

# EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS



The Magazine of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA)

Issue 17.4

December 2016 ISSN 1469-3267

£9.50 Cover price (UK only)

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## Investigating educational developers' perceptions of assessment literacy

John Dermo, University of Bradford

### Introduction

*'Higher education is, in general, thinly populated with academics who are experts in assessment (there are probably rather more who consider themselves experts).'* (Yorke, 2011, p. 267)

Assessment literacy has been a common topic of discussion in UK Higher Education in recent years, largely as a result of the work emerging from the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which focused primarily on developing student assessment literacy (Price *et al.*, 2012; Sambell *et al.*, 2013). Prior to that, discussion around assessment literacy (mostly in the USA) had concentrated on staff assessment literacy in the school sector (Stiggins, 1995).

In 2015-16, a SEDA-funded small research project explored the concept of assessment literacy from the perspective of the educational developer, who has been largely overlooked in the literature of assessment literacy to date. The project set out to answer the following questions:

- What does assessment literacy mean to educational developers in higher education?
- How do educational developers engage with the concept in theory and in practice?
- What are the implications for provision of initial and continuing professional development in higher education?

### The research project

The study consisted of three stages, each providing different perspectives on the research questions: an initial online questionnaire to educational developers was followed up by more detailed discussion in a workshop session with SEDA conference delegates; then finally a longer in-depth discussion took place with an expert focus group. All three data collection activities were structured around the three research questions, and the data analysis used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in search of common themes. Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Humanities, Social and Health Sciences Research Ethics Panel at the University of Bradford on 2 October 2015.

### Online questionnaire

The initial online questionnaire was published in autumn 2015 via the SEDA mailing list and further publicised at the SEDA 2015 annual conference. There

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an antidote to the context within which higher education locates currently and which they overview effectively in their introductory chapter. Indeed, so comprehensive is this chapter, individuals who are unsure how to understand V4 in the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) could be guided to it. Other interweaving themes are identified in these early pages and are equally welcome – diversity, relationships, dialogue and enquiry.

A small, but important point to note is that whilst the book has much to offer individuals who practise within HE in the UK, there is more than one reference to tuition fees in the introduction and subsequent chapters, which is misleading. At present, some students in the UK do not pay them.

Whilst each chapter fits within the totality of the book and its intended purpose, a number stand out. Chapter 2, centred on course and learning design and evaluation, is illustrative of the book's potential. It is both philosophical and practical. It is also provocative, for example, by inviting the reader to view the construct of the curriculum critically with an emphasis on its lack of neutrality. It also offers guidance for early career academics and those who are more experienced as they enact the curriculum and it is why I imagine this book stimulating debate because academics can and do make choices in their practice

which shape what students experience. It leads seamlessly into Chapter 3 and an exploration of learning environments. It too is challenging, pressing the reader to reflect on their conceptions of the learning environment, and how they intervene within it. This raises the question of expectations – those of students and those held by the individual academic. The risk of mismatch is suggested. At heart, this is a very practical chapter with ideas offered making it a rich resource. Chapter 6 focuses on student engagement and encourages reflection from the outset. It recognises that the primary vehicle for engaging students is the relationship with the educator. As such, it values the role and suggests the need to invest in it.

Overall, the book's potential rests in the fact that it does not offer solutions without first engaging the reader in reviewing their practice. Each chapter is a rich resource with direction to useful websites and further reading. I recommend it.

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Smith, Jan (2010) 'Academic identities for the twenty-first century', *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 15.

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# Lessons learnt: Blended approaches to academic writing

**Sylvie Lomer**, University of Manchester, and **Elizabeth Palmer**, University of Northampton

## Introduction

In 2018, the University of Northampton (UoN) will move to a new campus, which will be allied to a new pedagogical model. The new Learning and Teaching Plan emphasises blended, active learning through practical application, real-world tasks and scenarios, collaboration and independent learning, rather than more traditional formats, such as lectures. This shift in teaching and learning methods is changing educational development strategies, staff development and teaching methods at the chalk face. The innovations introduced as part of this plan offer educational developers interested in incorporating active and blended approaches into curricula a range of different options and reflections.

