

## **12. Lessons from the Writer: Academic Writing Insights from One-to-One Consultations with Students at Third Level**

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*In third level education the writing of essays is both ubiquitous and difficult. Novice writers frequently struggle to develop, not just an analytical approach to researching their essays, but also the analytical writing style required at third level. Since essays are one of the primary means of assessment on many third level courses, not developing an appropriate style of academic writing can result in poor performance. The Learner Support Unit in Mary Immaculate College was established with the primary aim of assisting mature students with their academic writing. This assistance is provided in the form of classes in academic writing and one-to-one consultations. This paper will focus on these consultations, explore the most common types of academic writing problems, and also the strategies used by tutors in overcoming them. It will be shown that students encounter difficulties relating to academic writing in the areas of style, structure and referencing, with referencing proving to be the most challenging area. The benefits of using a scaffolded approach in the one-to-one consultations to overcome the problems experienced by students in academic writing will also be considered.*

### **Introduction**

The Learner Support Unit (LSU) was founded in Mary Immaculate College (MIC) in 1997, with the initial aim of providing support to mature students taking an undergraduate degree course in the college. In the intervening seven years, with the assistance of continued and increased

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investment by the Higher Education Authority under the Targeted Initiative Scheme, the remit of the LSU has expanded considerably. Due to the realisation that many of the needs of mature students are common to all students, the unit has now been expanded in order to cater for all undergraduates in MIC. The LSU is also committed to increasing participation at third level among (though not exclusively) groups such as mature students, Travellers and refugees/foreign nationals, while never losing sight of the fact that these groups require continued support once within the third level system. This support takes many forms in the LSU, such as courses in academic writing, weekly learner training seminars, subject-specific peer tutoring and one-to-one tutoring.

At university level, one-to-one tutoring is the most interactive form of learning found, especially when compared to the other methods of instruction at third level such as the lecture, the textbook or small group tutorials. Brown and Alkins (1988) have, for example, shown that 86% of talking time in seminars and discussions in university is made up of tutor talk. It is widely accepted that students gain greater understanding, are more motivated and work faster in one-to-one tutoring (Slavin, 1987).

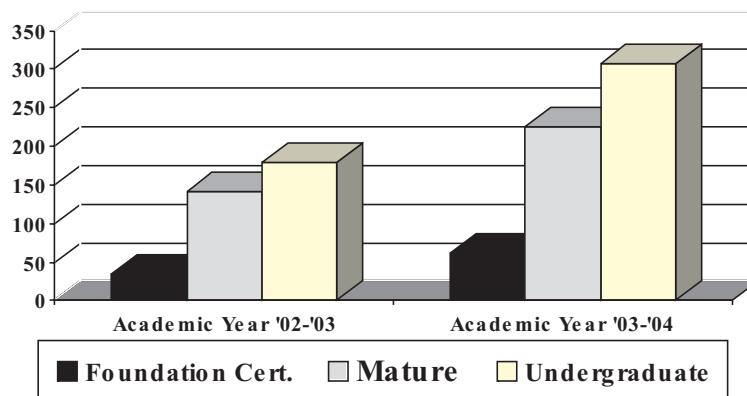
### **Methodology**

This paper presents the initial findings of a two-year investigation into the uptake of the service provided by the Learner Support Unit in MIC. The analysis throughout this paper refers to quantitative data collected by two academic support tutors over a period of two academic years (2002-2004). The data relate to the one-to-one tutoring sessions provided by the support tutors. Where possible, information such as student name, course, duration of consultation, preparation time, nature of consultation and difficulties encountered was recorded after every one-to-one session. These operational data are needed to ensure the successful day-to-day running of the LSU, in order to provide a more effective and efficient tutoring service. Clearly, in addition to the quantitative nature of the analysis in this paper, a qualitative strand of research is necessary to complement these findings.

