

“It’s a Lonely Walk”: Supporting Postgraduate Researchers through Writing

Gillian Fergie, Suzanne Beeke, Colleen McKenna, and Phyllis Creme
University College London

Traditional views of the writing process as a solitary and painstaking task can inhibit postgraduate students from pursuing useful conversations about their writing. Recent research has suggested that spaces for opening discussion on writing are needed and are important in supporting postgraduate writers to develop their academic identity (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Cuthbert, Spark & Burke 2009; Kamler & Thomson, 2007; Lee & Boud, 2003). This paper explores the experiences of five students at University College London (UCL), who were the first cohort to take a writing module which aimed to introduce theoretical and practical approaches to writing and to encourage reflection and evaluation of writing practices. The three key themes to emerge from the research were related to the development of the students’ confidence as writers and more generally as researchers. These were:

(1) Space – the value of having a defined space for writing, providing a new focus for learning in a less formal environment; (2) Academic Identity – the development of the students’ academic identity through writing and gaining confidence as writers; and (3) Peer Learning – the importance of discussion with peers in developing writing and academic identity.

Introduction

For many Ph.D. students, the challenge of writing their theses (and thus developing an academic identity) is undertaken without a great deal of guidance. While supervisors provide insight into crucial subject debates and advice on research design, they do not always create a space in which to discuss and engage with issues of reading and writing, an awareness of which is critical during the transition from student to academic (Ivanic, 1998; Kamler & Thomson, 2007). One student in our study remarked on her experience of doing a Ph.D.: “You’re on your own, and it requires a great deal of diligence and discipline, and it’s a lonely walk.” Recent research suggests a sociable space for discussion about reading and writing is needed: an opportunity for introducing new ideas and more generally for airing academic concerns and successes (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Cuthbert, Spark, & Burke, 2009; Kamler & Thomson, 2007; Lee & Boud, 2003).

This study explores the experiences of five students at UCL (University College London) who were the first cohort to take a writing module entitled “Developing a Literature Review,” designed for students studying for a Professional Doctorate in Speech and Language Therapy in the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences. In this paper we situate the module within the context of academic writing in higher education in the UK and within the local university context at UCL. We also provide a description of the module: its general focus and ethos, the content of each of the nine sessions, and details of its organization and delivery. After describing our qualitative research methods, we then present the experiences of the students and analyze their developing confidence as writers and as

scholars, focusing on three key themes: space, identity, and peer learning.

Postgraduate Writing in the U.K. Context

Since the late 1990s, research into academic writing in higher education in the U.K. has been influenced by a “writing as social practice” approach, promulgated by, among others, Lea and Street (1998) in their academic literacies framework (see also Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2001; and Lillis & Scott, 2007). In this approach, writing is viewed as an ongoing pursuit that student writers must constantly develop, particularly when they enter a new learning context, such as postgraduate study. This “writing as social practice” approach is a critique of a generic study skills model of writing development, which is still a feature of U.K. Higher Education. The generic skills model presupposes that writing is a fixed skill that can be easily transported across boundaries, with scant reference to the context in which the student is operating.

The academic literacies approach to writing takes into account disciplinary, institutional, and even cultural conventions, and it acknowledges that writing is bound up with issues of identity and power. Writing is thus seen as a social act informed by practices of departments, subjects, and institutions. Many of these same issues are also foregrounded in the Writing in the Disciplines (WiD) approach to university writing development (largely in operation in North America), the central tenet of which is that writing cannot be separated from the learning of a discipline. Therefore, the proponents of WiD argue, writing development should take place in the subject curriculum, and in U.S. WiD programs, writing tuition is largely embedded in subject teaching in the form of writing-intensive courses (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street & Donahue, 2009).

It is worth observing that much research into writing in higher education has taken undergraduate work as its subject, with rather less focus on postgraduate writing, although Ph.D. writers have attracted increasing attention more recently. As Badley (2009) has suggested, the lack of focus on Ph.D. writing in research and curricula is almost certainly due in part to the assumption that students at Ph.D. level do not need to address writing development explicitly. That said, there is no shortage of “how-to” manuals aimed at Ph.D. writers themselves, as Kamler and Thomson (2008) note.

