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Academic writing in distance learning programs: The tutors' perspective

Ακαδημαϊκή γραφή σε εξ αποστάσεως προγράμματα: Η σκοπιά του εκπαιδευτικού

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One of the major stumbling blocks in the academic world for many young scholars is mastering the techniques of academic writing. Some come into the scene with hordes of experience in the area having penned many papers over the years. Others have logged in quite a few drafts during the course of their studies, while a good number has not made much progress beyond exams and weekly assignments. The situation, however, becomes even more daunting when one is summoned to fine hone their academic writing skills in a foreign language while pursuing graduate work in a distance learning environment. Though there is a wealth of research on academic writing in the greater vicinity of the academic world of mortar and board institutions, very little research has been carried out to date in the context of foreign language pedagogy and distance learning. This paper focuses on the multiple benefits and problems of academic assignment writing as perceived by the tutors of the Course Design and Evaluation module offered through the MA in TESOL program at the Hellenic Open University (henceforth, HOU), concluding with suggestions for effective student preparation and training in academic writing.

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Η έρευνα βασίζεται στα αποτελέσματα μιας συστηματικής αξιολόγησης στη θεματική ενότητα "Σχεδιασμός, Ανάπτυξη και Αξιολόγηση Προγραμμάτων Σπουδών στη Διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής Γλώσσας" που προσφέρεται στα πλαίσια του μεταπτυχιακού προγράμματος ειδίκευσης καθηγητών Αγγλικής γλώσσας του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου. Παρόλο που οι φοιτητές ήταν θετικά προδιατεθειμένοι στα περισσότερα στοιχεία της ενότητας, η συγγραφή των γραπτών εργασιών αποτέλεσε ένα χώρο που ξεπέρασε τις προσδοκίες τους. Η έρευνα αυτή εστιάζει στα πολλαπλά οφέλη αλλά και τα προβλήματα της συγγραφής ακαδημαϊκών εργασιών, όπως αυτά γίνονται αντιληπτά από τους φοιτητές, και διατυπώνει προτάσεις για την αποτελεσματική προετοιμασία και εκπαίδευση στη συγγραφή ακαδημαϊκών εργασιών από τους φοιτητές του ΕΑΠ.

Keywords: Academic writing, distance learning, TESOL, adult learners

1. Introduction

One of the most disconcerting and dreadful moments for any college student is the laborious preparation and prompt submission of a written assignment. Though we tend to reminisce all the blissful and blithe moments of our early college years, one can never really forget those endless nights in front of a computer screen, sipping on the 4th cup of coffee and fussing over a paragraph or the proper use of a specific word while the clock read 3am, and the assignment was due “pronto” the very next morning on the instructor’s desk. In a nutshell, this pretty much describes the life of a carefree undergraduate college student trying to cram everything the night before a paper is due. The situation, however, becomes complicated when the individual assuming the role of the student is far from being a rampaging teenager with no worries and minimal responsibilities but rather an assiduous and hardworking adult who has decided to return to “school” after a long and academically dormant period in order to embark on an alternative education program and earn a graduate degree while, at the same time, juggling many pins, if you will, such as a full time job or being a full time parent (or parent-to-be).

In the realm of higher education, written assignments constitute the focal point of graduate school since they are geared toward the preparation for more complex research-oriented projects such as a master thesis and/or a dissertation. Though their role and merit is hardly disputed, there are, nonetheless, those voices from within the academic community (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Dysthe, 2007; Stierer 1997; Zorbas 2014) who assert that while there is, definitely, a demand for more refined pieces of academic research with a synthesis of a broad reading of theory and an original contribution to a particular area of inquiry, the skill of academic writing per se (also known as *academic literacy*) has literally taken the backseat, virtually leaving graduate students to their own devices.

On the other side of the pendulum, the students themselves have their own hurdles to overcome. Lea (2004) argues that due to the academic rigor inherent in this line of work, many students tend to feel quite befuddled and helpless because they really do not know how to go about putting an assignment together, and this becomes quite evident in the work they ultimately turn in. This is definitely the case with the postgraduate students at the HOU who struggle to meet the demands of such rigorous and complex (written) assignments without a solid background (nor formal training) in academic writing, and, as alarming as this may be, our educational system continues to pay no heed to a brooding problem.

Throughout this paper we will predominantly focus on the multiple benefits and problems of academic assignment writing as perceived by the tutors and conclude with suggestions for the effective preparation and training of HOU students in academic writing.