### Profiling the LSU user

Since the broadening of the Learner Support Unit's terms of reference, a sharp increase in the number of students using the service has been noted. In addition to this, the diversity of backgrounds among students using the service has broadened, and this has also had a significant impact on the day-to-day operation of the unit. Figure 1 presents the number of visits to the LSU for one-to-one tutoring by Foundation Certificate<sup>2</sup>, mature and undergraduate students<sup>3</sup> and compares them across two academic years.

**Figure 1. Comparison of all mature and undergraduate visits to the LSU for one-to-one tutoring across two academic years 2002-2004**



- 2 The *Foundation Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners* has been designed to provide an introduction to an Arts degree for adults who wish to progress to higher education. Students on the Foundation Certificate are required to be twenty-two years or over on the first of January of year of application for the course. This ensures that, should they choose to progress to full-time university education, they are afforded mature student status.
- 3 The LSU caters for all undergraduate students in MIC. For the purposes of this paper, the term *undergraduate* is used to refer to third level students who have progressed directly from Leaving Certificate and are under twenty-three years of age upon commencement of the degree programme. *Mature student* is used to refer to those undergraduates of twenty-three years or over within MIC.

Fig. 1 shows that undergraduate students visit the unit for one-to-one tutoring more frequently than mature students – 485 visits for undergraduates compared with 368 for mature students. Undergraduate visits in 2003-2004 show a 41.5% rise in demand for one-to-one tuition from the previous year, while the mature student visits reflect an increase of 37%, and it is interesting to explore the reasons behind this. The main point of contact between the LSU and the students is in the academic writing class. However, the unit has also developed a comprehensive website ([www.mic.ul.ie/lsu/intro.htm](http://www.mic.ul.ie/lsu/intro.htm)), advertises throughout the college using flyers, and has taken initiatives like placing study tips in the student newspaper. The upsurge in both mature and undergraduate one-to-one tutoring sessions, reflected in the percentages here, indicates that these initiatives are now bearing fruit.

The *Foundation Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners* course offered in MIC is another area where the academic support tutors offer one-to-one tutoring sessions to students. The number of student visits for one-to-one tutoring increased from 34 visits in 2002-2003 to 61 visits in 2003-2004. This represents a 44% rise in uptake of one-to-one tutoring on this course, despite the fact that student numbers have remained constant over the two years. There may be a number of possible explanations for this. In the pilot year of the course, it was noted that students who participated in one-to-one sessions achieved significantly higher grades than those who did not. This was brought to the attention of the students the following year, and consultations have risen accordingly. It may also be hypothesised that the Learner Support Unit more successfully targeted disadvantaged and non-traditional students in the second year, thereby increasing the amount of support provided to those most in need.

Mature students represent more than 13% of the student body in MIC. As regards mature student visits to the LSU, when this ratio of mature students to undergraduates is taken into account, it becomes apparent that mature students in fact use the LSU significantly more often per head than the undergraduates. Take, for example, the one-to-one tutoring numbers for the second semester 2002-2003 shown in Table 1 here:

**Table 1. Number of visits to the LSU for one-to-one tutoring (second semester of the academic year 2002-2003)**

	Mature Students	Undergraduates
Number of students visiting the LSU for one-to-one tutoring	41	86
Total number of visits	72	112
Average number of visits per student	1.75	1.3

Here it can be seen that 127 students visited the LSU in this semester, approximately two-thirds of whom were undergraduates. However, when the number of visits per student is considered, it is apparent that mature students using the service on average visit the unit more often (1.75 times a semester) whereas an undergraduate using the service visits 1.3 times on average. There are many possible reasons for the discrepancy in these numbers. The fact that a mature student will visit the unit more frequently than an undergraduate may suggest that mature students are in need of more support. However, it may also suggest that a more mature outlook allows these students to recognise their need for support more than undergraduate students, in that they are more aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses and often times confident enough to approach a Learner Support Tutor in order to address these weaknesses. What is apparent is that more qualitative research is necessary in this area in order to determine the exact reasons behind the higher number of mature student visits.