There is also a shift in recent research in student writing away from the idea of ‘writing up’, which implies that writing is done only in the final stages of a dissertation, and towards thinking of writing as an important part of the research process from the start. Kamler and Thompson (2008), in particular, promote this shift, and the work described here is premised on this move towards recognizing that writing should be an integral part of the Ph.D. throughout.

Writing Development at UCL

UCL is a large, multi-faculty institution, and support for student writing is organized both centrally and within departments. This work includes the Academic Communication Program (ACP) (located in the Centre for Advancement of Learning and Teaching), which offers courses and institution-wide programs that are informed by academic literacies and WiD perspectives. Two ACP strands of work are relevant to the current study. The first is the Writing and Learning Mentors program (WLM) in which a network of Ph.D. writers from across UCL are trained as mentors to support the writing development of undergraduates in their departments. The program explicitly offers WLM mentors a space in which to consider their writing development during this important transitional stage between being a student and becoming a professional; additionally, through interacting in a multidisciplinary group, the mentors have the opportunity to compare the writing practices of their disciplines with those of writers working in other fields. One of the authors of the current study (Beeke) previously participated in the WLM program, and some of its theoretical and practical work informed the development of the Literature Review module described here. (See Creme & McKenna, 2010, for an account of the WLM program.)

The other aspect of the ACP that is relevant here is the series of collaborations between members of the ACP and subject academics. These institutionally funded projects offer opportunities to embed (and research) the teaching of writing practices in the

curriculum. Recent collaborations have included the creation of a legal writing workshop series for 3rd year Law students; the construction of a writing-intensive, compulsory first year course called Writing History; and the support and evaluation of online writing in a Masters course on world literatures. As with the WLM, these projects are premised on the idea that writing development should be located in subject departments wherever possible. The current paper reports on another of these collaborative projects that aimed to establish a module, entitled Developing a Literature Review, as part of the UCL Professional Doctorate in Speech and Language Therapy (DSLTL).

Description of the Module

The module, Developing a Literature Review (DLR), is taken by students in the second year of the DSLTL. At its inception in 2007, the DSLTL was the first professional doctorate available in the UK for speech and language therapists (SLTs). Students make research links between their professional work and their studies at UCL, while continuing to be employed in the NHS or private sector. It is a 4 year part-time program, with a taught component of up to two days per week in the first 2 years. The final 2 years focus entirely on the research project. In its first year, the DSLTL recruited a cohort of three students. The DLR module’s focus on academic writing renders it a unique learning and teaching experience for postgraduate students in the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences, the home of the DSLTL. For this reason, two Ph.D. students following a traditional (non-taught) route opted to join the course in its first year.

The focus of the DLR module is academic reading and writing with the end goal of producing a literature review. (For DSLTL students this is submitted for assessment by their supervisors). In addition, all students produce and present a poster on their research, and they receive formative feedback on this from the staff and postgraduate students who attend the poster session. (See below for further details). The module is delivered via nine 2 hour long group sessions (called units), in which time is dedicated to: discussion of current practices and issues; discussion of module readings; writing activities (completed both within and between sessions); generative and thinking writing; peer review; reflective writing and learning journals; the introduction of new ideas about reading and writing; and reflection on issues raised in prior sessions. In general, sessions were approached by both the module facilitator (the second author) and the students as an informal space where reading and writing were prioritized; discussions were open and often student-led, and learning was often peer-based.

The content of sessions was developed by the authors and based in the academic literacies and WiD literature, as well as the work of the WLM program (see above). The module's delivery over two terms and the allocation of 2 hours for each of the nine sessions allowed for the exploration of a wide variety of approaches for the learning and teaching of academic writing. The aims and objectives of each session are listed below as they were presented to the students:

