



WrAssE (Writing for Assignments E-library)



LearnHigher Case Study July 2008

Introduction

The WrAssE project is about doing, assessing and researching academic writing. It aims to be an evolving learning resource, using real examples of student writing from across the HE curriculum with specific comments from academics, and open for online discussion.

This case study reflects on the process and the outcomes to date of the WrAssE project at the University of Plymouth. It examines some effects on both staff and students, and reflects on some difficult decisions that had to be made, and their rationale. Working with academic staff to generate content for WrAssE has been a very rewarding experience for the team. Much has been learned and there have been many positive outcomes, some of which have been unexpected.

Innovation and context

The original project arose from a local study of students' academic writing (Hilsdon, 1999) and was based on the questions:

- What are academics looking for in students' written work?
- Are there generic qualities and functions in 'good' academic writing?

A small collection of extracts from student texts was given an online user-interface (Hilsdon and Evans, 2004) and made available to staff and students on the University of Plymouth's Learning Development intranet. The collection included comments from each academic marker of the texts, indicating what they thought was good. Feedback received from those using this pilot resource was very positive and provided impetus for proposals to make further use of the methodology in a project including a larger, more representative database. The new resource, 'WrAssE' covers a wider number of discipline areas and writing types, and embeds search

capabilities on a variety of identified qualities and functions of writing. It will be offered for evaluation, initially in Plymouth and, to partners later in 2008/9.

WrAssE promotes learning about writing through access to a growing range of authentic examples, with contextual information. These will provide a valuable basis for the development of further learning resources and for research. A key design feature of the project is an emphasis on encouraging staff to articulate what they want students to do: their criteria for good written assignments in a range of contexts. The resource is therefore underpinned by discussion and attempts to clarify qualities and functions in student writing.

Feedback from students in response to initial pilot

“This will give ... feedback that tutors would normally never have time to give. Tutors seem to have different approaches ... This database is exactly what's needed, I think. It'll also help to remove a not uncommon perception (which I share, to some extent!) that critical writing is something of a black art. I think this will help remove some of the mystery, and will make the assessment process more transparent”.

“I think it's immensely valuable, and an imaginative use of technology. I can certainly confirm that many students in my year have a great interest in understanding what constitutes good critical writing, and some of us have found it useful to swap essays after they've been marked”.

“Being shown an example is really helpful – you wouldn't be expected to just know how to do the job in any other professional capacity”.

Process and workshops

Academic staff were initially invited to choose and submit student work that they considered to be examples of good writing. During 2006-7, twenty staff attended workshops and annotated pieces of student work. The aim of the workshops was to introduce participants to the rationale and processes underlying the project. They were also intended to provide opportunities to clarify the views of participant academics and thereby inform our emerging framework of qualities and functions of

writing, and help us to refine and improve the model. A new selection of annotated student texts has enabled the development of the current version of the project, which will be ready for trial as a learning resource during the academic year 08/09.

Project outcomes to date

- a growing collection of examples of writing by students from a range of disciplines, at varying stages of study; tutor comments and feedback on the examples which focus on how they are effective
- a design and working model for a prototype framework of 'functions and qualities of writing' (underpinning categorisation and search functions)
- development of an online interface to enable students to access the resource
- conference presentations and papers outlining the development of the project (both prior to and since the provision of support by LearnHigher).

Discussion of impact to date

The project has afforded the Learning Development team at Plymouth improved access to, and ways of working with academic staff. The discussion generated has improved understanding about what academics expect in terms of student writing, and a range of important related issues have been raised. For example, there were difficulties associated with 'correcting' students' language. Some texts had mistakes or miscues in grammar and punctuation which we didn't want to reproduce.

However, we did try to leave student texts unaltered as far as possible, since authenticity of the student writing is a key feature of the resource. The notion of using 'professional judgement' to decide when and how to 'correct' texts raised discussion about pedagogical aspects of the resource and the meaning of 'errors'. We also considered whether to include 'bad' examples of writing; concluding that good examples gave a more 'positive' message overall, and that focusing on error might be counterproductive or demoralising.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome has been the learning experienced by the staff participants themselves. As the following comments illustrate, some have been encouraged to examine their own approach to marking and feedback, and to reconsider how they communicate with their students:

“Working on WrAssE has certainly helped me to focus again on the type and quality of feedback I give and to consider how I can improve its developmental attributes”.

“I have ... found that my practice has changed since I have been involved in the project. I think that the way that I mark has changed and that I now have a better balance of content and style and structure. This means that I also feel better able to give students much more constructive feedback particularly in the structure and style of their writing. I am also finding that I am much more proactive as opposed to reactive in my approach to managing issues with writing”.

There have also been specific benefits for staff in using the WrAssE framework:

“I have also found this project extremely useful in helping to define ... what makes a good answer a good answer! (It) ... has also helped me to clarify model answers more clearly to my own students”

“...I think that the directions in the ... analysis exercises I set for first years can be mapped onto that scheme. This is quite unintentional on my part, but nonetheless reassuring!”

We are particularly interested in participants' reflections (such as this one) on the WrAssE model of functions and qualities of writing, and how it might help them to refine the feedback they give to students. Preliminary responses suggest that WrAssE may be as useful for staff development work as for student learning about writing. We have had expressions of interest from a number of other universities from the UK and elsewhere and look forward to reporting on use of the project in 2010. WrAssE has already achieved some degree of success, but we are hopeful that it will evolve and grow beyond the current evaluation phase. By moving beyond Plymouth and incorporating more examples of, and comments about writing, the project could play a significant role in promoting learning, research and discussion about students' academic writing in future.

References

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