

SHORT NOTES ON CLASSROOM INNOVATIONS

Fostering student engagement in an academic writing class through an electronic academic writing survey

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ABSTRACT

Students who show interest in their learning and participate in educational activities and lessons in ways that are likely to result in enhanced learning are often referred to in the literature and by teacher practitioners as “engaged” students (e.g. Axelson & Flick, 2010; Coates, 2005; Trowler, 2010). Higher education institutions and teachers alike agree on the desirability of such engagement, but most would acknowledge that promoting and enabling student engagement is no easy task. In this article, I describe a teaching activity that I tried which aimed to boost student engagement in a lesson for a compulsory academic writing course that few students seemed to be particularly interested in. The activity took the form of an academic writing survey which was administered through our university’s Virtual Learning Environment, and which involved students responding to twelve statements about academic writing (e.g. *All academic writing is essentially the same*) using the options *Agree*, *Disagree*, or *I don’t understand this*. I suggest that the survey fostered student engagement in several ways, for example by activating students’ mental schemas prior to class and by providing a springboard from which teachers could discuss academic writing in ways that were personally relevant to the students in the class. While the survey described is specific to the course that I taught, I suggest that the principles underlying the effectiveness of the activity can be transferred to other classrooms in other contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Student engagement has in recent years been very much in focus in the higher education context. This focus undoubtedly stems at least in part from the increasing commodification of the higher education sector, in that measures of “student engagement” are increasingly being seen as a quality indicator for both institutional excellence as well as individual faculty performance. As a university educator, however, I would like to think that our collective and sustained concern with student engagement is primarily rooted in the pedagogic benefits that we believe it has for student learning. As research has indicated, students who are

engaged are likely to learn more (e.g. Astin, 1984/1999; Coates, 2005; Graham, Tripp, Seawright & Joeckel, 2007), and it is therefore important for us to explore ways by which we can boost student engagement in our universities.

Used prolifically throughout higher education, the term “student engagement” in fact has a variety of different meanings in the research literature, not all of which are intended by everyone who uses the term in discussing how to enhance student engagement at the university. For example, in terms of its scope, the concept can be seen as broadly encompassing not just an interested and active involvement in the academic curriculum, studying, and lessons, but also participation in campus and educational activities (including, for instance, orientation activities and student governance), and regular interactions with peers and faculty (e.g. Astin, 1984/1999; Coates, 2005; Trowler, 2010). (See also Krause (2005) for further ways to stretch our conceptualisations of what “engagement” might mean.) Additionally, much of the literature also recognises a distinction between outward, visible signs of engagement on the one hand (i.e. what students do), and internal, less-easily observed forms of engagement on the other (what students may feel and think). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), for instance, usefully distinguish between “behavioural engagement” (visible participation in educational activities), “emotional engagement” (affective reactions such as “interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety” (p. 63)), and “cognitive engagement” (mental investment in tackling challenging issues). And Astin (1984/1999), working with the concept of “involvement” (which Axelson and Flick (2010) credit as being the precursor to current studies on “engagement”), differentiated between a “behavioural” component and a more “interior” component of student involvement, before ultimately prioritising student behaviour that could be seen, asserting that, for him, “[i]t is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement” (p. 519).

In this article, my aim is to share some insights into an activity that I tried which aimed to boost student interest and participation in a lesson for a compulsory course that few students seemed particularly keen to be doing. As such, I will be using the term “student engagement” to mean very specifically the students’ active involvement and participation in this lesson. While the visible, behavioural component of the students’ involvement is largely the basis upon which I gauge the success of the activity (e.g. Do the students readily contribute their ideas in class? Do their facial expressions indicate interest?), the reasons and explanations that I suggest for the effectiveness of the activity will relate to underlying affective and cognitive factors.

The rest of this article unfolds as follows. I begin by giving an overview of the course for which I felt I needed to boost student engagement. This was a compulsory academic writing course that all first year undergraduates at my university have to take. I then describe a course-initial activity that I designed

which aimed to engage students in the first lesson of the twelve-week course. The activity took the form of an online “academic writing survey” created and administered through Blackboard, which is our university’s online course management system. Finally, I discuss some of the ways in which I see the activity fostering student engagement and offer some thoughts on adapting this activity for other classes.

