

Re-framing writing (support): centring audience and purpose in a community nursing course

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Presentation abstract

This presentation examined the longitudinal collaboration between our Learning Development team and the coordinators of a community nursing course. It began with the question to the development team: ‘are our demands of students with respect to paraphrasing and referencing reasonable?’ The assignment was a formal report on a semester-long group project where students partnered with a community agency. The coordinators worried that students (and lecturers) were putting too much emphasis on referencing and the technicalities of paraphrasing, to the detriment of engagement with the community nursing process itself. Our Learning Development team eventually realised that the problem was not one of expectations, but rather a genre-audience mismatch. Although the assignment was called a report, the emphasis on integrating scholarly sources made it more like an academic essay, and the tone and length of the report limited its practical use by most partner agencies. Over time, by emphasising genre, audience and purpose, we have contributed to a gradual loosening of the hold on the original report format. Last year, we provided feedback on a range of digital deliverables, including infographics, videos, and mind maps, with each one designed to meet the specific partner agency’s needs. Our model of providing feedback on the report during one-hour in-person meetings has also evolved into a flexible combination of synchronous and asynchronous collaboration with students. We continue to guide students towards thoughtful, transparent source use, but the conversations around referencing and paraphrasing are now more holistic. In this presentation, we shared how our perspective, external to the discipline of nursing, has supported meaningful student learning about authentic (and impactful) writing for different contexts.

Community response

There was real interest in using a tight focus on audience as a key question to drive exploration of writing with both staff and students. The context clearly resonated with colleagues who identified with student confusion about 'who their audience is supposed (to be) and saw this as accounting for a lot of students' difficulties with academic writing'. Similarly, others found this 'genre-audience mismatch' and the importance of raising students' awareness of audience as key learning points. This approach to analysing the drivers of writing was seen as new for some in the audience, and one that offered a different approach to mainstream UK study support material; the links to underpinning theory (see Elbow, 1998; 1999), were appreciated. This case study offers a rich example of how to explore the tension and space between 'style guide and generic convention' and how the Learning Development team used definition of audience as a way in to collaboratively examine writing mode, purpose and detailed textual features. This led to much more creative engagement with the course team concerning forms of assessment. This focus on audience raised a number of larger questions, relevant beyond this specific university. As well as exploring the implications for 'diversifying assessment and questioning the kinds of (multimodal) texts that are appropriate for academic assessment,' the presentation also prompted some in the audience to consider the role of the Learning Development team in facilitating this conversation between faculty staff, students, external agencies and the assessment. It provided a detailed account of the "long, long conversations with faculty" (O'Neill, 2010) where Learning Development morphs into educational development and curriculum redesign. It provides a piece of solid evidence of learning developers' impact as the Learning Development team clearly contributed to the course team's shifting their focus from 'report' and mechanics of academic writing to consider purpose, and form.

Authors' reflection

Our journey with this community nursing course has taught us a great deal, but perhaps the most important takeaway is realising how impactful it can be to place audience and purpose at the centre of our discussions with students about the texts they create (whether those texts are spoken, written, or visual). Our ALDCon22 presentation confirmed that we

are not alone among Learning Developers in recognising that students do not get opportunities to create authentic texts nearly often enough. Students become accustomed to writing for their teachers at school, and then for their tutors at university, so it is no wonder they forget to consider audience needs when they have the chance to create a text for a different audience. As Learning Developers, we can encourage tutors to boost the authenticity factor in the assignments they give students, and to write assignment briefs so that audience and purpose become more salient. When we work with students, we can commit to emphasising audience and purpose--even when we recognise that an assignment's sole audience is the tutor. Making connections to text genres that exist outside of the higher education context can help students to see the broader relevance of their assignments and the transferability of the communication abilities they are cultivating.

In courses/assignments that do not involve community-based work or public-facing deliverables, sometimes the audience will be much less clear. In conversations with lecturers, Learning Developers can mention the benefits of students having opportunities to share their work with each other or with the public, or at the very least with an imaginary but clearly defined audience. In cases where it makes sense for the instructor to be the only audience, at least initially (e.g. for an essay that is not being turned into a bigger project), it seems worthwhile to make clearer to students *why* they are doing that assignment. How is that piece of formal academic writing helping them meet learning objectives? Why is paraphrasing or citation or essay writing an important skill in and of itself, and something the instructor should be assessing? Our colleague was right to bring up the systemic question of what makes academic writing worthwhile if students do not need it outside of the university. Maybe this focus on audience might address that question, and make assignments more meaningful to students?

ALDCon22 gave us the opportunity to deeply analyse our involvement in this nursing course. Writing the conference proposal abstract was a first step towards crystallising our thoughts on how our support has evolved over the years and what it actually means. Then, as we prepared our presentation in advance of the conference, we discussed and debated our ideas more thoroughly. We attempted to pinpoint the factors that have allowed our involvement to expand and our influence to grow. And we asked ourselves, constantly,

- What will Learning Developer colleagues already know?"
- What might they want to know?

- “What do we have to offer that could possibly be new--or at the very least, interesting?”

Next steps

We have identified specific actions and orientations that we are sure will contribute to greater success with future projects. Firstly, we are going to add a section on audience and genre to an existing workshop entitled ‘University Writing: Decoded,’ which focuses on different types of assignments and arguments. Secondly, we are going to be more assertive in bringing attention to audience and genre in our conversations with lecturers, especially when those conversations take place as an assignment brief is being developed or redesigned. In those moments, lecturers are most likely to be open to re-orienting assignments towards a genre that matches a particular audience and purpose.

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Further reading

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Author details

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