- Unit 1: Thinking Writing and Learning Journals: This unit will explore writing as a way of thinking and learning – “writing to learn” vs. “learning to write,” and explain why this approach means that reading and writing are inextricably linked. It will introduce the concepts of “freewriting” and learning journals. You will produce some entries in your own learning journal, to be kept over the duration of the module.
- Unit 2: Reading and Evaluating: This unit will explore what is involved in the process of reading literature: not just searching for new information, but also articulating questions, reading critically, acquiring knowledge, distinguishing between positions, and developing a stance. It will support you in developing practical strategies to encourage you to engage with each of these parts of the process.
- Unit 3: Note Taking: This unit will encourage you to evaluate how you currently take notes, and it will equip you with some practical strategies for facilitating the process of reading and evaluating literature via note taking. You will try out several different ways of taking notes on a research paper.
- Unit 4: Communicating with the Reader: Writing for Different Purposes: This unit will introduce the idea of writing with the reader in mind and writing for different purposes, exploring the differences between writing for a literature review, presentation and poster. You will explore the relationship between text and image and begin to think about preparing your poster.
- Unit 5: Developing an Argument: This unit will explore the processes involved in the development of the argument in your writing. You will be encouraged to view the argument as both a story and a conversation with the reader. You will also be encouraged to focus on the overall structure of your argument as well as the progression of the argument at paragraph level. The unit introduces you to a simple method of analyzing the structure of an

argument in a paragraph of writing, and it supports you as you analyze some student writing in this way.

- Unit 6: Purpose, Focus and Structure of the Literature Review: This unit will explore the processes involved in constructing your literature review and creating a focus. It will explore the purpose of the literature review and how it can be structured. You will be encouraged to review the work of others for indicators of their focus and develop the focus of your own work.
- Unit 7: Style: This unit will explore some of the stylistic features of academic writing, both in your own work and in the work of others. It will encourage evaluation of the strategies employed in academic writing to guide the reader, to balance meaning and readability, and to create cohesion. You will be encouraged to identify and review your use of specific stylistic features and develop an appropriate academic writing style.
- Unit 8: Writing and Identity: Putting Yourself into Your Writing: This unit will explore the relationship between the writer and the text. It will raise questions and debate about the use of the first person in academic writing. It will also explore the aspects of writer identity which affect the production of text. You will be encouraged to evaluate your own sense of identity in your writing and have an opportunity to develop the presentation of yourself in your work.
- Unit 9: Editing: This unit will explore what is involved in the process of editing your writing: not only checking coherence, but also polishing your argument and refining modes of expression. It will support you in developing practical strategies for reviewing your work and encourage you to take part in peer review in order to refine the editing process.

Conducted at strategic intervals alongside the nine group sessions were three 1-to-1 writing mentoring sessions with the module facilitator. These focused on: (i) personal writing concerns, drawing on a page of current writing; (ii) effective poster construction, referring to a draft of the student's poster; and (iii) a draft of the literature review. One-to-one sessions provided an opportunity to air personal concerns and receive individualized feedback from the module facilitator.

The module organization and delivery were supported by a site created within UCL's virtual learning environment, Moodle, where all course materials including unit handouts, writing tasks, and

readings were made available. The site also supported informal discussion about writing through an online forum.

Assessment of the module was formative. All students were required to produce a poster reporting an aspect of their research, and they presented this at a poster session to which all staff and postgraduate students in the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences were invited. The poster session included a brief verbal presentation by each student in turn at the start of the session in order to introduce themselves and their research area to the audience, as well as to attempt to interest people in reading and discussing the poster with them. For the first cohort of students to take the module, this ran successfully with 21 staff in attendance. Feedback forms, completed by all staff, requested a rating from 1 to 4 (with 4 being the highest score) on the following parameters for each poster: appeal of verbal presentation; overall visual impact; use of images; readability; presentation of information. This was later collated and returned to each student individually. In addition, DSLT students were required to submit a literature review of 6-7,000 words to their supervisors for formative assessment approximately 2 months after completion of the module, in accordance with the DSLT assessment schedule. Ph.D. students following a traditional (non-taught) route who attended the module were not required to produce a literature review, but those who were at a stage where this might be considered an appropriate personal goal were encouraged to make an independent arrangement with their supervisors to submit and receive feedback on such a piece of writing. Thus, the students' various Ph.D. supervisors provided feedback on the content of the literature review; input from the module coordinator (via unit discussion and 1-to-1 sessions) focused on issues of writing.

