



FINAL REPORT FOR A 1998 NATIONAL TEACHING DEVELOPMENT GRANT (INDIVIDUAL)

Name of Project Leader(s)

Associate Professor Alex Radloff and Dr Barbara de la Harpe

Current Department and University Address

Centre for Educational Advancement
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U 1987
Perth 6845
Western Australia

Tel: (08) 9266 9733
Fax: (08) 9266 3051
E-Mail: A.Radloff@curtin.edu.au
B.delaharpe@curtin.edu.au

Project Title

Enhancing student academic writing: developing a booklet of instructional activities and strategies to support lecturers to teach writing in the context of their disciplines

10 Key words or phrases that describe the project

How-to-book on enhancing student writing
Teaching academic writing
University students
Lecturer resource
Integrating writing support
Writing activities and strategies
Writing model
Cross-disciplinary collaborative approach
Classroom based trials
Student and lecturer feedback

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project aimed to develop a booklet to help lecturers who do not have experience in teaching English or literacy to teach writing as part of their normal discipline-based writing tasks. A set of activities and strategies were identified, developed, trialled and refined, and collated into a booklet.

The booklet is underpinned by a five step problem-solving model that recognises the complex nature of writing and can be used to help writers manage any writing task. In the booklet, each step – Preplanning, Planning, Composing and Evaluating – is described and ways it can be integrated into a class session are provided, together with teaching and learning materials which lecturers can adapt. Each step is presented separately and the teaching and learning activities and strategies suggested are stand-alone and easily integrated into a class. Instructional activities and strategies, applicable to a variety of disciplines, are linked to each of the steps of the Model. Instructional activities and strategies consisted of those based on current theory and research in the self-regulation of student writing and those already developed, used and evaluated by de la Harpe and Radloff. In addition, web and library searches were undertaken to identify other appropriate activities and strategies from across the disciplines. Valuable ideas and resources were also obtained from academics from around the world in response to requests for input into the project.



Activities and strategies were designed and presented using a simple and accessible format so that they could be easily incorporated into subjects by lecturers in any discipline without the need for extensive rewriting of existing materials or major changes to assessment practices. In addition, ‘characters’ were included to represent a variety of disciplines and perspectives on issues related to student writing and managing the writing process. The characters modelled the use of problem-solving strategies, collaboration and reflective practice throughout the book. It was hoped that characters would encourage readers to identify with the characters and their students’ struggles to be self-directed writers. Student quotes were included to highlight student perceptions and experiences of the support needed to help them develop as effective writers.



Two experienced lecturers – one in Physics and one in Education – trialled the activities and strategies for each step of the Model in their respective classes. Each lecturer was given a draft copy of the chapters that described one way to teach each step and outlined additional activities and strategies that they could use. After each trial, the lecturers completed a questionnaire about their experiences and reactions. In addition, at the end of the project, they provided a written reflection on their experiences. Students also completed a feedback form about activities and strategies used. Feedback from lecturers and students was used to identify which activities and strategies were the most valuable and how others could be adapted. In addition, the booklet was previewed by about 30 lecturers at the Teaching and Learning Forum 2000 in February 2000 and their comments were overwhelmingly positive.



Copies of the booklet have been sent to every University Library and Professional Development Centre in Australia. The project website <http://cea.curtin.edu.au/esaw/> provides further details of the project.

The project team comprised Alex Radloff and Barbara de la Harpe who identified, reviewed and selected instructional activities and strategies, worked with colleagues to trial materials, reviewed materials in response to feedback, and wrote and revised the booklet; Marjan Zadnik and Joy Yukich who implemented, evaluated and reflected on using the instructional activities and strategies in their units; and Jenny Giddy, the Research Associate, who co-ordinated the project, did the necessary literature searches, liaised with the Project Reference Group, and assisted with obtaining and analysing feedback from staff and students.

