Improving student writing: working in partnership to develop the Student Academic Literacy Tool (SALT). (Project Report)

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Introduction

The project began after Sue Becker had spent several years delivering a first-year core module during which students submitted their first piece of assessed writing at the University. Sue observed high levels of anxiety amongst successive cohorts as they had little knowledge of what was expected of them in their first piece of extended writing at university level. Students' lack of preparation for the transition to university and unfamiliarity with academic writing style led to recognition that support for improving academic literacy needed to be embedded in disciplines as part of the first-year experience (Hathaway, 2015). As a way of supporting students to recognise and improve their writing styles, Sue had started to run a diagnostic academic writing test and provided targeted feedback to students as part of a formative assessment in their first term. Unfortunately, the highly-specialised nature of the test meant that both students and tutors on the module required extensive guidance and support to understand the technical aspects of academic writing identified in the diagnostic test. In May 2014, Sue was awarded a research grant as part of a cross-subject collaboration with the English Language Unit to develop strategies to improve student writing. A key dilemma in beginning the project was ensuring that the resources produced would be useful and accessible, as students often find tutor feedback too abstract (Hulme and Forshaw, 2009). In order to produce an effective and useful tool, it seemed appropriate for the tool to be created in partnership with current undergraduates who would be the primary users.

The current project aimed to improve student writing by working in partnership with students to produce a set of materials which would make the key features of a good academic writing style accessible and identifiable to students spanning a range of ages and abilities.

Partnership work

The decision having been taken to use research funding to employ student researchers on the project from the outset, the underpinning model of partnership working used for the project embraced the three key principles of effective partnership working, namely engagement, awareness and enhancement (Cook-Sather *et al*, 2014). In addition, a key driver behind the success of the project has been to enable whole-team ownership, with student research partners recognised as co-creators of the resource. Ownership of student-created intellectual property is often a point of tension between staff and students, since the traditional model of 'student as research assistant' provides the student with little visibility or publication credit. Indeed, as learning in Higher Education moves increasingly towards problem-based approaches, with students designing original studies and interventions, student ownership of the learning experience will increasingly provoke wider discussions of the ownership of the outputs of that experience (Silvernagel *et al*, 2009).

At the start of the project, three student researchers representing each level of undergraduate study were recruited. All had had experience of having their writing assessed by standard academic writing diagnostic tools, as part of a first-year Psychology module. All came to initial meetings with clear ideas of what was needed to design a tool that was accessible for students. The student researchers were encouraged to take equal ownership of the project and of the tool which they were developing. They were supported and guided by Sue Becker, who project-managed development of the tool, giving structure through a regular timetable of meetings and tasks, but enabling the student researchers to have the space to work through problems independently. In the early stages of the project, the student researchers needed to find a way of working collaboratively and meshing their individual writing and working styles.

> *We started by brainstorming ideas in preliminary meetings as to how to make the existing academic writing tool more generally accessible to students. Following this the team worked on developing the tool separately as a prototype booklet. Although at this stage, we felt that we did identify as a team, because we were developing our ideas individually we had differing ideas of what to expect throughout the course of this project. This became clear when we compared the three prototype as each booklet reflected our own individual expectations of structure and content. As a result, we thought it best to work as a group on one booklet as opposed to three separate approaches. This change of approach continued as redrafted our initial efforts into a single prototype and helped us to begin working as a team and develop a rapport and three people who did not initially know each other became friends and felt we were beginning to take ownership over the tool.*

On a practical level, student researchers were embedded into the wider research culture of the department by being given access to staff facilities and allocated a private workspace in the 'research village', where they worked amongst the community of postgraduate and staff researchers. This positioning of student researchers alongside 'professional' research staff was key to encouraging a sense of ownership and equity in the team, as this tacit support and acceptance gave the students an increased sense of the value of the project to the department. Over the course of three months, they grew in confidence and the draft version of the SALT balanced academic concerns about the importance of particular details of style and accessibility for novice writers. As the project has progressed, the student research partners have increasingly taken a lead in updating the wider Psychology team and promoting the tool through marketing activities in local colleges and creating an online version of the original booklet. The partnership approach has resulted in a determination by student researchers to continue both developing their ideas beyond the time limits of the initial project funding and also enhancing and disseminating the tool they have produced.

