Developing writing and speaking skills through interactive workshops

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Abstract

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The Writing and Oral Skills (WOS) Project involves a weekly series of extra-curricular interactive workshops primarily for first year undergraduates at an English university. The project is designed to enhance the generic writing and speaking skills of the students. This paper reports on the development and evaluation of the project, including a comparison of its impact on students from “traditional” backgrounds against older students and those from lower socio-economic and Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) groups. The evaluation indicates that regular attendance at WOS workshops can help to improve attainment and engagement of students across backgrounds and disciplines.
Developing writing and speaking skills through interactive workshops

First year students coming into Higher Education are often not clear why they are attending university beyond getting a good degree and finding suitable employment. Managing these expectations should be part of a process, as ultimately, colleagues want the same for their students. The emphasis within the Writing and Oral Skills (WOS) Project is on learning outcomes to enable students to focus on what they are supposed to be able to do at the end of a given task. Students can decide if they have met the intended learning outcomes in a session and feel supported if they do not understand any aspect covered. WOS encourages students to establish good learning patterns, asking that important question: “how do you learn?” Validating students in their first year through sharing in discussions and debating, and valuing what they already know, begins to build much needed confidence at this very early stage. Such strategies of approach create a shared learning environment in which students feel empowered and, thus, able to apply the writing and skills acquired in the WOS workshops to the assessments they need to complete as part of their degree.

The WOS Project was started in 2013-14 at a medium sized comprehensive English post 92 university and is currently reaching the end of its second year. It involves a weekly series of extra-curricular interactive workshops primarily for first year students. It is organized and taught by staff in the School of Humanities, with the assistance of “Peer Assisted Learning” (PAL) students (Longfellow et al, 2008). The aim of the Project is to improve and enhance students’ generic writing and speaking skills as a complement and extension of their existing opportunities for academic skills development through university’s Academic Skills Centres; and to provide curricular and extracurricular activities. The WOS Project builds on and enhances the approaches and strategies employed in the academic skills centres to ensure that all students, regardless of background, can participate fully and benefit from the opportunity to improve their generic academic writing and speaking skills (May et al, 2012). Coordinating the timetable to accommodate all School of Humanities first year students is challenging, in part because of the large number of extra-curricular activities available at the University making it crucial to have online access and also a flexible approach in delivering sessions.

The initiative is central government funded through the university’s Access Agreement and is part of a wider University initiative to enhance student performance, attainment and engagement. In its first year (2013/14), the WOS Project was targeted at the Faculty of Arts and Social Science (FASS), although students from the other faculties regularly attended. In the second year (2014/15), the project was extended to target final year undergraduates in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Computing (SEC).

The ethos underlying the WOS Project is based on one of the early philosophies behind extracurricular activities: that they should, wherever possible, “grow out of curricular activities and return to curricular activities to enrich them” (Millard, 1930: 12). Part of ensuring success lies in promoting ideas that make for a successful learner through personal and group development with a view to lifelong learning, including PAL strategies such as peer review. This approach is designed to help those students who may find it difficult to translate general messages into practical solutions to begin to learn how to receive and give comments in a spirit of helpfulness. The weekly programme encourages students to respond to feedback by inviting them to reflect on their performance and identify strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, it can be argued that while there is not one “best” method of teaching “the second best is students teaching other students” (Biggs 2011: 147).

The potential of peer learning is now being realised and arguably it offers an important addition to the teaching and learning environment, especially in this university (see Smith et al, 2007) at which students come from a diverse and wide range of demographic backgrounds. Peer strategies are a useful tool in extracurriculum design where we are set with the task of diversifying learning and teaching, and peer involvement in learning has the added benefit of transferring cultural experiences though team approaches. In addition, Personal Development Planning sessions are incorporated into the programme to enable us to
offer tools of reflection and to support students to better plan for their futures.

WOS is organised and taught through workshops from the School of Humanities, within each 90-minute session attention is devoted to a key generic academic writing and speaking skill such as the principles of grammar and punctuation or the structuring and presentation of an argument. Initially, WOS was targeted at the School’s first year students, however, regular attendance by undergraduates at all levels from across the university demonstrated that the fundamentals of academic writing and speaking are essential skills for all university students to acquire and master, regardless of level and discipline.

