CHAPTER 30.

ACADEMIC WRITING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM SCOTLAND

By Kathleen McMillan
University of Dundee (Scotland)

This profile essay explores the variety of Academic Writing provision in place at the University of Dundee, Scotland. The Academic Achievement Teaching Unit (AATU), under the Directorship of the Academic Secretary, supports the University of Dundee community by promoting on-campus development of academic literacies for all students. This provision includes credit-bearing academic literacy courses, support programmes, bespoke inputs, and discrete postgraduate writing courses. In addition, under the Royal Literary Fund's Fellowship Scheme for supporting writing development in Higher Education, the institution hosts part-time Royal Literary Fund (RLF) Writing Fellows. The profile charts how writing development work at the University of Dundee has come into being organically, in response to demand from academic colleagues and to student-led demand.

The student population in Scotland tends to reflect the demographic profile, by drawing the majority of its undergraduate students from the wider Scottish/UK community, and often from the local area in which the university is set. Postgraduate students present a more cosmopolitan profile, as institutions seek to exploit the international market to supplement income streams; this trend is reflected in taught and research degree programmes. Therefore, the academic needs of subsets within university communities are diverse and often without complementarity.

Students as a community are articulate in their demands for a high quality teaching and learning experience. However, they are not alone in possessing high expectations of their university education; teaching and research staff, too, have expectations as to performance of students and their ability to learn and

to meet the standards of performance that judge them to be worthy of the target degree. In practice, this means a series of push-pull tensions, as university hierarchies seek to fulfil the requirements of central and regional governments in terms of recruitment and progression targets, while those involved in delivering courses strive to maintain levels of teaching and learning to standards that reflect the traditions of university education.

To add to these tensions, emergent factors have further influenced learning environments, as staff and students develop uses (and expectations about these uses) of technology in learning. Lecture notes are de rigeur posted on virtual learning sites, while podcast lectures and Twitter are beginning to reflect the outlook and expectation of the twenty-first century learner. Students make use of these different media to record ideas, contribute to discussions, and broker their learning by writing in ways that are not particularly well related to the traditional writing models of higher education. Yet, assessment modes still rely heavily on the written-word tradition as a means of demonstrating understanding and intellectual development.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Dundee, as one of the older Scottish universities, having separated from the University of St. Andrews in 1967, is no different from others in the sector in that it has to meet the demands of central (UK) and regional (Scottish) governments while responding to the requirements of its academic community. Recently, the university has restructured to four Colleges comprising 13 Schools, representing a range of disciplines including Life Sciences, Medicine, Dentistry, Social Sciences, Humanities, Engineering, and the Arts. The university has three campus sites.

The Academic Achievement Teaching Unit (AATU), under the Directorship of the Academic Secretary, supports the university community by promoting on-campus development of academic literacies for all students. The team consists of 4.75 full-time equivalent [FTE] staff: one senior lecturer with a remit for overseeing the provision of academic development (Head of Unit), two full-time lecturers (English language support for non-native speakers of English), and 1.75 Academic Skills Tutors, supplemented by hourly-paid freelance staff. Administration is covered by .5 FTE clerical staff with extended provision for large projects over the year. In addition, under the Royal Literary Fund's programme for supporting writing development in higher education, the institution hosts two part-time Royal Literary Fund (RLF) Writing Fellows (each for two days per week) and is grateful to the

RLF for its generosity in continuing to provide the services of the Writing Fellows.

SUPPORTING LEARNING: ORIGINS AND GRADUAL GROWTH OF AATU

AATU has developed organically, in response both to student-led demand and to demand from academic colleagues. The hard work of the AATU team has been successful in profiling the need for writing support and broader aspects of the acquisition of academic learning skills across the university. The AATU (under another name) originated in the late 1980s from modest requirements to meet the language needs of international students (English for Academic Purposes—EAP). Weekly tutorial classes were delivered within the University Language Unit, which specialised in the teaching of modern foreign languages (MFL). The EAP remit then morphed into a more inclusive one providing support in the development of academic literacies for all students. Subsequently, under one of several restructuring exercises, EAP tuition remained with MFL, while staff teaching academic literacies attained an independent identity within a centralised learning service. This model, in turn, was restructured, with the EAP component reunited with academic literacies activities, to the present configuration as AATU.