The Student Academic Literacy Tool (SALT)

The Student Academic Literacy Tool comprises two main elements. The key features of academic writing are divided into four sections: grammatical accuracy, correct use of language, structure/development of text and the use of relevant source material. Each section includes a set of criteria designed to enable students to identify key features of each element which they need to incorporate into their writing. In order to assess how successfully they have met each of the criteria, the SALT includes a two-stage checklist, in which students first identify where they have included each criterion and then rate how accurately

they have included these aspects. In order to enable students correctly to identify these key stylistic features and assess their own use of them in their writing, the second element of the SALT is a glossary, explaining each criterion in more detail and demonstrating, by means of short illustrative texts written by the student researchers, how these criteria appear in academic writing. To accompany the SALT, a tutor feedback template was also developed to enable individual students and tutors to work collaboratively, fostering dialogue about their respective perceptions of the student's work. The structured nature of this also allows students and staff to identify clearly areas for improvement in written assessments.

Evaluation - Piloting the SALT

In order to assess the usability of the SALT, the tool was produced in booklet format. The pilot study included 160 first-year psychology students at Teesside University, in their study skills sessions. Student researchers led these sessions during induction week, each working with and supporting groups of approximately fifty student participants, producing evaluation materials and facilitating participant engagement. Using this cohort allowed us to explore the opinions of students, from a range of backgrounds and with varying levels of ability, who had no prior experience of studying on this course. Participants used the tool to assess two extracts of pre-written text. In addition, they completed a twelve-item evaluation questionnaire and annotated booklets with comments and suggestions.

When the results were analysed, it was found that students' attitudes towards the tool were predominantly positive, with 61% indicating that they would definitely use the tool in the future. Amendments were made to the tool in accordance with the students' comments and preferences. 26% of students felt that the introductory section was too complex and that, in parts, the language was still too technical. Amendments were made to this section by editing it, thus reducing the length of introductory information from two pages of text to three bullet-pointed paragraphs. The language used was also simplified as much as possible. Finally, 68% of students said they would be more likely to make use of the tool if it were available electronically. Holly, Luke and Nadine have developed and made accessible an electronic version on the University blogspace. As, unfortunately, the lack of interactive features on this platform renders it merely an electronic repository, efforts are being made to secure support for the development of an interactive version of SALT online by means of an app. Student researchers have also taken the lead in developing a mobile application for the tool. Furthermore, they have now added successful income generation to the list of skills they are acquiring, having entered the project into the JISC Summer of Student Ideas competition and been shortlisted to compete in the second round.

Impact and dissemination

The wider impact of the project has been to embed academic writing training and support within the first-year experience of Psychology students at Teesside University. Induction sessions have now been revised to include academic writing and study skills. In addition, the SALT is now used as part of the formative assessment for all level 4 study skills modules. The first piece of written assessment which students submit is now formatively assessed using the SALT during the first eight weeks of term, providing students with the opportunity to compare their self-evaluation with tutor evaluation, using a newly-developed tutor version of the tool. The SALT now sits as part of an embedded programme of writing skills support

delivered by subject tutors and also includes a short series of workshops designed by English Language tutors to explore key aspects of language and grammar in more detail.

As a result of dissemination of the paper-based version of the SALT at University Learning and Teaching events, the tool is also being used to support writing workshops across science and computing subject areas, as well as being introduced in local sixth form colleges. The successful dissemination of the tool has been prompted by the recognition of its collaborative nature and the benefits of providing materials developed in partnership with students. The professionalism and creativity which Holly, Luke and Nadine have demonstrated in presenting the project and working with staff at both Teesside University and other North East Higher Education institutions has also led to wider interest by staff in the potential of working in partnership. For the academic year starting in 2015, plans are being developed for Holly and Nadine, who will be continuing in full-time study, to promote partnership working through the sharing of their experiences with staff from other subject areas at workshops and school events. Across Teesside University, the project is being recognised as an effective example of partnership working.