2. Evaluating the Course design and evaluation module: Main results

According to a recent study (Karavas et al 2009), the majority of the students in one of the modules at the HOU (i.e., *Course Design and Evaluation*) were positively predisposed toward most of the features of the course. On the whole, the students were satisfied with all aspects of the course and stated that the module managed to fulfill their expectations to a

great extent. An area, however, which exceeded their expectations (and ours for that matter) was the writing of academic assignments. Their responses to the questionnaire yielded the following results:

- The module materials were found comprehensive, up-to-date and clearly written.
- The course materials facilitated the understanding of key concepts and principles of course design.
- The content of the module was directly relevant and applicable to classroom practices
- The accompanying reader and the extra articles provided on the Yahoo site for the course design module were deemed useful in understanding course design principles.
- The contact sessions were well organized.
- The quality of communication with the course tutor as well as the feedback provided was deemed extremely helpful and effective.

2.1. Unexpected results: Perceived value of academic writing assignments

Students' evaluation of the various course elements mentioned in the previous section were on the whole positive and alleviated any reservations we had concerning the density of information included in the materials and the transparency, the clarity of the written work. *What exceeded our expectations though and pleasantly surprised us was our students' attitudes towards the written assignments which constitute part of their assessed work. The vast majority of our students (85%) rated the assignments they had to complete for the course, good to excellent.*

This result was unexpected given the many constraints that may impede students' willingness and motivation to complete written assignments. What are these constraints?

a) *Effect of previous educational experiences, prior beliefs about teaching and learning.*

Given that our students have been brought up and acculturated in the Greek educational system which is highly teacher-centered and exam oriented, and taking into account the fact that students' expectations of postgraduate study are formed on the basis of their prior learning experience and beliefs about teaching and learning (Kember et al 2003, Laing et al 2005), we expected that academic assignment writing would contradict their preconceived notions of effective learning and assessment and that our students would regard the final written examination as a more efficient and valid assessment tool.

b) *Students' lack of familiarity and practice with the conventions of academic writing.*

Academic writing skills and the development of academic or tertiary literacy which is defined as the articulation of high level arguments in appropriate language which genuinely enables intellectual level of thought to be expressed (Lea 2004), are not developed automatically through participation in formal education be it secondary or tertiary. Adjusting to learning in higher education, developing academic discourse and academic writing skills is part of the socialization process that students need to undergo in order to survive and succeed in their studies. Academic writing is one of the greatest difficulties that graduate students face regardless of the context in which they are studying and the subject they are specializing in and as Mullen (2001) states, graduate students need to experience productive, systematic and well-designed interventions that will help them change their perceptions as non-writers and socialize them into the intricacies of academic writing. Our postgraduate students have had little if any experience and practice with the mechanics and conventions of academic writing

at undergraduate level. They enter this postgraduate program usually years after completing their undergraduate degrees and therefore any academic writing skills developed in previous studies have been forgotten or are ineffectual for success at this level.

- c) *Lack of time management skills.* Our students are busy professionals and most are working mothers who struggle to balance their professional and personal responsibilities with the demands and challenges of postgraduate study. The writing of academic assignments is a strenuous, anxiety provoking and time-consuming process which our students try to squeeze in the very little free time they have available.
- d) *Lack of resources (easy access to journals, libraries etc.).* Our students especially those living and working in rural or remote areas face great difficulty in finding relevant sources of information needed for their academic assignments. As has been highlighted frequently by our students, the HOU lending library is not efficient and reliable which exacerbates the problem of access to resources.
- e) *Students' lack of familiarity and practice with the conventions of academic writing.* Our students are expected to write four 1500-word assignments through the module which count in total for 30% of their total mark; the final written exam counts for 70% of the total mark. This rather irrational and unfair allocation of marks, we expected would demotivate our students and taint their perceptions of the value of academic writing.

Being well aware of these constraints we expected that our students would fail to see the importance of academic writing for their own learning and would eventually develop an aversion to the whole writing process. Despite our fears, students who responded to the questionnaire, not only expressed very positive attitudes towards the writing of assignments, but also justified their attitudes with lengthy responses. Students delineated the following benefits of academic assignment writing. According to their responses, assignments:

- facilitated the application of theory to practice,
- contributed to the improvement of classroom practices and professional development,
- forced students to study and as a result help them understand theories and principles,
- contributed to the development of students' critical thinking and reflective skills, raised their awareness of and helped them reflect on their personal theories of teaching and learning.