Employer expectation that graduate students, regardless of discipline, will have good writing and speaking skills is well documented (see for example Badcock, Pattinson and Harris, 2010). Universities have responded to employer expectation by embedding the acquisition of communication skills, specifically writing and oral skills, into the curriculum. The amount of class time devoted to developing students’ writing abilities and appropriate writing-related attitudes tends to differ according to discipline, however. With the need to cover discipline-specific content in some courses, time devoted to specific skills and their acquisition is also sometimes reduced. At this University, experience reveals that students need the repetition and re-familiarisation of skills throughout their degree career. In each 90-minute WOS workshop, therefore, the aim is to give students the opportunity to practice and hone their academic and speaking skills in a collaborative, inclusive and supportive workshop environment with the emphasis placed on active participation and engagement. By using a combination of lecturer-led presentations, small group exercises and peer-review, students are introduced to key academic skills, which they then have the opportunity to practice in-course and sharpen. Our experience has demonstrated that the strategy of blending lecturer and student-led activities helps to foster the type of supportive and collaborative environment essential for enabling our students to become autonomous, confident and successful learners. As a result, in the weekly WOS workshops we use second and third year PAL mentors to help to support and facilitate sessions, working in particular with first year undergraduates thereby providing them with the opportunity to receive feedback and guidance from student facilitators who have successfully completed their first year. The introduction of PAL is also likely to benefit to mentors (Smith, et al., 2007) and the literature suggests, successful PAL students enhance their personal and transferable skills (Donelan and Wallace, 1989) and ‘develop a greater understanding of the social aspect of learning’ (Ashwin, 2003).

During the WOS workshops, the Project Team also promote subject-specific personal tutor schemes as an important point of contact for all students. To support the commitment to the personal tutorial scheme, as part of the workshop scheduled sessions are included on ‘responding to feedback’ and ‘how to make connections between academic skills and personal development’. In addition, the WOS project team have an increased commitment to employability and embedding it as an integral part of the students’ diet of curricular and extra-curricular activities. The team work closely with the Careers and Employability service to promote curriculum vitae writing support and employability-focused workshops on interview techniques and writing personal statements.

On some undergraduate degree programmes the WOS schedule is also embedded as part of the teaching and learning and assessment strategies for at least one core module, this enables the project team to more effectively monitor the relationship between regular attendance at the WOS workshops and attainment. The WOS workshops are presented to students as an extra-curricular activity that would enable them to extend and develop the academic writing and oral skills they had acquired as part of that module. As the selected core modules/courses are each attached to the personal tutorial scheme, students are also aware that they have the opportunity to discuss the academic skills acquired in WOS workshops in a small-group environment and receive guidance on how to apply their skills knowledge to discipline specific examples. In addition, for each of these modules, students’ regular attendance at the WOS workshops was embedded as a small part of the assessment strategy. WOS loyalty cards were produced to enable students to collect WOS ‘attendance points’ and thereby record their attendance; these cards proved highly popular among students giving them a sense of being part of a community of learners, and hence an enhanced study experience (see for example Hodgson et al 2008).
Constructivist theories of teaching and learning are a useful approach aiming to draw on students’ ‘prior knowledge’, as this necessarily has an effect on the new knowledge being taught (Biggs, 2003:13). Thus in the example of one WOS workshop, students were able to apply and test out their understanding of academic writing by completing a tailored workbook and then conclude by writing a short 500 word critical analysis under timed conditions. At the end of this WOS workshop, students submitted the critical analysis for written feedback. The workbooks were returned to students in the following week, highlighting 3 things students’ ‘did well’ and 3 areas that needed improvement. This approach gave students, within a relatively short space of time, the knowledge and confidence to work to enhance the identified aspects of their academic writing. More importantly, this approach enabled students to begin to develop strategies for both recognising and addressing those aspects of their academic writing that require attention.

Evaluation
The evaluation strategy for the WOS Project is based on findings from the first year of the Project, and draws on quantitative and qualitative sources. The quantitative data was gathered through weekly attendance registers and the University’s student record system. The cohort consisted of 159 students from across the University who attended the WOS workshops, between September 2013 and March 2014. The qualitative data was gathered from focus groups, questionnaires and in-class written critical essay tests. The Project used both approaches to monitor and analyse the relationship between student attainment, demographic background and regular attendance at the workshops.