Justification and Educational Rationale

University students need well developed writing skills (Spear, 1997) because writing is integral to learning and understanding of new subject matter. Writing is also widely used to demonstrate the outcomes of learning through, for example, essays, reports and written examination, and is valued and demanded in graduates by professional and employer groups who recognise effective writing as essential for success in the workplace (ACNielsen, 1998). Much previous work shows that many students lack effective writing skills and need explicit instruction to develop them. Such instruction is most effective when provided by the discipline teacher in the context of regular subject teaching.

Students need help to develop their writing skills for a number of reasons. First, students, both school leavers, and mature-age, may come to university with inadequate previous educational experiences in relation to literacy. Second, the writing demands and writing tasks at university may differ markedly from students' previous writing experiences at school or at work. Third, the context in which university writing takes place often provides little guidance for students who are expected to be autonomous, independent and able to manage their time and learning tasks. Fourth, effective writing requires well developed skills in planning, reading, summarising, critical thinking, and abstract reasoning all of which students may need help to develop.

Developing writing skills requires intensive practice with timely and appropriate feedback. This means that students need to engage in regular writing activities which are discipline-specific and integrated into their course of study. These opportunities may not always be available for a number of reasons. First, most lecturers, while recognising that writing is important for learning and that many of their students need assistance to develop their writing skills, are primarily discipline specialists who generally do not have formal qualifications in English or Education. Thus, they may not believe that they have the skills needed to teach writing or they may lack the confidence to help their students to develop as writers. Instead, they may favour stand alone or remedial programs offered by specialists from outside their discipline despite the fact that such programs have been shown to be less successful than in-context writing support (Colomb, 1988; Herrington & Moran, 1992; Puhl, 1992).

Second, the type of writing tasks which lecturers set may not provide the necessary context for developing effective writing in that they may require unsophisticated writing such as list making or knowledge telling, may encourage a reliance on a 'cut and paste' approach to writing, or may provide too few opportunities for the development of writing proficiency and autonomy over time. Third, lecturers may avoid setting writing tasks or developing student self-directed writing skills as part of their regular subject teaching because these are perceived to be time consuming and/or difficult to assess. Fourth, the feedback that lecturers provide on writing tasks may focus mainly on spelling and format and largely ignore problems of structure, meaning, synthesis and audience awareness and on how students manage themselves and the writing process. Finally, both students and lecturers may believe that in certain disciplines such as, for example, the physical sciences, learning facts and 'covering the content' is more important than developing writing skills or independence as learners and, thus, will largely ignore the need to develop writing as part of discipline study.

One way to help students to develop their writing skills and become discipline literate, is to provide 'user friendly' instructional activities and strategies which can be readily accessed and adapted by the discipline teacher for use as part of regular subject teaching. Although there are many books available on writing, most offer only tips and suggestions to student writers, focus on grammar and syntax rather than on managing the process of writing, and rely on students to improve their writing through self-instruction. Unfortunately, merely offering advice to students is not enough because most students, in order to become better writers, need discipline specific encouragement, feedback

and explicit instruction. Furthermore, there is a large gap between *knowing what* to do to produce a good piece of writing and *knowing how* to actually write such a piece (Mahalski, 1992; Radloff & Radloff, 1995). Therefore, students need to be helped to write better in the context of their discipline and by the discipline teacher.

A possible way that this project could be expanded would be to devise more discipline specific activities and to trial and refine these in the same way that the activities for this book were trialled and refined. The project outcome, namely, the booklet entitled, *Enhancing student writing: A guide to integrating writing support across the disciplines*, can be used by all university teachers interested in helping students to be effective writers, and who are willing to make time as part of their normal teaching to do so. In addition, the methodology used in the project can be replicated by lecturers in any discipline to develop a similar resource tailored to their discipline, students and institutional context.