Learning Development, a central team at the UoN, was an early adopter of this approach. The team offers a range of transferable cognitive and academic skills development opportunities for students through online resources and face-to-face workshops, which are embedded into modules on the request of the subject lecturers. We began adopting blended learning approaches to workshop delivery, especially for academic writing, working closely with subject academics to develop e-tivities that could be repurposed and reused. This proved also to be an effective way for subject lecturers to trial blended approaches, in a slightly lower-stakes environment than their week-to-week subject lecture and seminar model. Reworking one full session with the support of a Learning Developer,

and then (in some cases) team-teaching the session, proved to be a successful staff development strategy, demonstrating the value of the new approach. For the students, adopting a blended model was intended to provide the opportunity for low-stakes writing practice with scaffolded tasks. Blended learning also offers extension and enrichment beyond the limited allocation of face-to-face workshops with Learning Development, often only an hour or so a term.

The case studies in this article exemplify some of Learning Development's approaches to designing blended learning activities. Despite following guidance available in the literature, the activities have generated fluctuating levels of student engagement, which we are trying

to understand both for the sake of our own team and to support subject staff in their development of blended learning. At this stage, our primary concern is to address student engagement in blended learning in order to ensure the success of the new pedagogical model. In this article, we are not attempting to evaluate the efficacy of blended learning interventions, as this has been demonstrated in other research. Rather, we critically examine what we have learnt within our context. For other institutions, following similar approaches, we hope that this might prove helpful in terms of ideas for approaches to educational development.

## What we did

Since 2014, we have been experimenting with different models of blended delivery and with different online tasks for academic writing across a range of programmes and subject areas. The creation of skills development e-tivities was informed by a number of principles including: clear instructions and design, explicit purpose, perceived relevance, practice opportunities, interactive, structured pathways and sequencing, effective feedback and interactions with the tutor (Swan, 2001; Sims *et al.*, 2002; Lim *et al.*, 2007; Salmon, 2013; Clark and Mayer, 2012; University of Leicester, no date). This approach also enables students to develop digital literacy skills, particularly with regard to effectively participating, reviewing and providing feedback through forums and blogs.

## Case studies

We offer four examples of the types of activities we have undertaken with various cohorts. These represent some of our approaches to teaching academic writing. We have endeavoured to select examples that best represent some of the challenges of engagement we have faced. The authors are happy to provide further details upon request. For confidentiality, no examples of student work have been included.

It is worth noting that the University of Northampton's VLE (virtual learning environment) is a Blackboard platform.

The tasks designed are influenced by the affordances and constraints of this platform in terms of both the visual design and the type of online activity.

### Case study 1: Initial Teacher Training, second year undergraduates, Professional Studies Module, 171 students

#### Pre-session activities

Please note: These tasks were introduced in the last face-to-face session of first year undergraduate studies and the students had the summer to complete the tasks.

1) Discussion board with three threads, each a question about transition from first to second year academic writing. Students could use these boards to highlight their key concerns and their current understanding of what this transition would involve, outlining what they felt the 'level up' would be. Students were informed that this would determine the content of the face-to-face sessions.

2) Structured writing task directly linked to first second year assessment. Students were provided with:

- Starting point ideas through a PDF from the subject tutor
- Library resource links for research (see <http://tinyurl.com/jxb5f54>)
- A brief, which included a writing structure and model of writing (see <http://tinyurl.com/z9cn5ny>).

Students were required to bring their resulting 500 words to class.

#### Session

Peer-to-peer structured feedback activities on their writing and tasks to answer the responses to the pre-session discussion board questions. Course tutors led the session using LD designed materials. LD tutors revolved throughout and also provided feedback.

#### Post-session

Students amended their 500 words using guidance and feedback from the session. Formative feedback on their revised writing given by both subject tutors and LD tutor through an online discussion board.

#### Engagement


Fourteen students used the discussion board in order to raise questions or comments prior to the session. 90-95% of students who attended the face-to-face session had completed the writing task and brought it with them. 80 students used the opportunity for formative feedback following the session.

#### Reflection

This was probably the most successful of the interventions in terms of student participation. The length of time during the summer holiday to complete the task may have played a role, combined with the opportunity to shape the response for the tutors in the face-to-face sessions. The direct link to the first written assignment and the opportunity for formative feedback were clearly valued by the students.

**Task 2 - Developing your academic writing style**

Build Content ▾ Assessments ▾ Tools ▾ Discussion Content

 **The Task**

To assist in developing your academic writing style to Level 5 ahead of next year, use the summer holidays to write 500 words using the guidelines below.