Research Methods

This research was conducted specifically to evaluate the impact of the module upon the first cohort of participants, and the design was qualitative. We adopted a critical ethnographic approach as proposed by Lillis and Scott (2007), which prioritizes researching the context in which writing is situated and integrates the analysis of "talk around text" with the examination of texts themselves as a means of exploring writers' perspectives. Lillis (2008) argues that to adopt ethnography as a methodology is to keep up sustained involvement of the researcher throughout the process of writing "to explore and track the dynamic and complex situated meanings and practices that are constituted in and by

academic writing" (p. 355). This study draws on a number of data sources produced at various stages in the writing process in an attempt to explore Ph.D. writing in context and appreciate more fully the complex process of academic writing in practice. These sources include focus group and interview transcripts, reflections on assignments, drafts of writing, autobiographical texts, and learning journals.

Five students participated in the module and subsequent research. The number of participants reflected the cohort of students who were eligible to take the module. The DSLT, for which the module was designed, was in its first year, and numbers were small: the cohort was three. The other participants were students studying for a Ph.D. by the traditional route; the year that the module ran for the first time, two chose to take it as an option. While the small sample size limits the study in that it only reflects the perceptions and experiences of a few individuals, the very nature of qualitative research is that it prioritizes depth over breadth. The range and rich nature of the data gathered enabled us to undertake a fine-grained exploration of the postgraduate writing process, identify subtle shifts within writing development, and generate a set of inter-related themes.

The students whose experiences form the focus of this work will now be described. The three DSLT students were all experienced SLTs exploring research interests within their working environment. Mary was conducting research into the use of technology to deliver SLT; Sarah was researching the impact of a training program for health care assistants working with individuals with dementia who had feeding and swallowing problems; and Chris was carrying out a randomized controlled trial of a drug treatment for managing the secretions of patients with tracheostomy. The two Ph.D. students who took the module were Alison, who was carrying out a qualitative investigation of stroke-related language disorder (aphasia) in bilinguals, and John, who was researching the neural basis of intelligible speech. (The students have been assigned pseudonyms; these are not intended to reflect their social or cultural identities.) These diverse research interests, drawing on various disciplines, are reflective of the multi-disciplinary nature of SLT and the wider research interests of the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences.

We developed the following research questions in order to investigate the impact of the module on the students' writing:

- What did the students get out of the module, and how did they feel about it?
- Has the module changed their understanding of what a literature review is?
- Has exposure to different ways of writing

changed the students' views of writing (writing as process, as product)?

- Has the module changed the students' sense of self as a writer?
- How did the students use the learning journal?
- Have the students found the assessment and feedback process useful for developing their literature review specifically, and their writing more generally?
- What is the impact of the module at a curricular/divisional/institutional level?

Evidence for the evaluation of the module and exploration of the experiences of the students was collected in three ways:

1. Reflective writing: Before the first unit the students were asked, "Tell me about your writing . . ." in a piece of reflective writing, to be submitted to the module coordinator. Following this, two further pieces of writing were requested at different stages during the course, detailing the students' writing experiences. After completing the module, the students were asked to submit one final piece of reflective writing. All students granted permission for these reflections to be examined and used as evidence for this research.
2. Interviews and focus group: Individual interviews were conducted with all five students following completion of the module, and at a point when the three DSLT students had submitted the literature review to their supervisors, but had not yet received formative feedback. The interviews lasted roughly 30 minutes and were conducted by the third and fourth authors (McKenna and Creme), who had not met the students before. It was thought that the choice of interviewers would encourage the students to be more forthright as to the value of the module. The focus group was facilitated by the third author (McKenna), and took place 3 weeks after the interviews. Four of the five students took part; John was unable to attend. The interviews and focus group were audio recorded with the students' permission, and the data were transcribed and coded by theme by the first author (Fergie).
3. Textual analysis: Examples of writing from before the module and from the literature review were collected with the permission of the students.

Emergent Themes: Space, Identity, and Peer Learning

Throughout the course of the module, as well as in its evaluation, the response of the students was resoundingly positive. Some reflected that before the course they had little, if any, awareness of writing within the university setting: "You're supposed to know all about it, you're supposed to achieve a standard that's not discussed but expected" (Sarah). An opportunity for discussion about writing, therefore, was welcomed wholeheartedly and indeed, the students were surprised by the content of the course and the effect it had on them. Chris talked about the newfound importance he now places on developing his academic writing: "I just think it's powerful, I mean, the whole, you know, aspect of writing, and how powerful it can be if you get it right."