The chequered development of AATU demonstrates that, in earlier times, interest in the academic literacy needs of students tended to be confined to a minority of staff and to the international student community—rather than being an explicit policy of learning development across the student population. However, in 2007, the creation of a formal unit with the remit of providing academic literacies tuition to all students (international and home; undergraduate and postgraduate) based on the existing platform of writing development support, has contributed to the higher profile and more extensive activities that characterise AATU's current work.

Thus, institutionally, the work of AATU is regarded as a "good thing" in that it contributes to aiding student retention and to engaging with the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) processes of quality assurance. However, this status has been achieved less as the outcome of a discrete policy than through the development of small, pilot projects launched proactively by AATU staff and championed by the Academic Secretary. As one success has been attained and the expertise, academic professionalism, and contribution of AATU staff recognised, further projects have become more readily supported and, thus, possible to implement.

Hence, University recognition of the importance of "academic literacy" as a pillar of the university learning experience has been constructed (Ivanic, 1998; Johns, 1997; Lea, 2004; Lillis, 2001; Street, 2001). The diverse demographic student profile provides a community whose learning histories may represent erratic assimilation of some basic concepts of learning, writing, and academic self-reliance. This is the challenge that AATU seeks to address through holistic approaches to supporting learning (McMillan, 2008). These encourage students to recognise that seeking assistance is a mature decision that will help them develop and succeed, rather than a de-motivating admission of failure. Students may "present" with one need, but reveal needs in other aspects of their learning; often, one of these is writing. While students may recognise for themselves or through staff feedback that there is a far bigger learning "picture," students may have yet to realise that

> Every time a student sits down to write for us, s/he has to invent the university . . . has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (Bartholomae, 1985, in Johns 1997, p. 20)

This is the challenge that AATU staff address through the pragmatic approach of identifying, and then meeting, learning needs in the broadest sense. Hence, the resultant AATU portfolio covers a range of diverse aspects of learning. This diversity takes account of the fact that students do not conveniently or predictably reach a simultaneous awareness of their learning needs, whatever these may be. Therefore, the essence of the AATU approach is to provide as many opportunities and routes into developing learning skills as possible. Writing plays a key role in this respect, since writing is the means by which students are most frequently assessed and, consequently, is the skill development to which they seem to give most credence.

PRACTICAL LEARNING: THE AATU PORTFOLIO

In its practical application, the AATU approach cleaves into four subsets as shown in Figure 1.

Each of the provisions identified in Figure 1 has contributed in some measure to the development of writing for those students who have, either individually or in their mainstream classes, participated in AATU teaching. The credit-

1.CREDIT-BEARING ACADEMIC LITERACY COURSES	2.SUPPORT PROGRAMMES
1.1 Personal Academic Student Skills 20-credit course for undergraduate students **1.2 Pre-sessional English Language Programme** Successful completion qualifies for admission **1.3 Access Programmes** Delivered online; successful completion of inputs to academic programmes qualifies for university admission	**2.1 Writing Programmes:** Writing by Appointment (WBA) Just Write (Royal Literary Fund sponsored) Write Right (Royal Literary Fund sponsored) **2.2 Numeracy Programme:** Count Me In **2.3 Examination Programmes:** Ready, Steady Exams Preparatory Resit Exam Programme (PREP) **2.4 English for international students** In-semester support programme of classes
3.BESPOKE INPUTS	**4.DISCRETE POSTGRADUATE WRITING COURSES**
3.1 Taught postgraduate Delivered within several courses including Design, Law, Education, Social Work **3.2 Undergraduate Programmes** Delivered across all Colleges with inputs in more than 12 Schools from levels 1- 4.	**4.1 Doctoral Programmes** Generic skills provision in academic writing for thesis level at 1st, 2nd and 3rd year levels of doctoral studies **4.2 Taught postgraduate** Civil Engineering for dissertation level Orthopaedic Surgery for dissertation level

Figure 1. Academic Achievement Teaching Unit Learning Models at the University of Dundee.