- **Subject matter:** 'Inclusion' in the classroom plus one of these five strands - environment, planning, resources, delivery or assessment. Take a look at the document [Strategies for inclusive teaching](#) for further information about each strand.
- **Evidence:** Consider using the following journals and at least one other academic journal that you have found yourself to inform your writing:
  - Focus on Inclusive Education
  - International Journal of Inclusive Education
  - Journal of Social Inclusion
  - Social Inclusion
  - Equality Diversity and Inclusion – An international journal
- Refer to the [Library support pages for Education students](#) for guidance about locating academic journal articles. Remember that your module reading list is always a good starting point for an assignment!
- **Structure:** Use the paragraph structure and example detailed in the section below to help you write at the correct level.

Please note that you need to complete this task before the first Professional Studies lecture in Year 2 as your writing will form the basis of the lecture given by Elizabeth Palmer and Hannah Rose around academic skills. You will also get a chance to receive some feedback through a peer critique workshop in the seminar slot.

Screenshot of guidance for the structured writing task (Case study 1)

**Case Study 2: Paramedic Science, second year undergraduates, 15 students**

**Pre-session activities**

- 1) An interactive tutorial in Xerte software introduced the basics of academic writing (see <http://tinyurl.com/zoahbpz>)
- 2) Discussion board: students posted their 3 key lessons from 1-3 questions/ areas of confusion they still had, to inform the face-to-face input.

**Session**

In preparation for their first assignment in second year, each student was given an exemplar from previous years and asked to resolve the concerns raised on the discussion board. Students were then paired up where each had read a different assignment to compare responses. A plenary discussion resolved main concerns.

**Engagement**

Out of 12 students who attended the workshop, 8 students had participated in the discussion board and the session was much more focused as a result.

**Reflection**

Some completed the discussion board less than 24 hours before the session was timetabled, making planning difficult. A flexible 'just-in-time' approach to teaching is needed to implement this.

**Case Study 3: Photography, first year undergraduates, Photographic Practice Module, 40 students**

**Sessions**

The series of 2 sessions introduced Bloom's taxonomy for critical thinking. They used a single photograph (a politically motivated self-portrait). Bloom's taxonomy was implemented using the image.

**Session 1**

Session 1 focused on comprehension – application. Students used information provided (handout including historical background and artist's statement) to interpret the key elements of the image (implementing Bloom's taxonomy, 'comprehension').

**Post session activity 1**

Photography assignment designed in cooperation with subject staff to take their own self-portrait with a message (implementing Bloom's 'application'). These were submitted via 500px, a photo-sharing website in regular use by subject staff.

**Session 2**

Students shared self-portraits for peer interpretation. The session tasks moved on to latter stages of Bloom: synthesising (i.e. linking example photograph with other images) and evaluating (developing criteria for judgement) on original image.

**Post session activity 2**

A short writing task, critically analysing a photograph of their choice using the approaches introduced across both workshops.

**Engagement**

Engagement with the first post-session activity was very good, with about 80% of those who attended session 2 bringing a self-portrait. However, only 2 students completed the second task.

**Reflection**

Although photography students are required to write in their associated theory module, this module was seen as more practice oriented. Students therefore engaged more with what they saw as more relevant to the module i.e. activity 1 rather than 2.

Also, session 2 did not cover writing, so perhaps students were unprepared for the mode of delivery of activity 2. In future, a template or table to complete could be used rather than a free-form writing task.

**Case study 4: Midwifery, first year undergraduates, 45 students**

**Session**

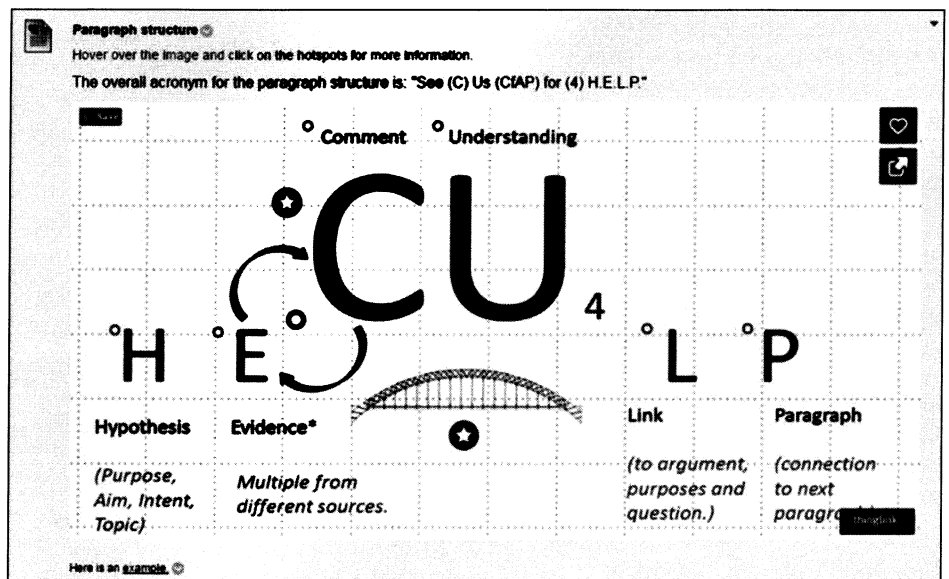
This was the last in a series of 4 workshops on academic writing. It used a scaffolded writing task modelled on an upcoming assessment. First, the session reviewed the key features of academic writing conventions introduced in sessions 1-3. Students were then provided with a table of abbreviated evidence and references for key maternal health conditions, which they used to write a short paragraph. Immediate face-to-face feedback from tutor and peers was provided.