Despite this, the students came to the module with varying expectations, not all of which were positive. Sarah anticipated a "woolly" course with little engaging content. Alison explained her initial expectations and how they differed from the reality of her experience in the following way: "I started out thinking it was going to be just the literature review and ended up learning more about writing as a whole process." These thoughts about how the module's content extended beyond the literature review were shared by others. Mary commented that completing the module "is a way to learn systematically how to improve [your writing]." Alison also suggested the key practical outcomes of the course were "strategies and having structure to the work, developing more discipline, getting over the blocks."

In the interviews and the focus group, as well as in reflective writings, the students described their development in terms of confidence. All of the students, having completed the module, felt their confidence had increased and were positive about writing in the future. Mary explained this increase in her confidence: "I'm certainly a bit more confident, but perhaps that's a combination of feeling confident about writing and knowing how to write but also more confident about things that I've been reading about." Alison also mentioned developing confidence: "It has helped to develop confidence, the feedback I get from my supervisors now, the feedback that we had in the . . . one to one and peer sessions in the class, yeah, it has helped me become more confident." However, this development was not always an upward trajectory; the interview and focus group data also revealed that some of the students felt unexpected knocks to their confidence. Sarah felt she was now critical of her own work: 'I wonder how I passed my MSc, I looked at it and went oh that's really bad, great big huge holes in it.' Chris mentioned that he felt "quite deflated" after

the first two sessions. He described his experience thus: “You’re thinking, oh my god, my work’s really crap and then, I don’t know when it happened to me. . . . You start turning and you are changing your writing . . . so, you know, you’re quite at a low confidence level initially, and then you’re just building on that really, knowing that you’re working upwards.” While increased awareness of and reflection on writing aroused concerns, thinking about writing, developing new writing and reading processes, and increased interaction about writing were all mentioned as factors contributing to an increase in confidence.

The following sections explore this further by discussing three key themes in the development of the students’ confidence, how it was facilitated and fostered, and what effect it had on them as academics and clinical practitioners. These themes are space, identity, and peer learning.

Space

A key theme evident in both the interviews and the focus group is the importance of defined spaces for reading and writing. By carving a space in the curriculum for students to attend a sustained series of reading and writing sessions, where the focus was not the content of their research project, a new opportunity for academic development was created. This new space for talking about reading and writing was welcomed by the students. Discussing his general experience of the module, John comments:

One of the things I really appreciated was having . . . places to read about writing ‘cause that’s something that I’ve not really ever done before . . . , and I’ve found the discussion with other people very useful . . . and it kind of allows you to . . . consolidate in your head, okay, well, these are the things I do, and these are the reasons, perhaps, why I do them, which allows you to perhaps take a little bit more control over them.

Here, John suggests the value of airing ideas, often previously unexpressed, about writing and comments that this helps to identify current practices. The students revealed, both in the interviews and focus group, that opportunities for this kind of discussion are not always present on the “lonely walk” (Mary) of the Ph.D. A space for this appears to be valuable.

The new space established through the module created an opportunity for self-reflection and discussion. Students were encouraged to discuss issues and ideas about writing, share established practices, and develop new strategies for future writing. This finding has much in common with the concept of “third space” (Bhabba, 1994; Gutierrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995),

explored in recent writings on innovation in higher and further education (Curry, 2007; Ivanic & Satchwell, 2007) which suggest effective learning is stimulated by an environment somewhere between formal teaching and informal experience. Creating a more informal space, a third space in educational terms, is to create a productive space for learning where traditional teaching methods are used less and the roles of student and teacher (novice and expert) are less well defined. Curry (2007) highlights “the desirability of creating ‘third spaces’ in which students can discuss experiences, grapple with challenges, and build confidence in using academic literacies – to enter an ‘engaged state’” (p. 126). The students’ experiences during this module suggest that the space it created operated as a third space, rather than as a traditional university teaching space.