bearing Personal Academic Student Skills (P@SS) programme, introduced in 2003 (Figure 1: model 1), has been influential in raising the profile amongst those staff who acknowledge the value of developing academic literacies (http://www.dundee.ac.uk/aatu/pass.htm). The module is offered twice in an academic year and attracts students from Levels 1—3 from a range of disciplines. The 20 credits awarded for successful completion of the module contribute to the requirement to accumulate 120 credits at level 1 towards the final degree. The syllabus is delivered in three complementary threads: information-processing;

understanding "studentness," and academic writing (the latter incorporating significant inputs on language [grammar] and lexical development). Classroom teaching is supplemented by activities provided through the institutional virtual learning environment. The course attracts 80-100 students per year and has been commended by external examiners, one of whom commented that "this course is exemplary of the type of support we might wish were available to each student embarking on university study."

Pre-entry teaching takes place in English language courses for international students and, for home students, in a hybrid on-line/on-campus module on academic literacies entitled "Learning Plus." Both programmes (Figure 1: model 1) place considerable emphasis on learning to write well. Clearly, although these represent introductions to academic writing, the intention is that students will engage, where possible, with later 'writing in the disciplines' provision that exists within bespoke or discrete writing programmes.

Three support programmes (Figure 1: model 2), Just Write, Write Right, and Writing by Appointment, explicitly address the development of academic writing and have generated considerable activity since their inception. In 2004, the generosity of the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) provided the University with our first Writing Fellow, whose role was to help students develop their writing (www.rlf.org.uk). Since 2004, we have had five Writing Fellows, and the current arrangement is that we have two Writing Fellows at any one time working over the two-semester period of an academic year. Thus far, each Fellow remains in post for a two-year period. They offer two programmes (one each) —Just Write and Write Right—and appointments are made via an online booking system, so that the Fellows can optimize their time for working with students rather than on routine administrative tasks. They work with undergraduate and postgraduate students, with the focus on the development of style rather than explicit grammatical explanation of errors. The terms of the RLF agreement preclude working with specific groups who might be regarded as requiring specialist attention; notably, dyslexic students and students whose writing problems emanate from the fact that they are using English as an additional language. Such students are referred to our other in-house writing programme, Writing by Appointment.

In the RLF programmes and the in-house Writing by Appointment, students are seen on a one-to-one basis. This approach is well-received by students and deemed to be effective; its acknowledged success supports the view that in the modern, anonymous world of universities, the opportunity to work with a writing specialist on the student's own work is highly valued (www.dundee.ac.uk/aatu/writing.htm).[1]

Over the three writing programmes, an average of 300 students are seen each academic year, which in 2009-10 represented in excess of 780 appoint-

ments. The number of meetings will vary, since some students require support over a number of weeks. Students can book online or staff can refer students to AATU. Information about these programmes is delivered by corporate branded PLUS@Dundee[2] materials displayed prominently in sites available to staff and students (http://www.dundee.ac.uk/welcome2010/leaflet.htm).

The Challenge of Changing Staff Perceptions

However, for some academic staff, perceptions remain that these initiatives represent deficit models of teaching. These perceptions are incorrect. While some students do, indeed, register because they are weak in writing, others participate because they aspire to the highest grades possible and see the writing programmes as a route to fulfilling this aspiration. If deficit there is, then this lies in the shortfall in skills development in the school sector; higher education inherits that legacy (McMillan, 2006). Blame cannot be placed on students who have had limited school tuition in the fundamentals of writing; often these students write only what they can write, not necessarily what they know (McMillan, 2006).

Nevertheless, initially, some academics suggested that these writing programme interventions compromise the integrity of the work of students, claiming that such students gain an advantage over others who do not receive this help. These suggestions highlight the failure of some colleagues to recognize the approach as a construct of learning rather than provision of proof-reading, as they had assumed. Since the programmes are open to all students, then, it is counter-argued, no student is disadvantaged by the system, only by their choice not to seek an appointment. For some individual students who receive guidance on their writing and learning, this may well compensate in some measure for the skills shortfall that is increasingly evident among some sectors of the student population; even perceived "high achievers" need to recognize the importance of reflective thinking processes of planning and composing on writing (Sharples, 1999).

