further enriching the dataset.

In analysing the data, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines, familiarising myself with the data to notice emerging themes; “playing” with the data, “searching for patterns, insights or concepts that seem promising [and] ... juxtaposing the data from different interviewees” (Yin, 2014, p. 135), all with a view of getting to know the data intimately. To ensure anonymity of participants, all potentially identifying information has been removed and the gender-neutral singular pronoun “they” is used throughout the paper to describe all individuals.

As the main measurement device in any qualitative study, the researcher controls the investigation and constructs the narrative, meaning they are required to “make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand” (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). This was particularly challenging in this paper, given the word limit and the large amount of data collected. As such, I have had to be very selective in what is included, and I ultimately chose to report broad features which I hope will be most useful to relatively inexperienced RW teachers.

Findings and Discussion

In qualitative research, it is often difficult to separate a study’s findings from its interpretation (McGregor, 2018). This appears especially pertinent in this study, in which the first RQ elicits descriptive findings while the second calls for a subjective interpretation of RQ1. As such, this section combines the findings and discussion sections of a traditional paper, interweaving the main themes that emerged from conversations with the participants with reflexive and reflective comments discussing the implications for my own course.

Approaches to Content

Given that the area of inquiry provides the context for the development of writing and researching skills, it is unsurprising that all teachers mentioned “front-loading” the content (a phrase used by several participants) to stimulate students’ curiosity in the topic, and to encourage them to begin exploring potential ideas for their own essays. Most teachers introduce content by assigning the whole class with common texts (e.g., academic articles, book chapters, and news reports) or videos (e.g., TED talks) and then holding in-class discussions on the main themes. A slightly different approach taken by one colleague was to introduce a key topic in class before encouraging students to “go away and inform themselves” on the issues by carrying out independent research in preparation for a discussion in a subsequent lesson. This is an approach that I would like to trial in my own course, as I feel there is currently a slightly abrupt shift between the beginning of the course (when I provide the texts) and the middle of the course (when students are required to research their own topic independently). Introducing a controlled practice stage of independent research on a common topic could therefore function as a useful diagnostic test of students’ researching ability and could facilitate a discussion of skills, such as using keyword searches, navigating Google Scholar, and evaluating the reliability of sources.

A recurrent question during this study (and one with potentially major implications for my course) was about the scope of the area of inquiry. My course currently has an intentionally broad focus with the rationale that it allows students greater freedom in selecting an essay topic they are passionate about. However, I have realised that many of my colleagues have narrower scopes and, importantly, that they do not feel it unreasonably constrains students’ autonomy. Indeed, a narrower scope enables a clear connection to be made between the initial course content and students’ essay topics as it provides them with a basic knowledge of the key issues as well as several initial sources to begin their research. In contrast, I realise now that my course is relatively disjointed. I begin by exploring several different themes to introduce students to the range of choice available to them. However, students seldom choose one of these topics for their essays and, as such, they are often forgotten about. It occurs to me now that when I began teaching RW, I lacked a clearly defined vision of what my course would be and, perhaps to compensate for this, I decided to offer students a large amount of autonomy. Interestingly, four more experienced instructors reported having similar realisations, describing their initial areas of inquiry as “trying to do too much” (Colleague A) or being “overly ambitious” (Colleague B). After several iterations of their courses, they were able to develop a clearer vision of their expectations and, as a result, to sharpen the focus of their course. It is therefore my intention to pilot a more honed version of my area of inquiry in my next course with the aim of providing a more fluid, interrelated, and coherent experience for my students.

Approaches to the Writing Process

All teachers follow a broadly similar writing process, mirroring the logical progression set out in the learning objectives (see Table 1). This begins with students selecting their research topic (objective 1), choosing an appropriate angle (objective 2), developing an outline (objective 4), and then writing and revising the research paper itself (objective 7). Two common additions to the process mentioned by colleagues are:

- a research proposal (to ensure an appropriate essay scope before the outline)

- an annotated bibliography (to encourage students to evaluate the reliability of their sources, to consider how these sources may be integrated into their work, and to “actually start reading” [Colleague A]).

Given that this is often the first extended research paper that students have written, a major consideration cited by teachers is how to ensure the process is achievable for the students. As such, most teachers take a step-by-step approach to compiling the essay, often asking students to submit the essay in sections or as partial drafts (typically between 700–900 words). Teachers felt this approach “lightened the load” (Colleague C), made the writing process “less intimidating” for students (Colleague D), and was “more manageable” for teachers in terms of marking (Colleague E). It also increases students’ chances of success on the RW course; as Colleague F stated, “breaking it down suits a lot of students...they don’t get lost as often”.