Importantly, the roles of the students and the module coordinator within the space created by the module were fluid, with the coordinator acting not as teacher but as facilitator, encouraging and supporting discussion rather than lecturing. Through less well defined roles and an emphasis on sharing thoughts and experience (positive and negative), the module provided an opportunity for less self-conscious interaction, where students were not presenting their most polished academic personas but were comfortable talking about shortcomings and tackling problematic issues. Sarah’s comment that the module was “almost like insider information” gives weight to the concept of the module as a less self-conscious space.

As well as a forum for discussion, the module was also created as a space for reflection. Each student was provided with a learning journal and encouraged at regular points in the course to write reflectively about their experiences of writing, as well as their intentions for future writing. Both Chris and Sarah felt they developed a greater sense of awareness about their writing:

I think [the module has] made me more aware . . . of the things . . . involved in the writing process, which all become intrinsic really . . . I didn’t, take a step back, em, and look at my writing in such depth, I think and in such awareness. (Chris)

Before I did this module I think I was floundering but I wasn’t aware of it, em, and I came to the course, and . . . I thought okay, this will be fine, I’ll just do it, but it really has taught me a lot and it’s provided me with a real structure to my writing and emphasized how important it is. (Sarah)

John made a similar comment: “I feel a bit more, um, empowered and, em, a bit more, kind of aware and in control.” These sentiments rang true with all the

students: reflection on writing became important to them as a means of developing awareness. Gaining confidence by learning about their own writing, and writing more generally, appeared to facilitate the development of authoritative modes of expression, and with this they developed a greater sense of academic identity.

Another important feature of the new space created by the module was the focus on writing as a process. In this space, the act of writing was actively encouraged, and the students were supported in shifting focus from “writing-up” to just writing, little and often, producing both exploratory writing and more polished pieces. Sarah appreciated the opportunity to write consistently and now sees writing as a means of “keeping in touch” with her studies. Mary also changed her approach to writing and as a result no longer “loathes” it, but instead has learned “to think about writing not as a chore but as a tool.” Regular writing support was a key in fixing writing as a crucial and useful part of the students’ studies. As they became more disciplined and confident writers they were less daunted by writing at length, and indeed Mary comments, ‘As I was writing [my literature review] I was thinking I could write a book.’

Identity

Mary’s shift in thinking about writing relates to Kamler and Thomson’s ideas about academic identity (2008). They suggest:

Doctoral writing is best understood as text work/identity work, . . . texts and identities are formed together, in, and through writing. The practices of doctoral writing simultaneously produce not only a dissertation but also a doctoral scholar. In the academic world, texts and their authors are inseparable. (p. 508)

Through writing and discussion about bodies of work, the students developed a greater sense of their position within the literatures they were reviewing. All of the students identified successfully critiquing the work of others, situating their own work within existing literatures, and making a contribution to the body of research in their discipline, as important learning outcomes of the module, and some directly related this to their developing academic identity. For example Sarah said:

I’ve got to identify where I stand in the . . . framework of the research and how my research slots in, and contributes to the literature . . . so I see my literature review now as more [of] a finely honed contribution, developing academic authority, making a contribution to the discipline.

Development of the students’ academic identity is also evident in assertions of authority. Sarah’s wish to make a contribution is echoed in Mary’s thoughts on her research project: “I think it has a very small part to play but I think quite a good part to play, in perhaps changing how we deliver healthcare.” Mary is not only identifying a place for her work among the literatures she is reading, but also identifying herself as producing valuable research which will have an impact in a clinical context. It appears that creating a space for thinking about reading and writing is useful for giving students an opportunity to refocus, not on the intricate details of their research, but on the wider academic community, helping them to envisage themselves as a part of it. In doing this, and recognizing the validity of their research, they gain confidence to talk and write with academic authority.