Table 2 shows that, in general, every mature student essay requires an average of twenty minutes preparation time on the part of the tutor and forty minutes one-to-one tutoring time with the student. This is in comparison to fifteen minutes preparation time and twenty-six minutes consultation time for each undergraduate student. This demonstrates that, on average, a tutor devotes twenty minutes more to a mature student. This could be due in part to the fact that mature students are more likely to take a proactive role during the consultation process. This role involves asking more questions and exploring the writing process in more detail, thereby recognising the

collaborative nature of a one-to-one consultation. In contrast, undergraduate students tend to interpret the process in the same way they would the traditional teacher-student relationship, with its inherent power differential. This seems to support the view that the service provided to undergraduate and mature students needs to cater for their different needs. However, qualitative research is required to explore this area more fully.

**Table 2. Length of preparation and consultation time for one-to-one tutoring per student in the LSU (second semester, academic year 2002-2003)**

	Mature Students	Undergraduates
Average preparation time by tutor per student	20 mins.	15 mins.
Average consultation time per student	40 mins.	26 mins.

### **Areas of difficulty experienced by students**

Based on information collected over semester one of the academic year 2003-2004, it is apparent that in-text and bibliographic referencing of citations and quotations produce the most difficulties for students. In 58% of the 260 one-to-one tutoring sessions in this semester, referencing was discussed between tutor and student. This was followed by structure (42%), style (41%) and computer related issues (13%). Some of the problems encountered are discussed below.

#### **Referencing**

Referencing has proven to be a difficult issue with students due to its non-standardisation within MIC. Different faculties in the university tend to use different referencing systems, resulting in confusion among students. The History faculty, for example, require the Footnoting System, whereas the Harvard System is standard in the faculty of Education. In addition, the proliferation of use of the Internet at third level has created a research tool with yet more implications for referencing.

### **Structure**

At its most basic level, academic writing structure deals with sentence structure: both simple and complex. Example 1 below illustrates the problems that arise when learners fail to distinguish between a simple and complex sentence:

#### *Example 1*

Socrates believed that self-reflection would lead to political reflection within society. As a good state would make people lead better lives by doing good.

However, academic writing structure is also related to how the introduction, main body and conclusion of an essay are constructed, and entails developing strategies to determine how best to write an introduction and conclusion. The learner must also decide on an order for the arguments and supporting material that will comprise the main body of the essay. This all ensures that the essay reads coherently and logically from beginning to end. Example 2 demonstrates one of the problems that can arise when concluding an essay:

#### *Example 2*

Finally, do these students just get branded as trouble makers and left to the side? This is a discussion for another day.

Here the learner has failed to address a crucial segment of the essay, instead labelling it as 'a discussion for another day'.

### **Style**

Academic writing style is generally accepted to be structured, formal and objective in nature. Therefore, the LSU encourages learners to employ the use of stylistic features such as academic connectors (*therefore, however, furthermore* etc.) while avoiding errors particular to the academic register such as repetition, illogical sentences, redundancy and the use of subjective language. Examples 3, 4 and 5 outline some common style mistakes in these areas:

#### *Example 3*

The French revolution was revolutionary.

*Example 4*

Although monasteries suffered greatly from the arrival of these bloodthirsty gold diggers, they were not the only innocent victims to be affected.

*Example 5*

How unfortunate for the poor souls of the Texas Waco incident, assuming of course they had souls.

These examples illustrate the primary academic writing difficulty faced by students at third level, that is, the transition in their writing to an academic register. The LSU encourages students to discriminate between registers and uses an array of language awareness exercises in order to develop the students' academic writing.

**Computer skills**

Although most students have the basic computer skills required at third level, some are not aware of academic essay conventions such as indenting quotations, inserting footnotes or page numbers or drawing tables. Students are also informed of the advantages and disadvantages of using the spell check facility in Microsoft Word™ for proofreading their essays. An oversight while using spell check can result in errors such as that in Example 6:

*Example 6*

Durkheim believed in the common goo.