Even among the teachers who require a full essay first draft from their students, there was still a consensus that scaffolding the process is necessary to adequately prepare students to write. In an approach I had not previously considered, Colleague G has students treat their outlines as a working document, building it over three to four weeks from a basic skeleton of brief yet organised ideas (“a topic outline”) to a “sentence-level outline” which in turn is developed into “a paragraph outline”, effectively becoming a “condensed version of the paper” (Winkler & Metherell, 2008, p. 85). From this point, students simply need to “flesh out” the paper to create a first draft. In my experience, one of the central challenges facing most RW students is that they are tasked with writing a research paper on a topic that is largely unfamiliar to them. Their lack of an adequate working knowledge of their topic means it can be difficult for them to envisage the shape their essay may take. As such, even after completing their outline, they are still required to research and inform themselves on the topic, which can necessitate a large amount of disassembly and rebuilding of information to ensure a clear structure and a logical progression of ideas, such as Ballenger’s (2018) “Frankenstein draft” technique (pp. 153–155). As such, Colleague G’s approach to outlining resonates with me as it encourages students to treat their outlines as early drafts of the essay rather than a separate step they take before writing begins, and it emphasises that their work is a flexible, evolving draft at all stages.

Approaches to Essay Structure

Although the end product (i.e., an extended research paper) is the same for all RW courses, there is a variety in the shape these essays take, and the guidance teachers offer to students in structuring their papers. In a continuation of the style of essay commonly practiced in the freshmen Academic Reading & Writing (ARW) course, several teachers encourage students to take an argumentative approach. This often begins with students defining and describing the issue before establishing and defending their position on an issue through the use of evidence, logical reasoning, counterarguments, and rebuttals. For two colleagues, this was an approach they implemented in the first versions of their courses though they subsequently decided to move away from this in favour of an essay structure that better suited the topics in their courses. One of these teachers now favours a SPRE (Situation-Problem-Response-Evaluation) approach while the other requires an IMRaD (Introduction-Methodology-Results-Discussion) structure.

Colleague H mused that there is an interesting “tension” about the role of the RW teacher, asking “to what extent are we directive or facilitative?” In their course, Colleague H

does not usually “prescribe” an essay structure, yet they make an exception for RW students in Stream 4 (those with the lowest English proficiency). In this case, they have “created a genre” with sub-headings to provide greater support and to help lower the cognitive load for students. Colleague I took a similar backward-design approach to the essay structure for their course on the basis that they wanted students to “objectively assess both sides of the issue then comment on what they found, and react with a broad conclusion, perhaps suggesting their own solution or evaluating a solution they have found.”

Several other teachers offer students more flexibility in their choice of essay structure. Colleague J’s main advice to students is that they may find it helpful to use an “11-paragraph approach” as a guide, building an essay with three body sections consisting of (approximately) three paragraphs each. Three other teachers introduce a range of possible approaches (including “problem-solution”, “cause-effect”, and “entirely argumentative”) and allow students to choose the best fit for their topic. Interestingly, a similar “free rein” approach was taken by Colleague F in their first year teaching RW, yet they subsequently felt that it was “too ambitious” and “overwhelming” to ask students to both decide upon their own research focus and choose an appropriate essay structure.

These discussions have strengthened my belief that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to essay structure. Instead, teachers’ decisions in this regard are heavily influenced by their individual area of inquiry and their vision for the final outcome, as well as their expectations of their students’ English proficiency. However, I was struck by the many similarities between my colleagues’ experiences and the evolution of my own RW course. Firstly, much like Colleagues D and F, I also required my students to follow an argumentative approach in my first year, primarily due to the relative familiarity of this structure for both me and the students. However, I did not feel that an argumentative approach was best suited to my RW area of inquiry, and I was also keen for students to practice different styles of writing. I therefore backward-designed my approach to the essay structure, much like Colleague H and I, starting with my desired image for the essay, considering the students’ initial level of ability and understanding, and then adapting my teaching in response (see Richards, 2013).