Target Student Group

As a result of this project, initially approximately 50 students from Physics and Education benefitted. Future students in these classes will also benefit since the two lecturers involved in the project have adopted and integrated the instructional strategies into their units and plan to use them in the future. In addition, since the initial dissemination of the booklet in February 2000, students in Business Law, Business Communication and Health Science Communication units at Curtin (approximately 1200 in total) have also benefitted since their lecturers have used activities and strategies from the booklet.

Technical Soundness

Overall, the design of the project worked well. The project team worked collaboratively and benefitted from support provided by the Research Associate, web designer, graphic artist, and desktop publisher. We found that having a Research Associate with a background in education and previous project management experience was essential for the smooth running of the project. In addition, creating and updating the website was an excellent way to publicise the project and get input from a wide audience.

Trialling the activities and strategies included in the booklet in real classrooms by real lecturers in two quite different disciplines ensured that what was finally included in the booklet was relevant, usable and presented in an accessible format. Zadnik and Yukich trialled the activities and strategies in their Physics and Education classes respectively. They were provided with draft copies of chapters which outlined various activities and strategies from which they could choose. The Research Associate informed their students about the project and explained the purpose of the trials. After each strategy had been trialled, Zadnik and Yukich completed a questionnaire about their experiences and reactions. Students also completed feedback forms providing their views about whether and how the activity had helped their writing and whether it had improved their confidence in writing assignments. Students also listed three things they liked about the activity and three ways they felt the activity could be improved.

An important aspect of the project was the Project Reference Group comprising academics from a number of disciplines and two students. The Reference Group provided valuable input, suggestions and feedback to the team.

The original design included time release for one day per week for a year for Radloff and de la Harpe to identify, review and select instructional activities and strategies, work with colleagues to trial materials, review materials in response to feedback, and write the booklet. In practice, this

arrangement did not work as well as we envisaged partly because of the nature of the project tasks, especially the writing of the chapters which required sustained blocks of time, and partly because of the pressure of existing work commitments which, at times, meant that the allocated day could not be taken. In the end, we spent many hours after work and also part of our annual leave completing the project. Indeed, the one day per week allocation was insufficient to complete the set tasks.

Administrative Convenience

The project did not impact adversely on the organisational infrastructure. Other than the Research Associate who required office space, etc, the project team used their normal office and classroom facilities. The booklet is specifically designed to minimise the need for additional instructional materials, equipment or facilities. Production and printing costs and the Research Associate's salary were more than originally budgeted for in the CUTSD application. These costs were covered by the Centre for Educational Advancement.

Organisational Acceptance

To date, the project outcomes have been embedded in the classes of the lecturers involved in the project plus a number of others already mentioned. However, we believe that, in terms of ensuring durability, support is required at institutional, school and individual lecturer levels. At the institutional level, a policy is needed that recognises the importance of developing student writing and offers recognition and reward to those lecturers who do so. At the school level, Heads and senior staff need to model good practice in supporting writing development. At the individual level, some lecturers may need help and encouragement to increase their competence and confidence in writing and in providing writing support.

Evaluation

The project was evaluated at two levels. First, the activities trialled in classes by the Physics and Education lecturers were evaluated by both the lecturers and their students. Second, the booklet was evaluated by approximately 30 lecturers from across the disciplines.

After each trial, the two lecturers completed a questionnaire about their experiences and reactions (see Appendix 1). In addition, at the end of the project, they provided a written reflection on their experiences. Students also completed a feedback form (see Appendix 2) about activities and strategies used for each step of the 5-by-3 Writing Model (Samson & Radloff, 1992). They provided their views about whether and how the activities and strategies had helped their writing and whether these had improved their confidence in writing assignments. Students also listed three things they liked about the activities and strategies and three ways they felt these could be improved. Feedback from lecturers and students was used to identify which activities and strategies were the most valuable and how others could be adapted.