3. Research Methodology

Many would argue (Glesne 2005; Denzin et al. 2005; Maxwell 2004; Herr et al. 2007; Anzul et al., 1991) that the research methods one employs reflect his/her ontological views regarding the way knowledge is perceived, validated and ultimately disseminated. The research methodology adopted in this paper is grounded in the interpretivist/constructivist (qualitative) research paradigm while clinging to a new trend in the qualitative research tradition which goes by the term *action (or practitioner) research* (Herr et al. 2007; 2005). Though Lea (2004: 740) claims that "research undertaken in the field [i.e., *academic literacy*]

tends to be qualitative in nature and of an ethnographic type,” we chose *action research* over *ethnography* due to the idiosyncratic nature of the former.

Glesne (2005) argues that although *action research* is closely related to *ethnography* (Wolcott 2008a; 2008b; 2005; 1994), its roots are predominantly “political” since it’s primarily geared toward heightening people’s awareness on controversial and sensitive issues which may eventually lend themselves to particular “actions” being taken by all parties involved, ultimately benefiting the respective communities at large (and not merely the research participants). In our case, the level of *academic literacy* has proven to be quite problematic and ineffective (as we will see below) in all aspects of higher education in Greece, directly implicating the greater academic community as well as higher authorities and the powers that be, while at the same time handicapping the students’ academic and intellectual growth on both an undergraduate as well as a graduate level. Therefore, grounding our study in this research tradition is not only completely justified but also unequivocally mandated.

3.1. Tutors’ perceptions of students’ academic writing skills

Despite our students’ very positive attitudes towards assignments and their awareness of the multiple learning benefits of academic writing, this, nevertheless, constitutes one of the most (if not the most) problematic areas of students’ work. Our students are either completely unfamiliar with academic writing conventions and academic discourse more generally or have limited, fragmented knowledge of mechanics of academic writing. As a result, the correction of students’ written work and the provision of constructive feedback is perhaps the most demanding, challenging and time-consuming tasks that confront HOU tutors. We firmly believe that writing involves much more than expressing and communicating ideas; we view academic writing as an “important tool for thinking, learning and knowledge creation” (Dysthe 2007:237). As a result, given that all tutors in the module view academic writing as a most useful and effective learning tool and the whole writing process as a significant awareness raising activity contributing immensely to the professional development of our teachers, systematic attempts have been made especially during this academic year, to develop and refine our students’ writing skills and boost their confidence in academic writing.

The problematic areas we have identified as a team are manifold and roughly fall into the following four categories:

a. Structure of academic assignments

Though a handful of our students have managed to put together meticulously organized papers with effective cross referencing (between the documents in the appendix and the main body of the paper) and a plausible integration of detail into the paper's coherent whole, there are, nevertheless, those who are still struggling with ways to effectively structure their papers. Some of them tend to elaborate too much on one specific section of their assignment; thus, rendering the paper’s overall structure slightly disproportionate. Others tend to focus on minute details in many sections of their paper to a point where they literally go off on tangents and lose their initial train of thought and the thread of their argument. Their papers read more like a series of fragmented pieces of writing with no spine binding them together. One of the most significant problems with their writing is that it is not reader-based nor reader-oriented.

b. Synthesizing their reading and writing succinct and relevant literature reviews

Some assignments provide a relevant review of a broad range of literature employed which is well integrated and effectively weaved throughout the entire paper. However, there are those assignments which seem to sit in a vacuum without benefiting from what other scholars have written/researched in the past because the sources cited are either insufficient or limited to the module reader. On the other hand, there are also those assignments which contain a string of endless quotations that seem to have supplanted the discussion, and the reader gets the impression that the authors cited have literally "taken over" the paper. In general, most of our students see the purpose of the literature review as an opportunity to display (to the point of "showing off") their wide reading of a topic rather than as an essential indispensable component of a piece of academic writing which sets the theoretical framework of the discussion or the study.

c. Discussing implications of results and drawing conclusions

Even though there are assignments which demonstrate a well-articulated and convincing rationale and a sound and thorough analysis, there are also those where students either make sweeping statements without grounding their assertions in the relevant literature or provide a cursory discussion of their findings; rendering the implications of their study superficial and, to good degree, unsubstantiated.

d. Academic referencing conventions

Finally, some students have managed to master the conventions of academic referencing early on in the game, and their papers follow the APA citation protocol admirably. Many, however, continue to have problems with the format of their citations by failing to adopt a specific style and remain consistent throughout.