THE ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE

“Academic Discourse Skills” is a course taken by all first-year undergraduates at my university, regardless of their academic specialisation. Because of its “core” status in our undergraduate curriculum, the student enrolment for the course each year is typically quite large, somewhere in the region of 300 to 600 students. The course focuses broadly on critical reading and writing in an academic context, and takes an approach informed by practices from the fields of Critical Language Awareness (e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Clark & Ivanič, 1997), critical pedagogy (e.g. Benesch, 2001), and Academic Literacies (e.g. Lillis, 2001). What this translates into in practice is a three-pronged approach where students are encouraged to discuss and question academic literacy practices, where teachers explicitly teach the conventions of academic writing but always in the context of why conventions have evolved the way they have, and where students are encouraged to develop an independent ability to figure out the expectations of their disciplines for themselves through the guided analysis of genuine academic texts. The large cohort is divided up into tutorial groups of around 20 students per group, with each group led by individual tutors who all work according to the same weekly schedule and with materials that I designed as the course coordinator.

The academic writing course is one that our students know they need. As research has shown, students entering higher education need help understanding the expectations and conventions of the academic discourse community (see, for example, Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Bartholomae, 1985; Lillis, 2001; Wardle, 2009; Wingate & Tribble, 2012; Woodward-Kron, 2004) because the kinds of writing that are valued by this community are different from those which may be valued in other contexts, and students by and large do not take long to recognise that the kinds of writing that might have “worked” for them in the past are not necessarily received positively in higher education (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). Despite recognising the importance of knowing the valued social practices associated with tertiary level academic literacy, many undergraduates, I have noticed, tend not to be naturally excited by a class devoted to academic writing. I therefore found it a challenge to design lessons which address the areas that need addressing, in a way that engages the students. The academic writing survey described in the next section was one of the activities that I tried which seemed to work.

THE “ACADEMIC WRITING SURVEY” AS A TOOL TO BOOST ENGAGEMENT

Prior to the start of the semester in which this activity was carried out, I set up a survey using the survey tool in Blackboard. This tool was useful in that it could process and collate all of the students’ responses and, on demand, generate percentage figures to show how the students responded to each of my survey prompts.

At the heart of the activity was a list of 12 statements centred around academic writing:

1. All academic writing is essentially the same.
2. What defines academic writing the most is the form that it takes.
3. Academic writing is objective.
4. Academic writing is subjective.
5. Academic writing is a form of self-expression.
6. Academic writing is discriminatory.
7. Persuading a reader in academic writing is just the same as persuading a person in any other context.
8. Academic writing is full of rules and conventions that writers have to follow.
9. The rules and conventions of academic writing are quite clear to me.
10. Success in academic writing rests solely on the quality of a writer’s ideas.
11. Academic writing involves the taking on of a role.
12. Structurally difficult sentences and the frequent use of long, complex, multi-syllabic words are necessary characteristics of good academic writing.

The students were asked to log into Blackboard a few days before their first tutorial, navigate to the academic writing survey, read the twelve statements, and then choose from the options, *Agree*, *Disagree*, or *I don’t understand this*. The students were assured that all the answers given would be anonymous, and that their tutors and I were only interested to see a collated overall percentage score of the different responses across the entire cohort of students, not the individual responses of individual students. This, I felt, would encourage students to give responses that reflected their real perceptions and understanding of academic writing, rather than answers they might have felt expected to give.

It should be emphasised at this point that the pre-class survey was designed to be a tool which would be used to promote student engagement in the first face-

to-face class of the semester. While the actual, specific results of the survey were to some extent useful in that they gave my tutors and me an overall sense of the cohort's perceptions of academic writing before the start of the course, the specific results in themselves were not the main point of the activity. I was thus not overly concerned about whether we would get survey responses that we expected. Instead, what I was primarily interested in when I designed the activity were: (i) getting a set of survey results which had emerged out of the responses of the entire cohort that we could use as a springboard for discussion in the academic writing class (and this could be done whatever the specific results of the survey), and (ii) getting our students to think about those statements before coming to class.

During the first class of the semester, all the tutors across the different tutorial groups accessed Blackboard from the computer in the classroom in which they were teaching, generated the survey results right there and then, and displayed the results for the students on the overhead screen. Figure 1 shows an excerpt of what the students would have seen in class. (These figures are based on 340 students completing the survey.)

HOW THE ACTIVITY FOSTERED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

While the activity described above was designed primarily to boost engagement in the very first lesson of our twelve-week academic writing course, it was envisioned that a strong and engaging first lesson would set the tone for the rest of the semester. I felt that it was important for us to give the students opportunities to participate actively from very start of the course and to convey to them that this was a course where their views would be valued. From personal experience and accounts in the literature (e.g. Davis, 2009; Jenkins, 2012), the first classes of every semester are crucial – a participatory culture that is established in the first lesson often carries through for the rest of the semester.