Lessons learnt

Ironically, the main lesson learnt by the researchers has been an increased awareness of the lack of confidence that many subject tutors express when asked to assess student writing. Although academic staff regularly mark and provide academic assessment feedback, which includes general comments on such aspects of writing as the level of formality, when asked to rate specific aspects of student writing, staff were initially reluctant to do so. The student research team worked with tutors to provide support and guidance on use of the tool to rate student writing and thereby increase tutor confidence in providing more specific and constructive feedback on aspects of academic writing style, instead of merely referring generally to, for example, 'informality'.   By working in partnership with students, Sue has recognised their positive impact when acting as leaders for change. In particular, students collaborating with staff to refine the application of specific and useful feedback at the start of the transition to Higher Education may well increase transparency and succeed in eliminating at last such unhelpfully vague comments as 'Try to write more academically!' Although student researchers were originally brought on to the project as 'research assistants', we now describe ourselves as 'Team SALT' in recognition of the equality of ownership. Institutional descriptions of the project nevertheless still stubbornly reinforce traditional staff-student models of project management by referring to the team as 'Sue Becker and her student research assistants'.

Reflection - experiences of partnership work

> *Sue Becker - When I began this project, I did so with the vague sense that in order to develop a tool which was useful to students. I needed to work with students to develop something which not only reflected what I thought might be useful but which actually reflected students' needs. I was not sure what to expect from Holly, Luke and Nadine, apart from the enthusiasm and ideas they brought to our initial meetings. Over the last year, I have learnt that working in partnership means enabling students to take ownership of projects and that, in sharing control and ownership, the impact of partnership research goes beyond the quality of the output. I have watched Holly, Luke and Nadine grow in confidence and overcome barriers and challenges with a*

maturity and tenacity that I and many of my colleagues find inspiring. Looking back on our progress, a key driver for me has been to recognise that enabling student ownership does not pose a threat to my credibility as an academic; rather, in the act of 'letting go' of traditional power relationships in the research team, my student research partners have had the freedom to develop and realise their potential.

__Holly Shahverdi__ - I applied for the student researcher position on this project in my second year of study. I was apprehensive as I had never been involved in any extracurricular activities at the University, but I was excited to share this journey with the rest of the team. Throughout the project, we have faced and overcome challenges and been pushed out of our comfort zones, and these experiences have equipped me with skills that I can apply to both my studies and to my life outside of university.

For me, this experience has helped me to grow as an individual and encouraged me to think about the potential barriers that exist for students in attaining a good standard of academic writing. But most importantly, I feel that I have worked with such inspiring people, and I know that I would not be the person I am today had I not had the courage to apply for this post.

__Luke Kennedy__ - When I received the invitation to be a part of this project, I was immensely grateful to Sue for the job opportunity. It granted me legitimate psychological work experience and I found myself impressed with the grounded and pragmatic approach utilised by Sue in the orchestration of the project; being asked to work in partnership with a staff member on student-centric issues evoked feelings of respect and equality. Before the first meeting, I felt somewhat apprehensive concerning how the relational dynamic between myself and my colleagues would affect our efficacy to complete the coming challenges. The end of the first meeting saw any hint of doubt resolutely dissolved; we were all equally fervent concerning the nature of the project and the ideas we developed as individuals, with the guidance of Sue transformed quickly into an efficient team plan. Herein, I was confident in the capabilities of the partnership to complete our initial objective and do so well. The experiences gained throughout the course of the project however, have shown me that working in partnership, we have grown and surpassed even my own expectations. Together we have conducted pilot studies and evaluated the feedback, presented at conferences, both of these tasks required the building of confidence as an imperative, speaking in front of people and taking control of other students are not tasks I am particularly comfortable with and consequently through necessity I have acquired new and invaluable social and leadership skills. I feel it appropriate to mention, that teamwork became a vital prerequisite for success for this project and consequently a fortunate bi-product of this process is that I no longer consider Sue, Holly or Nadine my colleagues anymore; they are my friends.

__Nadine Spence__ - When I initially found myself working on this partnership project I did not anticipate that it would help me as much as it has. I have been able to gain valuable experience working on a real study and developing the tool. Although within my degree I have found myself doing work with groups, the teamwork found in this project has much surpassed any teamwork I have been involved with prior. This has shown to me the effective ways in which students can work in partnership with staff. I

feel the main thing I have gained throughout my time on this project is an increase in confidence. Some of the skills I have been able to utilise whilst on the project, such as piloting the tool and speaking at conferences, are skills I was not aware I had. Although, prior to doing so I was still unsure of my capabilities, being given the opportunity to do so has allowed me to see what skills and capabilities I have. I feel a lot of the confidence and capabilities I have gained through my time on the project have been down to working with and being encouraged by Sue, Holly and Luke, the experience I have gained through this project has been fantastic.

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