3.2. Possible Causes of students' problems with academic writing

Not to sound like people beating the crisis drum for no apparent reason nor like fence sitters deflecting responsibility while pointing fingers at others, but the fact of the matter is that the causes behind our students' inadequacies in academic writing run very deep, and there is plenty of blame to go around because, whether we like it or not, we are all at fault here. And here is why:

a. Lack of systematic training of students' academic writing skills

Even though we are all aware of our students' shortcomings when it comes to writing, we, nevertheless, seek to weather the problem by sweeping it under the rug hoping that it will eventually resolve itself, instead of dealing with it head on through the implementation of a rigorous academic writing program which seems to be lacking from our academic institutions nationwide.

b. Treating students as a homogenous group with same needs and experiences

We teach our students that when it comes to classroom practices, one size definitely does not fit all and that each learner's needs come first and should be properly addressed. Yet in the same breath, we treat our students as a homogenous group with the same needs and experiences, disregarding the fact that they don't come to

us in one “size” but run the gamut from being full-time students to full-time employees and, in many cases, full-time parents, and this is a reality that unfortunately defies the purpose of quality learning and democratic education in the first place.

c. Difficulties with the transition to postgraduate study

We seem oblivious to the fact that our students have been out of the academic picture for quite a while now. So the transition from their already busy professional and personal lives to the rigorous mandates of graduate school is anything but a smooth sailing for them which, in return, has a direct impact on the way they re-immense themselves in the academic community.

3.3. Addressing students’ academic writing problems: Measures currently in effect

In light of the above daunting situation and given the limited resources available to us, we are pretty much aware that as a team we are no miracle-workers and that the measures we are currently implementing in our program constitute mere “baby steps” which remotely address the problem (let alone rectify it), yet, in all honesty, we would, indeed, be amiss, disserving our students contemptuously, if we simply went along with the flow and essentially joined the bandwagon of indifference and sheer indolence. And since drastic times call for drastic measures, our team has factored the following into our program in an effort to provide targeted feedback on our students’ writing skills and raise their awareness on the intricacies of academic writing:

- i. Intensive in-class practice through handouts and worksheets tackling pivotal academic reading and writing issues, such as critical reading, synthetic writing, citation format and plagiarism.*
- ii. Submission of an assignment outline along with a working bibliography, 2-3 weeks prior to the deadline, which is subsequently followed up by an intensive one-to-one telephone session with the instructor.*
- iii. Peer editing and critique of anonymous samples of students’ writing during every contact session.*
- iv. Formation of writing groups which read and critically respond to each other’s paper before and/or after each contact session and prior to the submission deadline.*
- v. Detailed discussion of common academic writing problems illustrated with examples from students’ assignments. This awareness raising activity is carried out during contact sessions which take place after the submission of assignments.*
- vi. Provision of detailed feedback on all aspects of their writing on the basis of the set criteria; conscious attempts are made to highlight the problems with their work and to provide suggestions or alternatives for overcoming them.*

3.4. Suggestions for the future

The truth of the matter is that the above measures are in no shape or form remotely sufficient to prepare our students for the challenges and demands of writing a research-

based dissertation. Quite frankly, with just these measures alone, we are merely putting a band aid on the problem, instead of tackling it from the bottom-up. *Ideally what is needed is a structured and rigorous academic writing program effectively weaved throughout all modules, ardently preparing our students to grapple with the demands of writing a dissertation when that moment comes around.*

Acknowledging the constraints and difficulties involved in setting up, resourcing and implementing a separate, independent writing program, we believe that systematic and intensive writing practice and input should be integrated in and form an indispensable part of all contact sessions throughout all modules. The practice activities and input we provide should not be haphazard and arbitrarily chosen by each module tutor; they should in their entirety (i.e., taken in tandem) form the components of a well thought-out, tailor-made and systematic academic writing program. We therefore suggest that the two compulsory modules at the beginning of the program, integrate practice on pivotal academic reading and writing issues, such as critical reading, synthetic writing, citation format and plagiarism gradually in every contact session. Elective modules can then focus on training students in the mechanics of academic writing such as writing bibliographies, structuring assignments, using appendices effectively and presenting assignments.

The need for such a program has long been acknowledged by everyone on board, and, under the guidance of our scientific coordinator, the blueprints for its institution and implementation have been drawn up by our team. However, more work needs to be done in that direction.

5. Conclusion

There comes a time in our professional careers when we heed certain calls from those whose voices have been garbled up in a mire of apathy and indifference for way too long. And once this moment swings by, it will be our cue to act. For our students' sake, though, this moment couldn't have come any sooner. Whether they are at the beginning of our program or during the final stages of their studies, satisfying all the requirements put forth by this program is their call and only theirs to make alone. This also includes mastering the techniques of academic writing. We, on the other hand, have our own share of responsibilities to guide them through this process and, thus, fulfilling our end of the bargain. And though we are confident that despite the odds our program will eventually survive all doldrums and end up on top, there is, nonetheless, still more work to be done if we really want to *sow the seeds* of our labor in the years to come.

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