In the rest of this section, I discuss five ways in which I think the activity was effective in fostering student engagement in our academic writing class.

(i) By capitalising on students' natural curiosity about their peers

The students were shown the pattern of responses made by the entire cohort of students taking the course, and I found that the students seemed genuinely curious and interested to see what sorts of responses their peers had given, and they seemed excited to see the extent to which their own thoughts about academic writing were confirmed or contradicted by their classmates. The encouragement of curiosity in the classroom has been found to be an important element of student motivation. Busher and Harris (2000), for instance, note that “[students’] level of curiosity and interest is an important factor influencing

Question 1 Multiple Choice	
All academic writing is essentially the same.	
Answers	Percent Answered
Agree	27.353%
Disagree	70.294%
I don't understand this	2.353%
Unanswered	0%
Question 2 Multiple Choice	
What defines academic writing the most is the <i>form</i> that it takes.	
Answers	Percent Answered
Agree	74.118%
Disagree	17.059%
I don't understand this	8.824%
Unanswered	0%
Question 3 Multiple Choice	
Academic writing is objective.	
Answers	Percent Answered
Agree	62.941%
Disagree	34.118%
I don't understand this	2.941%
Unanswered	0%

How the Activity Fostered Student Engagement

Figure 1. An excerpt of the results from my academic writing survey.

subsequent learning”, adding that students whose curiosity and interest have been aroused are likely to pay more attention and are less likely to become bored in class (p. 82). While some might argue that this activity capitalises on the students’ interest in and curiosity about their peers and that it does not in fact promote interest in and curiosity about academic writing, I would suggest that the effectiveness of this activity lies in the former being a springboard to the latter. Students who are curious about and interested in looking at how their peers responded are likely to become curious about and interested in the ideas to which those peers were responding.

(ii) *By activating students’ schema prior to class*

One of the reasons why this activity was able to promote enhanced participation in our first lesson was because the survey was designed to get students thinking about their understanding and assumptions regarding academic writing before they came to class. Research has found that the activation of students’ prior knowledge improves the likelihood that students will remember the concepts

that are subsequently taught, raises the level of interest and motivation, and facilitates students' making mental connections, ultimately contributing to "deeper learning" (Jensen & Nickelsen, 2008, p. 74). Because our students had already activated their own mental schemas about academic writing before coming to class, they were in a better position to build on those schemas in class, and contribute their thoughts in class.

(iii) By allowing us to make learning personally meaningful to students

Crucially, the survey allowed us to address key issues about academic writing in a way that was personally meaningful to the students, because it was the students' perceptions, and in some cases misconceptions, which served as the starting point for our discussion about academic writing. For example, if we consider the statement *What defines academic writing the most is the form that it takes*, we see from Figure 1 that in this particular cohort, 74% agreed with this statement. This created an excellent springboard for us to discuss what defines academic writing. When I discussed this statement with my students, I talked about the importance of the conventions of academic writing (i.e. the form that it takes), but emphasised that what is even more important is in fact the reasons behind those conventions. Many students see the surface form of academic writing as its defining feature (e.g. the need for citations, the need for specific sections in a research paper). The figure of 74% opened up a natural teaching moment, allowing the course tutors to highlight the fact that academic conventions have not been arbitrarily decided upon, but have instead emerged to serve real purposes. The need for a methodology section in research papers, for instance, stems from the very real need for readers to know how results in research studies have been obtained, so that they can be in a position to evaluate the validity of the findings of a study. Similarly, the need for citations, for instance, stems from the inherently intertextual nature of the academic enterprise. New work must be contextualised to show how they relate to existing work in order for the field to expand and develop, and ideas of others' which are referred to in one's own work must be acknowledged to ensure that each researcher is given the credit due to them. These endeavours, which are central to academic writing, necessitate citations. Thus it is not in fact the form of academic writing (in this case, the presence of citations) that defines academic writing, but the academic negotiations that underlie the citations.

Could we have taught the same things without the survey? Yes, certainly. But the fact that our students responded in a particular way to a statement on the survey, I suggest, made them more predisposed to think about their own understandings and to listen to our explanations. As Killen (2007) has said, "most people learn best through personally meaningful experiences that enable them to connect new knowledge to what they already believe or understand" (p. 2). By starting with what the students themselves knew and believed about the topic, we facilitated their understanding and retaining of the new ideas that we introduced.