Yet raising staff awareness of academic support mechanisms that exist continues to be an uphill struggle for AATU practitioners. It is hoped that some recent institutional restructuring will address the student experience and the support mechanisms within that concept in a more comprehensive and coherent way that will help to push understanding of this aspect of learning higher on the continuous professional development agenda.

Bespoke Workshops and the "Writing in Disciplines" Approach

Further opportunities to disseminate writing support information are possible in bespoke workshops (Figure 1: model 3) where AATU staff collaborate

with subject specialists in delivering a range of academic skills within the framework of the academic discipline and its timetable. There is a direct correlation between these team-teaching episodes providing large-group inputs and subsequent follow-on appointments for students wishing to address writing issues. Once students have had experience of AATU support, whether in 1:1 writing tutorials, bespoke class, or special courses such as P@SS and PREP, several seek further help at later points in their academic journey towards graduation.

Writing remains an issue for international students and, while AATU provides in-sessional English support classes (Figure 1: model 2) on different aspects of language acquisition, including writing, the numbers of students who seek places in this voluntary programme are not indicative of the numbers of international students who may be challenged by academic writing standards. This disparity has been attributed to the fact that, because both under- and postgraduate programmes are intensive, students do not have time to participate in generic language classes; conversely, some students do not acknowledge their difficulties with writing until much further on in the academic year, when it is too late to address these because of the time pressure of submission deadlines.

For these reasons, a 'Writing in the Disciplines' (WiD) approach to support the writing needs of undergraduate international students is being adopted, modeled on a long-standing initiative for taught postgraduate orthopaedic students and a newer pilot with taught postgraduate civil engineering students. These discrete writing modules involve international and home students (Figure 1: model 4). The inputs are integrated into the course timetable, and the aim is to do likewise for undergraduate programmes. The focus, in both instances, is to shift the overt emphasis from language acquisition in the traditional, generic English for Academic Purposes approach, by exploiting the students' strategic need to prepare and produce a dissertation that meets the required written standard. Therefore, as each stage of the dissertation is tackled, the explicit writing skills are developed incrementally to that end and, since the module is integrated into courses, the time spent in the subject-driven writing class is validated. The content can be tailored to meet the discipline requirements, with those students who are weaker being identified and given additional support through the one-to-one writing programmes.

Postgraduate Writing Courses

Another dimension of the work of AATU is the provision of discrete postgraduate writing courses—in the form of 13 two-hour workshops on different aspects of thesis writing within the Generic Skills curriculum offered to all

doctoral students regardless of nationality or language community in the four University Colleges as part of their professional development programme in years 1-3 of their studies. The workshops take students from the early stages of exploring their topic through the literature review (Organised Writing), the development of drafts as the research work begins to achieve outcomes (Scholarly Writing), and into the final phase with sessions on achieving coherence over the whole thesis (Thesis Overview). Again, working on the principle that students are more engaged if the material relates to them as individuals, the approach is to provide students with feedback on a short piece of un-edited writing (500-750 words). This provides diagnostic information that forms the basis of the workshop sessions.

Examination Preparation Support

> The AATU model of academic literacies development reflects the views of Johns (1997), who acknowledged that students need ". . . .strategies for understanding, discussing, organizing, and producing texts . . . the learning processes as well as products, form as well as content, readers' as well as writers' roles and purposes" (Johns, 1997:2-3).

This interplay is recognized particularly by students who participate in the Preparatory Resit Examination Programme (PREP) (Figure 1: model 2). This AATU support programme deals with students when they are at their most vulnerable. Although only two-weeks long, the PREP syllabus has to work through different academic literacies to ensure that students not only understand the critical thinking necessary for exam success, but also ensure that they can evidence this in their writing. For those students who successfully return to their studies after resits, this provides an introduction to AATU provision and, as a consequence, such students frequently seek further support with writing through AATU's one-to-one writing tutorials.