In a piece of reflective writing submitted mid-way through the module, Alison commented on a developing confidence in her academic identity: “Knowing the right labels for what I wanted to write about has been important to me. These are important because they create a sense of continuity and (also a sense of belonging for the novice writer) in the academic community.” In this writing, she showed an awareness of the academic community and specific conventions of her discipline, and yet identified herself as a “novice writer.” This was not the case in her post-module interview. At this point, she had received positive feedback on her writing from her supervisors at a formal Ph.D. upgrade meeting. Discussing her developing confidence she explained: “This is *my* research, I’ve seen this in my data, this is relevant, this is how *I’m* going to say it.” (italics added to denote stress). At this later point, Alison appeared willing to claim authorship of her work and was more confident in asserting the validity of her contribution. Interestingly, Alison was the only student in the group for whom English was a second language, and it is therefore possible that her sense of her academic identity in relation to writing was more acute. She charted her progress, saying: “I have moved from being this second language writer to someone who can say I know what I’m writing about.”

An opportunity for important interaction within the wider research community was provided by the poster session. Chris saw the opportunity to present his research to members of the academic staff of the Division and gain their feedback as “invaluable.” Preparing and presenting a poster, as well as developing the students’ appreciation of poster writing as a genre, provided them with an opportunity to socialize within the department, raising the profile of their research and promoting networking opportunities. All of the students mentioned the significance of this experience to their development as researchers. Thus, findings suggest that

the students' developing sense of academic identity was influenced not only by the process of writing, but also by the provision of practical experiences within the wider research community that increased their confidence to work within it.

Peer Learning

The final theme that emerged was the significance of sharing the writing process with peers. The realization that they were "all in the same boat together" (Mary) led to the creation of an environment that fostered peer learning. The regular meetings of the group created a space where students could discuss progress and intentions for writing, providing a relief from the experiences of writing in solitude. On being asked to comment on her general experience of the module, Alison prioritized the importance of peer support: "The last piece of writing that I did I didn't feel alone doing that, it wasn't a lonely journey because I had [. . .] friends with me doing things like this." All of the students reported that sharing the experience of the writing module was important to them.

Creme and Cowan (2005) promote a model of "peer engagement," which aims to build confidence and autonomy in writing through regular peer feedback exercises. They suggest this is "one way of helping students take seriously the idea of writing as a process that is complex and develops over time" (p. 113). Furthermore, the authors suggest, "[I]f such peer- and self-review processes were built into the curriculum as common practice, students would be helped to realize that they can make use of their own and each other's critical abilities in order to develop their writing" (p. 113). The responses of the students throughout the current research suggest that the challenges of postgraduate writing can also be supported by continuous "peer engagement."

Despite never having read each other's writing before, the students were prepared to share their work. Chris wrote: "I now feel more confident in sharing my writing with some colleagues / peers (which I wouldn't have even considered in the past!)." Peer feedback was valued. Sarah was keen to "look at other people's writing and how they write and pick up tips from them, that was really important." Mary also commented, "It was good to have somebody look at what I had written who . . . wasn't embroiled in it, in the way, perhaps, my supervisors will be because . . . they know possibly where I am going." Chris talked about the importance of getting constructive criticism from peers: "There isn't any sort of negative or degrading feedback it's all constructive feedback and . . . it's to improve you and your self and I think that's important to take with you." All the students saw peer review as a useful exercise for progressing writing that had not previously been

available to them outside of the module, because it was unlikely to happen spontaneously and without structured ground rules. It appears that peer support and peer review can be an important relief from the more intense relationships students might have with their supervisors. Peer reviewers, removed from the intricacies of the project, were able to provide alternative insights into less considered issues.

Peer review could also be considered useful as an "academic" experience. The students were happy to provide and receive comments on draft writing in this less formal setting; later in their academic careers this process, although more formal, will become familiar to them, for example via peer review of journal articles. Working alongside peers is, perhaps, another important experience in developing students' confidence as they begin to identify themselves as researchers.

Alison suggests that her interactions with peers brought to light the real issues she was encountering in her own writing:

Part of . . . the confidence in writing was to do with the fact that I was writing in my second language, but having found during the interactions in the class that issues I had about my writing was not really about writing in my second language it was about writing academically, it's about developing yourself as a researcher . . . more than writing in my second language.