(iv) By providing a non-threatening platform for students to put forward their views

Because it was the results of the cohort-wide survey, projected on the overhead screen for all the students to see, which were the basis of our discussions, it was unlikely that our students felt threatened even if misconceptions had to be corrected. For example, in Figure 2, we see the responses to Statement 7: *Persuading a reader in academic writing is just the same as persuading a person in any other context*. 45% of the cohort agreed with this statement, and 52% disagreed. These very polarised views were extremely useful to kickstart a discussion and created an opportune moment for tutors to ask their class: “Why do you think these 45% of your peers agree with this statement?” and “Why do you think 52% disagree?” We see, therefore, that one positive aspect of this activity was that the students were not placed in a position where they were asked to justify their own personal beliefs in front of their classmates, which could have been face-threatening. Instead, they were asked to think of reasons for why their peers may have responded in a particular way. This provided students with a non-threatening platform to put forward their views, thus boosting the visible participation in class.

(v) By creating a classroom environment where multiple perspectives are seen to be welcome

Students are sometimes worried about giving the “wrong” answer in class. This sometimes translates into a reluctance to voice their opinions if they are not entirely sure about them. Another positive consequence of displaying survey results showing polarised views was that it became clear that many issues about academic writing were not necessarily black and white issues. Given Statement 7 (seen in Figure 2), for example, the almost even split between the “Agrees” and the “Disagrees” gave tutors an opening to discuss why both sides had some truth to them. Those who chose to agree that persuading a reader in academic writing is just the same as persuading a reader in any other context were partially right because a person who is good at persuading in a non-academic context is typically able to discern who his/her interactants are, what their interests and values are, and what is likely to be persuasive to them, and this skill of appropriately and strategically addressing our audience’s interests is equally valued in academic persuasion. However, those who disagreed that persuading a reader in academic writing is just the same as persuading a reader in any other context were also right in that the kinds of reasons and evidence an academic reader demands are likely to be quite different from the kinds of reasons and evidence we might offer in other contexts. Our own past experience and endorsements from our friends may persuade in an everyday setting, but they do not usually count as strong evidence in an academic context. So, is persuasion the same in every context? Yes and no. It is the same in some ways but different in others. The polarised results on our academic writing survey allowed us to

Question 7 Multiple Choice	
Persuading a reader in academic writing is just the same as persuading a person in any other context.	
Answers	Percent Answered
Agree	45%
Disagree	52.353%
I don't understand this	2.647%
Unanswered	0%

Figure 2. Responses to statement 7 of the survey.

foreground the fact that a question may not necessarily have one single “correct” answer, but that different perspectives may be valid if explained and argued for. This, I suggest, helped to foster student engagement in our first lesson by creating a classroom environment where students knew that it was possible to engage with multiple viewpoints on the same issue. And this inclusive and participatory culture was something that we wanted to establish at the very start of the course, with the hope that it would be sustained throughout the semester.

CONCLUSION

The pre-course survey discussed above was designed to boost student engagement in the first lesson of a 12-week course, with the idea that if we could get the students to be interested in, to think about, and to actively participate in discussing the topic of academic writing in the first lesson, this would set the tone for the rest of the semester. The activity was thus designed to pique the students’ curiosity, activate their prior knowledge, make learning personally meaningful for the students, create a non-threatening platform for student participation, and establish a classroom culture where diverse viewpoints are accepted and engaged with. The accomplishing of these aims resulted in a raising of the level of student engagement in the lesson, which I gauged largely through behavioural signs such as the asking of good questions, a healthy level of contribution of ideas, and interested facial expressions and body postures. I did not, unfortunately, obtain specific measures of engagement (e.g. by eliciting feedback from our students), and that is certainly a possible route for a follow-up study. However, my main aim with designing this activity was from the perspective of a practitioner – to see visible involvement and participation in that first class, and I felt that this was clearly evident.

Finally, while the twelve statements that formed the basis of the survey described in this article are specific to the course that I taught and would clearly only

work for someone else if they were teaching a similar academic writing course, I would suggest that the principles underlying the effectiveness of the activity (discussed in the previous section) are transferable to other classrooms in other contexts. In adapting the activity for use in other classes, I would suggest that the following guidelines could be kept in mind in crafting the pre-course survey: (i) to think about the main ideas that we want to discuss with our students in the introductory session of our course, (ii) to turn those main ideas into a series of statements which students can respond to, (iii) to include ideas which we know from experience some students may have misconceptions about, (iv) to include at least a few genuinely debatable ideas where multiple perspectives are possible and could be equally valued, and (v) to try as far as possible to use words and terminology that will be familiar to students but at the same time not be overly concerned about students misinterpreting some of the terms we use (since misinterpretations, if any, can be clarified in the first lesson).

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