Analysis of quantitative data
Evidence from previous experience of running WOS workshops showed that regular attendance at skills-based workshops such as these enable students both to acquire and hone their skills through repeated practice and application to their own learning styles and needs.

This evaluation considers the following cohorts of students:

A. Those who attended at least 6 WOS session in teaching block 1 (n=22)
B. Those who attended at least 6 WOS session in teaching block 2 (n=25)
C. Those who attended at least 6 WOS sessions in both teaching blocks 1 and 2 (the frequent attendees) n=39
D. Those who attended any WOS sessions, including the frequent attendees n=159
E. All students, including WOS attendees, studying on any of the same modules as the frequent WOS attendees (to give a fair comparison of potential WOS attendees with the WOS attendees). n=981

The demographic data in Table 1 shows that the frequent WOS attendees were predominantly from “traditional” backgrounds in terms of each of the measures considered here: age on entry, ethnic group and socio economic class. These constitute what is referred to here as the ‘Widening Participation criteria’ for this Project. For example 37% of the “potential attendees” (group C) were mature, and 73% met at least one of the Widening Participation criteria; against figures of 23% (mature group A) and 56% (overall group A) for the regular WOS attendees.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a majority of the frequent WOS attendees (56%) met at least one of these Widening Participation criteria of being either aged over 21 years when starting university, from a black minority ethnic group or, for those under 21 years, having parents from socio economic classes 4 to 7 (ONS 2010).
Table 1 - Demographic distribution of all WOS attendees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>A: WOS ≥ 6 attendances</th>
<th>B: All WOS attendees</th>
<th>C: All module attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP-Mature (&gt;21 on entry)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>A: WOS ≥ 6 attendances</th>
<th>B: All WOS attendees</th>
<th>C: All module attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP-BME</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio Econ Class of Young (where known)</th>
<th>A: WOS ≥ 6 attendances</th>
<th>B: All WOS attendees</th>
<th>C: All module attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP-4-7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>A: WOS ≥ 6 attendances</th>
<th>B: All WOS attendees</th>
<th>C: All module attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non WP</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 compares the average module marks for each attendance group for students meeting any of the Widening Participation criteria (mature, BME or, aged under 21 on entry with parents from lower a socio economic class). The data used considers only student marks in 2013/14 and excludes all cases of zero scores.

Table 2 - Module Marks against WOS attendance for WP and non-WP students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance group</th>
<th>TB1 All students</th>
<th>TB2 All students</th>
<th>TB1 WP</th>
<th>TB2 WP</th>
<th>TB1 Non WP</th>
<th>TB2 Non WP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C WOS attendance ≥ 6</td>
<td>n = 22 Mean = 66</td>
<td>n = 25 Mean = 65</td>
<td>n = 12 Mean = 65</td>
<td>n = 14 Mean = 65</td>
<td>n = 10 Mean = 68</td>
<td>n = 11 Mean = 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D All WOS attendees</td>
<td>n = 159 Mean = 62</td>
<td>n = 101 Mean = 62</td>
<td>n = 58 Mean = 62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E All module attendance</td>
<td>n = 981 Mean = 61</td>
<td>n = 717 Mean = 60</td>
<td>n = 263 Mean = 61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 illustrates that the average module marks of Widening Participation regular WOS attendees at 65 in each Teaching Block was significantly better that the average module marks of 60 of the complete Widening Participation population attending the same modules. The same pattern of higher marks for the regular WOS attendees is apparent for the non-Widening Participation cohort.

Table 2 also shows that there is an insignificant difference between the module attainment of WP and non WP students whether or not they attend the WOS sessions.
In summary, this analysis shows that regular WOS attendees were more likely to come from “traditional” backgrounds than those who chose to attend infrequently or not at all but that, nevertheless, more than half of the regular WOS attendees satisfied at least one Widening Participation criterion. The data also indicates that students who attended WOS session frequently outperformed non-attenders or infrequent attenders in their assessments and that students from “non traditional” demographic backgrounds benefited to the same extent as “traditional” young white students with parents from the higher socio economic groupings.