**Post session activity**

Students submitted a typed, improved paragraph (based on feedback received in the session) to a private blog via Blackboard for personal feedback.

**Engagement**

All students present completed a handwritten paragraph in this time. Approximately 6 students completed the post-session activity, with clear improvements from in-class to online writing.



Screenshot of guidance for paragraph structure (Case study 4)

### **Reflection**

The pattern of engagement suggested that writing in-class with immediate face-to-face feedback, however brief, was seen as more valuable (or less optional) than online asynchronous, albeit more detailed feedback. Had subject lecturers been involved in the administration and feedback of this task, more could have been done with the post-session task. Alternatively, rather than having this as the final session, it could have taken place earlier with a follow-up.

### **What have we learnt?**

#### **Keep it simple**

The online task needs to be easy to find, in a place that students access regularly and preferably signposted from multiple locations. It needs to be embedded in regular course materials, not stand-alone. Tasks need to be transparent in purpose; benefits and instruction need to be simple and direct. The task itself can be cognitively challenging but understanding what they need to do needs to be straightforward. Tasks need to be staged but should not have too many elements; two or three is usually sufficient.

#### **Consider the particular needs of the student group**

Tasks need to be relevant to the subject, explicitly linked and resourced for the course. Providing generic tasks for skills development, on topics unrelated to the course, alienates students from the materials. Consider the time tasks will take actual students (not how long they would take us as a member of staff), especially during term time when they have multiple tasks from multiple modules, other assessments coming in or other things going on in the programme e.g. placements. During term, if the task can't be completed in under an hour, it probably won't be completed. More complex tasks can be developed by breaking them down into discrete units which build over several weeks. Across the summer, tasks can be more complex and time-consuming (see Case study 1). Indeed students may appreciate online tasks to complete during 'empty' periods.

#### **Flip or sandwich online tasks, don't assign as homework without follow-up**

Sandwiched tasks (face-to-face, online, face-to-face) can work especially well when short, relevant to subject and practical. Flipping either task or content and following up in the session encourage engagement and expedite face-to-face sessions. Pre-session tasks can help tailor the content of face-to-face (see Case study 1).

Scaffolding the task, showing students' models and examples encourages completion of tasks. Building up the complexity of tasks over time or in different task components is more effective than assigning a complex open-ended task (e.g. paramedics, photography), particularly post-session. Doing activities in the session, although time-consuming, enables the complexity of tasks to be built up faster with more depth and immediate feedback from the tutor, as well as peer learning. Following up on tasks encourages subsequent engagement in future tasks.

#### **Consider the mode of e-tivity carefully**

Consider the culture of the module and programme which you are designing or developing. How is it currently using blended learning? If students are met with a completely new way of working by comparison to their normal mode of study, they are unlikely to engage. The more familiar the mode of the e-tivity, the better.

Structured tasks need to be interactive, not just button-pressing. Student content generation is the ideal, but their content must be visibly, explicitly used. Online tools for the submission of writing practice need careful consideration (e.g. Turnitin, discussion board, journal/blog), particularly whether this tool allows for public or private submission. Public submission can encourage or inhibit engagement, depending on students' confidence, familiarity with each other and the novelty of the task. Levels of digital literacy with a wide range of tools are often highly variable. It is better to use a small selection well and consistently than to use lots of exciting but bewildering tools. Demonstration

of the tool live in the face-to-face session encourages engagement.