**Scaffolding**

The term 'scaffolding' was coined by Bruner (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) to specify the type of assistance that makes it possible for learners to function at higher levels of their zones of proximal development. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the Vygotskian concept that defines development as the space between the child/learner's level of independent performance and the child/learner's level of maximally assisted performance (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova and Leong, 1996). In other words, the zone is one of potential, representing the distance between where the

child/learner is developmentally, and where s/he can be with the assistance of an adult, normally a teacher. Meyer (1993) uses the term scaffolding to describe how an expert can facilitate the learner's transition from assisted to independent learning. Although scaffolding and the ZPD refer primarily to an adult-child interaction, the context of tutoring is analogous to this, as tutoring practices often entail a more knowledgeable person tutoring a less knowledgeable tutee (Chi, 1996). A number of writing-specific scaffolds are used by the LSU in order to support the gradual acquisition of writing competence by the students, four of which (essay type, drafting, staging of instruction and feedback) are outlined here. As writing practices differ from student to student, each scaffold is tailored by the tutor to suit each individual.

### **Essay types**

One of the first scaffolds used by the tutor in a one-to-one consultation involves the identification of what is required of the student by the essay question. For example, s/he needs to determine whether or not the essay is evaluative or discursive in nature. The tutor then directs the student to consider the implications of this for the writing approach that should be taken. For example, a common essay type at third level, that of 'compare and/or contrast', has implications for essay structure that a student will need to take into account, and the tutor and student work collaboratively to discuss these. At the end of this scaffolded stage a student should be aware of the demands of the different essay types at third level, and be able to plan a structure accordingly.

### **Draft and redraft**

Veit, Gould and Clifford (2001: 5) maintain that 'one characteristic of skilled writers is that they spend considerable time in the preliminary stages of writing – long before they produce a complete, polished draft.' Accordingly, during a one-to-one consultation with a learner support tutor, the student is encouraged to arrange at least one follow-up consultation. This ensures that further work is done on subsequent drafts of the same essay. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this scaffold is beneficial and has a positive effect (Krashen, 1982) on the student's academic writing confidence.

### **Staging of Instruction**

A third way in which the writing process is scaffolded is by restricting the focus of each consultation to one area of academic writing. Therefore, in a student's first consultation the tutor may choose to explore an aspect of essay structure. The following consultation may then progress to an exploration of academic style. This staged approach, according to Cotterall and Cohen (2003:163), organises 'the instruction into manageable elements, while usefully focusing attention on the unit of organisation itself.'

### **Seek feedback**

Finally, as the relationship between tutor and student develops, the student is encouraged to seek feedback on their work from their peers and subject tutors. While the learner support tutor will provide support as long as the student requires, s/he is encouraged to become a self-sufficient writer, fully equipped with the strategies required to overcome any anxieties brought about by the academic writing process.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, this paper argues that a scaffolded approach to academic writing, such as the model outlined here, can lead to the development of a writing style appropriate to that which is required at third level in Ireland. Firstly, it is essential to recognise the differing needs of undergraduates and mature students, in order to cater for those needs appropriately. The quantitative analysis presented demonstrates that a mature student will require more visits to a Learner Support Unit than an undergraduate student. In addition, mature students require more consultation time with the tutor. Importantly, the paper identified a need for more qualitative research in order to determine in more detail the reasons behind these findings. Secondly, the specific difficulties encountered by a student must be addressed. Students in MIC primarily experience difficulties in academic writing fields such as referencing of citations and quotations, as well as structure and style. However, these may not be the only problems encountered by students in an academic environment. Finally, a scaffold appropriate to the individual student is identified and employed by the learner support tutor at a one-to-one level with the student. This ensures that the student is equipped with

the strategies to overcome any difficulty in the future, thereby gradually becoming an independent and confident academic writer.

In order to develop our understanding of the needs of students requiring learner support at third level it would be interesting to conduct case studies tracking individual students' progress within an LSU. There also exists the opportunity to examine the work of the tutors themselves by analysing the language used in one-to-one tutoring sessions. Projects like these would ensure that learning from learner support is indeed a two-way process and help the tutor and student to work in harmony with one another.

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