**Analysis of qualitative data**

Focus groups were carried out to explore the students’ rationale for attending the WOS workshops regularly and the connections they made between regular attendance, attainment at University and future careers. We ran one focus group at the end of TB1, during which the students also reflected on the piece of academic writing they completed in the first WOS workshop, and worked in pairs to consider how they used the feedback they had received on their academic writing skills over the teaching block in discipline-specific modules/assessments. The feedback from students helped us to reflect on the WOS Project in TB1 in preparation for TB2 and also formed part of the data to feed forward.

Students’ comments within the focus groups indicated that they both valued and benefitted from those features of the WOS workshops that they perceived as distinctive, including the participation of enthusiastic staff with a varied expertise who attended the workshops regularly, providing them with a sense of familiarity. These observations reiterated findings from the questionnaires and feedback sheets. Students also drew attention to the informal character of the workshops and the use of learning activities that place an emphasis on inclusivity, collaboration and ‘fun’, including through the weekly provision of biscuits. Together distinctive features such as these highlight the difference between extra-curricular and curricula environments from the students’ perspective, not in terms of the quality of teaching and learning received or its beneficial impact, but in terms of their character.

**Discussion**

The data collected strongly indicates that students who attend the extra-curricular interactive WOS workshops regularly (a minimum of 6 sessions in each teaching block) have the potential to increase their end-of-year assessment grade. This finding is unsurprising as the literature shows that extra-curricular activities are as necessary as regular classes for skill development. Such activities also provide good opportunities for students to achieve their curricular goals (See for example, Tenhouse, 2003).

The BME attainment gap across the English higher education sector is well documented, whereby undergraduates from white ethnic groups achieve significantly better degree outcomes than their non-white counterparts (see for example Broeke and Nicholls, 2007). It is therefore significant to note that evidence from the WOS workshops suggests that this attainment gap does not occur in this case, with those from BME and white backgrounds achieving at the same level. In light of ongoing efforts in higher education to reduce the BME attainment gap, an important question for the WOS Project Team and Universities more widely, is why and how these extra-curricular interactive WOS workshops enhance the potential for all students to succeed. Since student success seems to be predicated on regular student attendance, equally important questions revolve around the issue of student motivation. For example, what motivates our students to attend and participate both regularly and voluntarily in these extra-curricular academic skills workshops? What are the characteristics of academic extra-curricular activities, such as the WOS workshops, that inspire University students to remain involved? And can lecturers in higher education institutions use ‘engagement characteristics to inform classroom practice’ and course structure? (Holloway, 2002, p.80). These questions relate to student motivation and its impact on attainment and achievement, as well as student barriers to learning.

The ‘expectancy-value theory of motivation’ claims that ‘if anyone is to engage in an activity, he or she needs both to value the outcome and to expect success in achieving it.’ (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p.35.) Further research planned by the WOS Project Team will explore what motivates students to attend the extra-curricular interactive WOS workshops, and how student motivation impacts on their attainment and
assessment performance. An improved understanding will inform the types of teaching and learning strategies adopted and have an impact beyond the WOS workshop environment.

A key role of educators is to help students to understand the value of ‘deep learning’ and that appropriate and extended engagement in their studies is worthwhile and will facilitate academic success. By endeavouring to create a university culture that optimises student motivation we will be able ‘maximize the chances that they have to achieve the intended learning outcomes’ (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p.34) and minimize barriers to learning. Literature on inclusion and diversity in higher education institutions, stresses the importance of recognizing and reducing the range of barriers to learning that students may encounter during their University career (See Grace and Gravestock, 2009). Meanwhile, studies on BME students’ participation in Higher Education, underscore that ‘institutional factors’ have as much impact on BME student retention and attainment as student-specific factors (Richardson, 2008; Singh, 2011). For those universities that see ‘learning as central to all we do’ and whose commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion is integral to its strategic mission, a greater awareness of what motivates students is also important.

Conclusion
As part of the ethos for the WOS Project, the team believe that all students at the University have the potential to learn and excel. The findings from the first year of the project demonstrate that regular attendance at extra-curricular skills-based workshops such as WOS can help to improve students’ attainment, performance, engagement and employability, regardless of background and discipline. Indeed, such has been the success and recognised institutional value of WOS, that it is now formally recognised as part of the University’s academic strategy from 2015/16.

Further investigation is planned into factors influencing the motivation of students and the impact of WOS on students within each widening participation group and in relation to entry qualifications.

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