AATU also supports "unseen" students, namely, those who access the AATU "How to . . . " leaflets on essays, reports, and exams that are available on PLUS@ Dundee displays across the campuses (http://www.dundee.ac.uk/welcome2010/leaflet.htm). Additionally, our intranet sites, Advance@Dundee and Advance@ Dundee Postgraduate Portal, provide a resource on writing as an ever-present reference. Similarly, Write Attributes, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) module accessible to all students, provides guidance, with models, on citation and referencing. Designed to help students learn how to use the work of others in support of the discussion in their writing, it tackles plagiarism constructively.

MOVING FORWARD

The integrated approach of the AATU model is framed on an understanding that "there needs to be a facility within school and university curricula to introduce, develop, and enhance academic literacies for all those who may aspire to study in higher education at some point in the future" (McMillan, 2008). Writing is one such literacy. However, the problems that surround the development of writing lie not only with the constraints arising from students' lack of prior learning at school level, but also with the broadening genres within which students are expected to write (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006), alongside the "hidden agenda" of limited resources that prevail in modern higher education. It is not enough that students have to write in traditional essay or report formats; their writing must be appropriate to the discipline—yet deal with the multitude of genres expected of them. Dealing with the different formats and expectations that lead from these genres presents, for many, confusion and inconsistency. For example, in some disciplines, students are asked to submit a standard essay, blog entries, and a piece of reflective writing within their first-year assessments. Feedback on any one of these diverse genres has little potential to be particularly useful to the others. Thus, students are often not given the opportunity (especially within the now common modular system of course delivery) to consolidate their writing skills in light of related feedback. Instead, within one module they are required to write in an entirely different way measured against criteria that can be vague, if not unclear. In addition, "mixed messages" within the guidelines, learning outcomes, and practices required by individual academics can confuse students further; for example, in use of voice, personalization, structuring of text, and general register. Hence, students are constantly challenged by criteria that, while perhaps seeming open and clear, are often, in practice, hidden and, to the novice writer, unfathomable.[3]

AATU initiatives have developed, therefore, not only to assist students, but also to encourage subject specialists to become more aware of their role in "unpacking" some of the mysteries of the writing required in their field, by helping students to understand the academic "voice," the related language, and the writing conventions. Thus, the roles of academic staff and academic skills practitioners are to act as interpreters of the academic mores that support the traditions of academic writing for undergraduate and postgraduate students and to model ways in which these need to adapt to meet the diverse range of genres and contexts of the modern university. At a time when so much is uncertain in higher education and the wider economy, it is imperative for employability that students develop these academic writing skills in all their diversity, and recog-

nize that these skills need to be honed and shaped to transfer appropriately to professional contexts. How can this be done except by showing students that academia values and rewards excellence in writing?

NOTES

1. One unexpected outcome of the RLF scheme has been that the author of this essay has worked collaboratively since then on several commercial writing projects with our first Writing Fellow, Dr. Bill Kirton. Without the RLF initiative, this writing partnership opportunity would not have arisen.

2. PLUS@Dundee—Personal Learning for University Success at Dundee is a project that introduces students to the new learning environment of the University from the day of their arrival and progresses throughout the journey of their first academic year with support activities mostly delivered through AATU. A comprehensive set of information leaflets in addition to the "How to . . . ." leaflets positioned at information points across the institution gives students key information about University provision and signposts them to further information online or in support units.

3. The reality is that many students, especially at undergraduate level, are simply unaware of the not inconsiderable gaps in their writing skills, while staff make assumptions about the expected skill set that are at odds with the reality. This means that marking criteria and feedback often confuse more than assist.

REFERENCES

Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (2004). *A Report on the Teaching of Academic Writing in UK higher education.* London: Royal Literary Fund.

Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing.* Amsterdam: John Benjamin B.V.

Johns, A.M. (1997). *Text, role and context: Developing academic literacies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lea, M. (2004). Academic literacies: A pedagogy for course design. *Studies in Higher Education, 29*(6), 739-56.

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

McMillan, K. (2006). *The minority ethnic group experience in Scottish Higher Education*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Doctoral Thesis.

McMillan, K. (2008). Changing identities: Intercultural dimensions in Scottish educational contexts. *Language and Intercultural Communication* I *8*(2), *119-135.*

Sharples, M. (1999) *How we write: Writing as creative design.* London: Routledge.
Street, B. (2001). *Literacy and development: Ethnographic perspectives.* London: Routledge.