Both lecturers agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that 'the activity will help my students to do their assignment' and 'the activity was easy to integrate into my class'. The Education lecturer also strongly agreed with the statement that 'the activity has improved my students' confidence about doing their assignment'. However, the Physics lecturer commented that he found it difficult to respond to this statement. Positive comments about implementing each strategy and activity typically included the following comments:

"Generated a lot of discussion and excellent ideas from the groups."

"Students came up with some extremely interesting ideas and issues that they would not have done if they were merely given the essay topic."

"Made everyone feel that their ideas were valued."

"Was informative for the students and me."

Suggestions for how each activity and strategy could be improved typically included comments about implementation rather than about the activity or strategy itself:

"Allow more time."

"I could fill a whole session because it is so important."

"I spent longer on this than planned. Time constraints are a big problem."

Feedback from students showed that the aspects of each activity and strategy they most liked typically included the following:

"The discussion part."

"I liked working in groups."

"Got to see what other people were thinking."

"It gave me a clear idea on the purpose of the project. What sort of things I need to do ie what it's aimed at."

"Clears up any misunderstood or unsure areas."

"I've never done a plan to write an essay, so I'm glad to have a model to use."

Students also suggested that they needed more time devoted to supporting their writing.

Feedback at the end of the project showed that both lecturers found the Model and the activities and strategies helped them to integrate writing tasks into their teaching. They commented that, while they did not necessarily use the activities exactly as described, having activities that they could adapt, was helpful as illustrated by the following comments:

"This project and the 'In Writing' book have provided a valuable framework for teaching writing skills for the students and for myself. It also fits well within the constructivist paradigm of student-centred learning." [Physics lecturer]

"The final comments from the students were positive. They all felt more confident about tackling writing tasks and were so encouraged by the Model, that they advocated its inclusion in all university courses, to strengthen the writing skills of students." [Education lecturer]

Feedback also suggested that the two lecturers used activities and strategies in different ways in response to the different needs of their students, as illustrated by the following comment:

"The students in the Communications class did not have sound literacy skills, were rather insecure and felt intimidated by the thought of being involved in the project. The Mathematics students were not particularly receptive, because, 'It wasn't Maths'." [Education lecturer]

Both lecturers found that getting students to write drafts and review writing were particularly helpful and something which was a new activity for students and in the case of the Education lecturer for her too, as illustrated by the following comments:

"This process [reviewing] allowed students to reflect on their peers' writing as well as their own. Student feedback indicated this was a particularly valuable, difficult but rewarding process." [Physics lecturer]

"The students brought in their essays and swapped them with other students, to complete the Review section. They had never been engaged in the task of reading and writing constructive comments on other people's essays. It was an eye-opener for them and it also gave them an insight on how others approached a task." [Education lecturer]

In terms of student feedback, students generally valued having writing support as part of their regular learning, believed that their writing had improved and expressed increased confidence about themselves as writers, as illustrated by the following comments:

"I feel I will be a lot more knowledgeable about how to tackle an essay from the onset. Following the format will be a lot easier and I will be a lot more comfortable." [Education student]

"I am beginning to feel more confident in myself as an essay writer. Before this essay, I had never used a plan. This essay writing has taught me ways to become an excellent writer for future tasks." [Education student]

Feedback from participants at the Teaching and Learning Forum 2000 in February 2000 who previewed the booklet (see Appendix 3) in terms of its format and layout, chapter structure, useability and relevance of activities were positive. Examples of typical comments were:

"Very clear. Print is a good size, pictures are fun, story line is great and relevant."

"Friendly, clear layout encourages you to read on."

"Easy to follow, clear focus, addresses the major concerns of academics and offers good ideas..."

"Encourages reflection by teacher on activity which is relevant to current educational practice."

"Very relevant for the academic environment. Well done!"

"A useful tool for teachers in the sciences particularly."

"I feel really energized to give it a try with my students and I'm pleased I haven't printed off my unit guide yet!"

"This book should be issued to all staff so we're following the same guidelines."