#### **Who sets the assignment (i.e. lecturer vs learning developer) impacts engagement**

Students say they don't perceive Learning Development staff separately from subject staff, but engagement says differently. Relationships with tutors appear to be key, and tasks are more likely to be completed for a tutor seen on a regular basis than for a guest lecturer or workshop delivered by a central team. Presenting tasks as 'optional extras' does not encourage engagement. Engagement is higher when subject lecturers visibly endorse and encourage engagement with the activities, ideally through team-teaching. Non-compulsory tasks can still generate anxiety for students, so clear support strategies must be provided e.g. online forums to ask questions.

#### **Manage feedback expectations and volume**

Explicit links to assessment work are key for students to see the relationship between weekly tasks and learning outcomes. Purpose and pedagogical underpinnings need to be transparent. Feedback opportunities must be built into the task. Involvement of subject lecturers is essential as a joint feedback effort appears to better encourage student participation. Students need to be clear about who will feedback to them, on what, by when, by what means and why. Individual feedback dramatically helps improve writing but takes time and the volume can be problematic. Peer-to-peer feedback needs to be well structured and scaffolded. Students need training in how to deliver and receive effective feedback – these are key academic and transferable skills. Peer feedback must be purposeful and it needs to be made clear to students why peer feedback is better suited in this context than feedback from staff.

#### **Conclusion**

Across the interventions that we have undertaken in this last academic year we have had very different levels of engagement between different

cohorts and students (Salmon, 2013, p. 180). In summary, our explanations for varied engagement include:

- Cultures of engagement with blended learning within the school and subject
- The perceived relationship between CfAP and the subject staff
- The time of year and student workload
- The perceived value of the task
- Characteristics of particular cohorts
- The design of the task itself.

All of these factors are underpinned by the relationship between Learning Developers, subject academics and the students. Unlike a subject lecturer who has regular face-to-face contact with students, sometimes a Learning Development tutor might only see a particular cohort once or twice. As a result, gaining the trust of the students is vital with regards to impacting their motivation to engage. As such, formative feedback mechanisms, whether online or in the session, become intrinsic to successfully engaging students in the task. In addition, successful explanation,

implementation and feedback strategies for the online activities involve a high level of negotiation and teamwork between academic subject staff and Learning Development staff. Students need to see coherence between tasks assigned by all members of staff involved. They need to see that transferable skills are valued by the subject staff. We also have to acknowledge that non-engagement is a valid exercise of students' agency and that we cannot, nor would want to, enforce compliance. A student-led research project is under way to explore these hypotheses and to uncover any additional reasons behind student engagement with blended activities.

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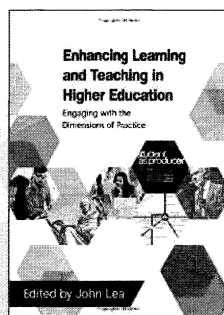
# Book Review

## Enhancing Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Edited by John Lea

Open University Press, 2015

ISBN: 13: 978 0 33 526416 2



As we start this new semester many more people will be involved in delivering – and receiving – courses on how to teach. This book, edited by John Lea, will doubtless be indispensable in this context.

The text contains six main chapters, including an Introduction and a Conclusion. The content is very much UK oriented, although highly dependent on research from the US and elsewhere.

In Chapter 1, John Lea and Nigel Purcell provide a brief literature review of what they call – following Boyer – the scholarship of teaching and learning. This is then followed by an outline of the work and role of the current Higher Education Academy (HEA) and, in particular, the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). The introduction is dense and hard to follow. It is replete with acronyms (with

no explanations of what they mean – although there is a useful glossary at the end of the book).

Chapter 2, by Cordelia Bryan, is called Enhancing Student Learning. This is a 30-page summary of key research and ideas. Although in some ways this chapter is a tour de force it inevitably oversimplifies issues, and doubtless few readers will follow up the references given (unless they are producing a portfolio for the HEA).

In Chapter 3, The Nature of Academic Time, John Lea shows how teaching, learning, research, leadership and management all overlap. As he notes, at the time when he wrote this chapter, there was the REF but not the TEF. The chapter concludes by considering whether or not academics should see themselves as working at or working for their institution. A provocative question.

Chapter 4 takes us into different territory – The Nature of Academic Space. In the first half Mike Neary discusses the effects of university buildings and campuses – both ancient and modern – on the branding and selling of universities – without, unfortunately, any illustrations. Helen Beetham's 'Inhabiting digital space', in the second half, is rather different. New technology provides a different kind