As such, I currently opt for an inquiry-based structure in which students frame their essay around a research question and explore the evidence in a short literature review before providing an informed answer to their questions in a discussion section. I feel this more closely mirrors the researching and writing process that students go through and permits them the freedom to research more objectively, minimising the risk of cherry-picking information to support their thesis. However, much like most teachers I spoke to, I also encourage students to be flexible in their approach and to consider other essay structures if it better suits their essay topics, their research questions, or their views after their initial background reading.

Approaches to Teaching Writing Skills

Another recurring topic of discussion was the writing skills that teachers prioritise on their courses. Due to the extended period (of a maximum of nine months) between RW and the freshmen ELA courses, most teachers felt it was useful to review the writing skills which have been covered in the earlier courses. The most frequently mentioned of these skills were the fundamentals of paraphrasing, developing thesis statements, and structuring paragraphs (such as writing topic sentences and supporting sentences). However, it was evident that many teachers feel that a focus purely on these skills is insufficient for RW. Colleague K, for example,

felt that while a “review of the basics” may be called for, RW should aim to enhance students’ writing beyond this foundational level, while Colleague C suggested that they see RW “as an extension of ARW,” consolidating and subsequently developing students’ writing skills.

A wide range of these “extended” skills was mentioned by teachers, though the most common skills (mentioned by eight teachers) were integrating evidence and synthesising sources into students’ writing, which were often taught alongside in-text citations. In addition, several colleagues highlighted the need to support students in articulating and developing their ideas in an extended essay. As Cornwell and McKay (1998) suggest, students’ familiarity with shorter, five-paragraph essays can lead to an overreliance on formulaic patterns and to the overapplication of the principle that “one idea equals one paragraph,” both of which could hinder students’ ability to write an extended research paper.

The discussions about the teaching of writing skills were perhaps where I noticed the biggest gap between my approach and that of many of my colleagues. Firstly, I tend to assume that students can “do the basics” of academic writing, only carrying out reactive reviews based on emergent issues in students’ writing. I do, however, make frequent reference to writing skills (such as paraphrasing and summarising) learned in ARW and in Reading and Content Analysis (RCA) to draw attention to the connection between students’ freshmen courses and the RW course. However, Colleague K did this in a much more explicit way, asking students to select an essay they had written in a previous course and to analyse its strengths and weaknesses. As well as functioning as a reminder to the students of their ability to write academically in English, this activity is a useful diagnostic tool for the teacher, and I am keen to incorporate it into my own course.

I was somewhat surprised that academic style was not mentioned by many colleagues in the discussions, though this is perhaps due to the unstructured interview approach: sometimes we simply did not discuss this topic. One exception to this was Colleague F, who described raising students’ awareness of “bad habits” in academic writing such as “weird, bloated, convoluted language” (Colleague F cited Orwell’s (1946) plea for clarity and conciseness in writing and Pinker’s (2014) protests about ‘academese’ as useful sources on this issue). Colleague F’s emphasis on writing style is closest to my own approach: I typically spend around four lessons between the first and the final draft developing students’ awareness of academic style, such as improving the flow, being more concise, avoiding repetition and improving the academic tone. Although this does not seem to be a common component in other RW courses, I do not intend to change my approach as I believe it is effective at helping students develop as more stylish academic writers.

Approaches to Teacher Feedback

In RW courses, tutorials form an essential part of the teacher feedback process, with all teachers scheduling regular appointments with their students throughout the writing process to discuss their progress. In advance of the tutorials, most colleagues read through their students’ work and leave comments to be discussed in the tutorial. Students are also commonly required to prepare for tutorials by writing questions they might have about their papers. While most teachers arrange individual tutorials, at least two teachers schedule small-group tutorials (of between two and three students) during their courses. Colleague D felt this was beneficial as students often have similar issues or questions and they can benefit from hearing the teacher feedback that their peers receive.

Reflective Practice of Research Writing Instruction

The quantity of teachers' written comments was also a frequent topic of conversation. Colleague F stated that they prefer a dialogic approach to feedback as it leads to fewer misunderstandings and ensures that students are able to digest their feedback. They therefore eschew written comments in favour of verbal feedback during tutorials (which they encourage students to record for later review). Based on the principle that feedback should be "actionable", Colleague K chooses to select a few manageable key points and avoids the temptation to write "hundreds of comments." In contrast, six teachers stated that they do write "lots of" comments on early drafts and expect students to make changes to their work in response. These teachers all felt this was required due to the length of the essay and the number of improvements deemed necessary yet acknowledged that, for students, seeing (and subsequently dealing with) a large volume of comments can be overwhelming or even disheartening. As such, ensuring that students understand both what their comments say and how they should proceed in response is clearly an important consideration. Another challenge regarding teacher feedback is that some students tend to postpone reviewing their drafts until the next deadline approaches and then attempt to tackle the feedback all at once. While this approach may work for shorter assignments, it is unwise when further research or major rewrites are required. To guarantee that students engage with their teacher comments in a timely manner, Colleague I allocates a full lesson of class time soon after they receive their feedback to allow them the opportunity to read it and discuss it with their peers and teacher. This is an idea that I have already incorporated into my own RW course as it guarantees that students spend an adequate amount of time reflecting on their draft soon after they receive my feedback.