"I love your book. Layout and structure is brilliant and really useful strategies."

Based on further informal feedback from lecturers and our own reflections, we have revised Chapter 1, added an additional graphic and changed the title to reflect more accurately that the booklet is aimed at lecturers and not students. One thousand copies of the revised edition are currently being printed and will be available at cost from CEA Publications, Curtin.

A list of publications arising from the project

de la Harpe, B., & Radloff, A. (in press). Helping lecturers to help students be self-directed about their writing. Refereed proceedings of the Teaching and Learning Forum 2000.

de la Harpe, B., & Radloff, A. (2000). *Enhancing writing: A guide to integrating writing support across the disciplines* (A CUTSD funded project). Perth, WA: Curtin.

de la Harpe, B., Radloff, A., Giddy, J., Zadnik, M., & Yukich, J. (2000). Presenting a practical resource to help you enhance your students' academic writing skills. *Proceedings of the 9th Teaching and Learning Forum 2000*, Perth, WA. <http://cleo.murdoch.edu.au/asu/pubs/tlf/>

de la Harpe, B., & Radloff, A. (2000). *Enhancing student academic writing: A teaching resource to foster expert learning*. Paper accepted for presentation at the Innovations 2000 Conference, Helsinki, Finland.

Radloff, A., & de la Harpe, B. (2000). *Helping students develop their writing skills – a resource for lecturers*. Paper accepted for presentation at the ASET-HERDSA Conference 2000, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland.

Radloff, A., & de la Harpe, B. (2000). *Supporting student writing: A practical guide for lecturers*. Paper accepted for presentation at the Communication Skills in University Conference, Fremantle, Western Australia.

Other means of dissemination

The project web site: <http://www.cea.curtin.edu.au/esaw>

Copies of the booklet have been sent to every University Library and Professional Development Centre in Australia, as well as to a number of specialists in the field in Australia and overseas.

Workshops about the project are planned for presentation at the ATN universities.

A book launch is being planned when the revised edition is printed.

Acknowledgments

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We sincerely thank the Centre for Educational Advancement, Curtin, for administrative assistance, office-space and facilities, and financial assistance;

Marjan Zadnik, a prize-winning physics teacher and Joy Yukich, an experienced mathematics teacher, for so enthusiastically trialling and evaluating selected teaching and learning strategies and activities included in the book;

Jenny Giddy, Research Associate for the project, for managing the project and us so well;

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Kathleen Manners, desktop publisher, for her professionalism and patience.

In addition, we thank Marjan's and Joy's students for so willingly sharing their reactions to the teaching and learning activities aimed at enhancing their writing. We also thank the students – ours and theirs – for providing the student voice throughout the book.

Finally, we acknowledge the interest and input of Maria Fiocco, Planning Director, Curtin International College, Perth, Australia who provided valuable suggestions and prepared a model Economics assignment for the book; Sandra J. Martin, Learning Consultant, NWRC, Saskatchewan, Canada and Angus Morrison-Saunders, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Studies, Notre Dame University, Fremantle, Australia, who shared with us their teaching and learning strategies for supporting writing; and Dai Hounsell, Head, Department of Higher and Further Education, Edinburgh University, Scotland who offered encouragement for the project and gave us a prepublication copy of his chapter on history essay writing.

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Contact details

We are willing to be contacted for advice regarding our project.

Associate Professor Alex Radloff

Phone: (08) 9266 2292

Fax: (08) 9266 3051

Email: A.Radloff@curtin.edu.au

Dr Barbara de la Harpe

Phone: (08) 9266 7250

Fax: (08) 9266 3051

Email: B.delaharpe@curtin.edu.au

Previewing the book



Look through the book and consider and comment on:

Format and layout

Chapter structure

Useability

Relevance of activities

I would like a copy of *Enhancing writing: A guide to integrating writing support across the disciplines* to help me integrate writing support into my teaching.

NAME: _____