

Supporting student writing and other modes of learning and assessment: a staff guide

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Presentation abstract

Academic writing in higher education (HE) is a contested practice freighted with meaning, never more so than for widening participation students, still placed as ‘outsiders’ and often left feeling unwelcome and ‘un-voiced’. Ironically, as Molinari (2022) argues, universities were originally more diverse in form and content, not heavily ‘literate’ but oral, discursive and creative. As HE has become ostensibly more ‘open’, the system has become more normative, more formally rule-bound, more ‘written’ – and hence more exclusive. A recent example in the UK is the Office for Students’ (Adams, 2021) attack on inclusive assessment, pushing instead for more emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Alongside this tension, many in the Learning Development (LD) community feel that discipline academics do not see the ‘teaching’ of academic writing as part of their pedagogic and assessment repertoire, preferring to send students to learning developers (LDs) ‘to be fixed’. However, academics and LDs engaged in discussion and free writing (Elbow 1998; 1999) on this topic at a London Met Learning and Teaching Conference presented views that were more nuanced and sympathetic. There was a deep appreciation of the ‘real’ work that academic writing does with and for students, but also a sense that they did not know *how* to build writing into their practice(s). And so was born this staff Guide: a playful, creative and yet intensely practical guide for academic staff who want to empower their students to write – often, playfully, experimentally – on their way to ‘becoming’, and becoming academic. Presenting the Guide in the resource showcase

allowed us to highlight the continuing centrality of writing. Lecturers and university staff can use it to engage students in 'writing to learn' rather than 'learning to write'.

Community response

Writing is a fundamental practice in academia, integral to our professional identities yet also challenging in the way that success in writing is often based on how well the author conforms to certain expectations of what 'good' academic writing looks like (French, 2020). As staff are challenged in their writing identities, so too are students, trained from their arrival at university to produce essays and reports without necessarily learning why, or how, to enjoy the process - or even that it can be enjoyable! I was particularly inspired by the concept of writing as play and making writing pleasurable for students, and would love to see more work like this.

I found the concept of writing to learn, as opposed to learning to write, powerful and provocative, as I consider the focus of my own practice to be encouraging students to learn to write. It is a mantra I'm going to take away with me for sure. However, writing is a process and can be used as a learning tool. This has challenged my emphasis and made me question my approach. I think the emphasis on learning to write can encourage students to have a confrontational approach to writing, particularly if this is the main way their knowledge is judged. Writing is not a neutral activity but a socially-situated one that can act as a method of enquiry into the self (Park, 2013). I wonder what would happen if students were shown and taught how to love writing and treat it as a thinking tool, and to see it as an opportunity rather than something to fear.

That partly comes down to how writing is presented to students, both in conversation in the classroom or during a tutorial, and quite literally in what it looks like. 'Writing to learn', as a resource, looks so engaging that I am genuinely excited to get stuck in and read through! It is refreshingly clear and fun, and the best kind of student co-creation in the way the design and feel of the book were handed over to the student illustrator, who created something cohesive with a clear and consistent style. I love the way this guide looks. It is reminiscent of a children's book, in the best way, with the white space, the large clear font and the beautiful, memorable illustrations add something special to the whole. It is as far from a

textbook as it is possible to imagine. In short, it is both creative and pragmatic, and reflects the exciting possibilities inherent in the writing process. Thanks for making it open access.

Next steps and additional questions

I find the part on other modes of assessments especially useful. Considering there is not too much literature on it, are there any good resources you can recommend on authentic assessment that explore alternative modes?

Authors' reflection

The 'academic writing' of university students occupies contested ground freighted with meaning about the writer, who they are, their potential and what they might become. Writing is 'dangerous', particularly for those marginalised groups new to HE – widening participation students – who feel particularly unwelcome in academia. Thus, students need help, not just to overcome their fear of writing, but to positively discover the pleasure of exploratory writing. This, coupled with concerns about plagiarism and essay mills, makes it more urgent to find spaces in the curriculum to discover that writing can be a learning process that gives students voice and agency, that places them powerfully within their own learning (Abegglen et al., 2017). Hence our colourful and playful Guide for staff on integrating 'writing to learn' in the classroom (Abegglen et al., 2021), now freely available through creative commons.

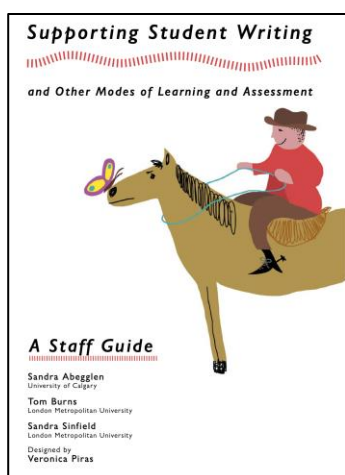
The purpose of the Guide is to help academics discover fresh energy when supporting students with their writing. We want to reveal in practical, real and creative ways that writing is a thinking process and that we, as instructors, also benefit when we create spaces for generative and exploratory writing that enable our students to develop as confident academic writers and confident academics. Students will flourish if academics set meaningful and valuable writing tasks, as well as other more multimodal forms of assessment. Rather than 'dumbing down' we need to 'scale up' our challenge levels, whilst ensuring that students are appropriately scaffolded, supported and developed on their route to mastery. We need to harness the fact that students are provoked by their curiosity, by the opportunity to have their say, and by their perception of the task's value. They know the difference between being invited into their epistemic community/ies and

being asked to 'regurgitate' their learning. The onus is on all academics to set those challenging, provocative tasks.

In the Guide we have drawn on our extensive work with widening participation students and instructors, and our engagement with the literature from the Writing and Learning Development communities, to highlight that writing really is more than a skill or set of skills to master. We need to move beyond a focus on the mechanics of writing, a preoccupation with spelling, punctuation and grammar (important as these are for final draft writing), to develop a love of writing and to initiate students into their epistemic communities.

It also illustrates that there are opportunities to widen assessment practice. Although multimodal assessments may never entirely replace the essay, they can de-centre its dominance, whilst at the same time, adopting more creative approaches overall can work to transform academic writing into a more inclusive and consciously learning process. Hence, the Guide is more than a 'how to' book but rather a stepping stone to rethink academic praxis and pedagogy.

As part of our own commitment to the power of the ludic, we worked with a first-year Design student to bring alive the ideas across the text. Hence the images – and the white space – and (we hope) the overarching sense of joy and possibility encapsulated in the Guide and beyond, in its audience, in its readers, and in practice.



The Guide can be downloaded for free: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/113457>. To date, it has been viewed an amazing 3,145 times, with 2,400 downloads. Feedback, and comments more generally, have been overwhelmingly positive, with many valuing the

reminder that academic writing can be powerfully, more positively and more playfully developed, and that it can be taught 'differently'.

We encourage everyone to run writing workshops/weeks/years and set up free writing sessions in which students experience writing as thinking/learning as opposed to the alienated (and alienating), judged one-draft writing that they tend to engage in. We can all encourage students to take ownership of their learning through a variety of active learning modes and diverse writing and meaning-making activities. And we can develop writing in a variety of ways: by scaffolding reading, by encouraging blogging to learn, by setting provocative, open essay questions, and by setting more multimodal tasks, in which students seem more naturally to engage in the selection, revision and editing processes that we also want them to engage in with their writing. Writing should not be a 'trick', something with which we catch students out or judge them as deficient. Academic writing is a process through which to develop and participate in academia.

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