Approaches to Peer Feedback

Opinions and approaches towards peer feedback varied greatly among the teachers interviewed. While most RW teachers require students to review each other's work, it was notable that four teachers said they either struggle to find time for peer review or are not sure how to approach it, with one teacher asking if "that [is] something I'm supposed to do." Student survey results from my previous RW courses suggest that receiving advice from their peers is indeed something that students value highly, though several teachers expressed doubts about its utility. For example, Colleague I stated they were "not sold on it" while Colleague L suggested that the "focus is often off" with students' attention drawn to the minor issues with the "mechanics or grammar" as opposed to the "bigger picture," such as the strength of arguments, use of evidence, or overall clarity and impression of the paper. Colleague F also suggested the dynamic of RW classes—where students do not know each other as well as they do in their freshmen courses—means that they are generally less comfortable criticising each other's work.

These challenges resonated strongly with me: indeed, peer feedback was initially an activity that I often overlooked for the same reasons, yet after experimenting with a range of approaches, I now recognise its worth and it is an integral part of the writing process in my RW course. However, I realised that, in contrast to many teachers, I do not require peers to review an entire full draft, instead asking writers to regularly share short sections for peer review. I find that this is a more structured activity and can lead to more focused feedback. Several teachers also cited a "devil's advocate" approach, in which they encourage peers to find faults with the writer's ideas. While I find this useful once students have developed their ideas, I

initially tend to employ a “supportive peer feedback” activity in which peers simply listen and encourage the writer as they attempt to articulate their main arguments (see Edge, 2002).

Conclusion

Teacher awareness of their colleagues’ expertise is a crucial factor in effective professional development (Sakamoto, 2022). However, the “egg crate” arrangement of many teaching institutions means that teachers can be isolated from one another in individual compartments (Lortie, 1975). In such environments, “important information about the challenges that teachers encounter, the problems that puzzle them, and the expertise they might offer their peers remains limited by the confines of the classroom [or office]” (Johnson, 2015, p. 119). As such, actively seeking out the opportunity to sit down and talk with my colleagues about their RW courses has been very enlightening for me: not only has the experience provided me with new insights into alternative ways of approaching my course, but it has also enabled me to clarify and challenge several tacit beliefs I had about RW. Fortunately, carrying out this study has also reinforced many other beliefs about my approaches and has reassured me that my course stands up to scrutiny when compared to my peers’.

In the discussions with my colleagues, I was struck by the difference in how the more experienced and the less experienced RW teachers talked about their courses. Many of those who have taught it multiple times reported that RW was their favourite course, while several of the more novice teachers mentioned that their RW experiences had been chaotic, confusing, and “a rollercoaster” (Colleague M). They also expressed more frequently that the discussions with me had been “helpful,” “a relief,” and informative, providing them with “ideas to steal” and “a great deal to reflect on.” As Graves (1996) suggests, no teacher wants to start from scratch or “reinvent the wheel” when designing a new course and they therefore seek to inform their approaches by examining existing “models, guidelines, and principles” (p. 5). For teachers new to the ELA program, I therefore hope that this paper can go some way to providing this kind of support and make the experience of planning and teaching RW for the first time a little less daunting. At the same time, I also believe this paper can be useful for experienced teachers of RW. While “there is no set procedure to follow that will guarantee a successful course because every teacher and every teacher’s course is different” (Graves, 1996, p. 5), having a greater awareness of what goes on in neighbouring classrooms can undoubtedly enable us to better (re)consider how to approach our own. Therefore, even for RW old hands, I hope this paper acts as a springboard for further reflection and discussion, encouraging teachers to escape the egg crate, to juxtapose their own approaches with those featured in this study, to strike up conversations, and to exploit the rich source of their colleague’s expertise.

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