Peer support and interaction, in this case, appears to have encouraged a heightened awareness of personal writing processes and indeed challenges. By providing consistent interaction with peers, with writing as the focus, the module encouraged productive peer-learning experiences and relationships.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study of five students' experiences of an academic writing course produced a large volume of rich data through which we were able to explore the postgraduate writing process. The analysis has highlighted key themes - space, academic identity, and peer learning - that resonate with existing literature and provide useful insights for future research. Kamler and Thomson (2008) suggest that universities should prioritize writing cultures and adopt an approach which "recognises that research practices are writing practices and that all university staff and students benefit from systematic attention to writing" (p. 177). By developing a module for postgraduates where reading and writing are foregrounded, we have attempted to create a space which supports such attention. The students' descriptions of this space and how it was utilized suggest they found it invaluable as

an opportunity for discussion and learning. Increasing confidence in their writing and in their role as researchers confirms, as suggested by Kamler and Thomson (2008), that to support one is to support the other. The results of this research suggest that postgraduate students can benefit from having a defined space for writing that facilitates learning in a less formal environment and highlights the importance of discussion with peers in developing writing. This not only benefits writing and increases students' confidence as writers, but it also contributes to the development of their academic identities. Additionally, our findings confirm the precepts of the Writing in the Disciplines model that writing development work of the type described here is best situated within a disciplinary and program context.

This study has influenced the practices of both postgraduate students and staff within the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences. After its initial success, the module continues to run as an option for students following a traditional (non-taught) Ph.D. route (the DSLT does not recruit every year; the next intake of students will complete year two of the course in 2011/12). Although optional, its reputation is such that interest is growing year on year, and Ph.D. supervisors are beginning to suggest the module to their students. This growth has been achieved largely through word of mouth, as a result of students who have completed the module recommending it to their friends, and supervisors observing positive changes in their supervisees' writing. A second cohort of eight Ph.D. students opted to take the module in 2009/10. They had wide-ranging research backgrounds from audiology to behavioral neuroscience. Written feedback from them at the end of the module revealed their experiences to be overwhelmingly positive: "I've really . . . enjoyed the course. It's . . . helped me see that my writing's not that bad. My issues are a combination of lack of confidence and laziness. It's been like therapy!" (3rd Year Psychology Ph.D. Student). The third cohort (2010/11) also numbers eight students, again with wide-ranging research interests, from regional accent variation in Saudi Arabian Arabic to the sociolinguistics of British Sign Language. Knowledge of the module has also helped to raise awareness of writing among academics in the Division, such that a number of colleagues have set up a writing group which meets twice a term to provide both peer support for the process of writing academic papers and grant applications and dedicated time in which to write.

The future of the centrally run Writing and Learning Mentor program at UCL is uncertain. However, its basic premise that writing is best developed within the discipline has borne fruit as evidenced in the module described here. In a time of

financial austerity it may be difficult to carve out such 'third spaces' for writing and learning, the value of which has been amply demonstrated through this research.

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GILLIAN FERGIE is currently a Ph.D. student at the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit in Glasgow researching young people's engagement with health online. Prior to this she worked at University College London as a research assistant in innovation in learning and teaching, where she assisted with the development and running of a writing module for doctoral students.

SUZANNE BEEKE is a senior lecturer at University College London and head of the Research Department of Language and Communication. As a qualified speech and language therapist, she conducts research into the conversations of adults who have aphasia, a language disorder caused primarily by stroke, using

qualitative research methods such as Conversation Analysis. Suzanne has a long standing interest in academic writing, and after several years as a Writing and Learning Mentor, offering one to one and group writing support to undergraduate and postgraduate students, she now coordinates a writing module for the Doctorate in Clinical Communication Science, formerly known as the Doctorate in Speech and Language Therapy.

COLLEEN MCKENNA is a lecturer in academic literacies in the Centre for the Advancement for Learning and Teaching at University College London, where she teaches and publishes in the area of postgraduate writing, digital literacies, academic practice and writing in the disciplines.

PHYLLIS CREME is a senior teaching fellow in the Centre for the Advancement for Learning and Teaching at University College London. With a background in the humanities she now mainly teaches and publishes on issues around student writing, with a particular interest in creative approaches to academic writing. She is co-author, with Mary Lea, of *Writing at University: A Guide for Students*, Open University Press/McGraw Hill Education, 2008.

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