The Impact of Research-based Writing on Student Learning Experience: Issues of Evaluation

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Outline

1. Context
2. Rationale
3. Departmental mini-projects: brief overview
4. Evaluation framework + principles
5. Sample mini-project
6. Conclusions and implications
Context

Thinking Writing at Queen Mary, University of London

Staff-facing, writing development of both L1 and L2 students, writing not as an add-on skill but as an important way of learning in the disciplines.

2010-2011 - Research-based Learning and Writing Project

Internally funded, overlooking the (re)design, delivery and evaluation of six modules from different departments that involve undergraduate students in research-based learning and writing.

Guiding questions:
What makes an effective RBL experience for students?
How can RBL create productive opportunities for students to write?
How can writing contribute to RBL and learning in general?
Rationale: Development of Purposeful Writing

‘Reinvigorating’ writing for students and staff by emphasising its purpose, audience, and its role in research and professional practice

In composing according to disciplinary and generic conventions, researchers both test and shape their knowledge, understanding and arguments (Bazerman, 2009).

In publishing their work and participating in peer review, researchers allow their work to be judged and made accessible to future researchers. They also develop their professional identities (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

In adapting their work to communicate with a broad range of audiences and purposes – disciplinary, professional and community-based – researchers create value beyond the university in professional and community contexts (Dias & Pare, 2000).
Mini-projects - Brief Overview

**Film Studies**
Year 3
Mapping Contemporary Cinema

**Geography**
Year 2
Wiki-based collaborative writing in Geography

**Politics**
Year 2
Using Parliament and Government as Research Resources

**English**
Year 1
Connect-Criticise-Construct: Building the Research-Aware Student

**History**
Year 3
Building a Collaborative Case Study

**Medicine**
Intercalated BSc
SODOTO Cascade: See one, do one, teach one
Evaluation: Challenges

1) How to draw up a framework that
   → enables us to say something quite broadly about the impact of research-based writing interventions on student learning experience, and
   ← allows us to keep the individuality of the six mini-projects

2) How to produce meaningful data that would enable subject tutors to make any necessary changes both during the project and for the subsequent re-runs of their modules.
Evaluation: Purposes

**Accountability** — ‘monitoring whether the process achieves its intended outcomes’ (Chelimsky, 1997, in Powell, 2007: 3);  

**Development** — ‘providing information to help improve the process’ (*ibid.*);  

**Knowledge** — obtaining ‘a deeper understanding about the process and its participants’ (*ibid.*);  

**Capacity building** — ‘providing those engaged in the process of evaluation with the ability to evaluate, in order to support their own processes of enquiry and critical thinking’ (Baume, 2006 in Powell, 2007: 3).
## Evaluation: Principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flexibility</th>
<th>Umbrella categories for what to evaluate, but focus and mechanisms can vary within each of them</th>
<th>Powell (2007), Healey and Jenkins (2009), Nygaard and Belluigi, 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on process and experience as well as product and outcome</td>
<td>Staff and student experiences are of interest</td>
<td>Robertson and Bond (2001), Robertson and Blacker (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental (ongoing)</td>
<td>Evaluation activities used throughout the life of the project + encouraging reflection</td>
<td>Powell (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple perspectives</td>
<td>Involving different parties in the evaluation process, students as participants, peer evaluation, triangulation</td>
<td>Powell (2007), Spronken-Smith and Walker (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintended outcomes</td>
<td>Considering any consequences that have not been predicted</td>
<td>Powell (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation: Data

Lecturer/s

Students ↔ Process/product
**Evaluation: Framework**

- **RBL ELEMENT**
- **WRITING**
- **STAFF AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

**Nature of (a) writing task(s)**
What kinds of writing are happening?
What are their functions?
How do they differ from regular writing?

**‘Product’ quality**
How well are students producing these?
Has student writing improved?
Does it demonstrate a deep/er engagement with the subject material?
Example: Mapping Contemporary Cinema

Film Studies
Year 3
Mapping Contemporary Cinema

Assessment:
1. Reader’s report: 1000 words, 25%
2. Rewrite/edit: 3,500 words, 25%
3. Editorial: 2000 words, 50%

Website built: http://www.mcc.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/

‘Film Matters’ (a journal of undergraduate film studies) – a regular column.
Mapping Contemporary Cinema

Created by staff and students in the film studies department at Queen Mary, University of London, Mapping Contemporary Cinema is devoted to the publication of intelligent in-depth accounts of contemporary US and German films, as well as shorter editorials on a range of different themes.
Tutor comments:

a success, good attendance, high levels of motivation, work produced of high quality.

‘The writing task has driven a different kind of engagement with the subject material/knowledge: more precise (fixing up and clarifying a reference), more opportunist (fixing gaps in another student’s work with quick raids on the critical literature) and in part more expansive (a broader overview of the field is needed to do this well)’.
Example: Mapping Contemporary Cinema

Students’ comments:
‘unique and creative’, ‘a nice adventure’, ‘very enjoyable’, ‘offered us a different approach to the exercise of writing and doing research’, ‘had a more vocational feel than that of an academic subject’, ‘we were essentially in control’.

What they valued:

- Innovative and experimental - gives a good platform for getting further involved in journalistic pursuits.
- The module is much more unique and creative than other modules, allowing us a glimpse into the processes and workings of an editorial board.
- It is so exciting to know that our work will be published on a website.
- The chance to learn to write essays properly by looking through peer marking.
- This is the module that has most helped my writing and research skills.
Student comments - suggestions for improvement:

- structure,
- assignment turnaround times,
- run it in the 2nd year,
- clearer guidance for marking out the border between writing and editing needed,
- request for better resources esp. marking criteria,
- different workloads - unfair,
- further feedback round requested,
- structured writing workshops may be needed.
Thinking Writing Advisor’s comments:

‘Generally, there was a fair amount of consensus, particularly about style. A snappy turn of phrase or good figurative writing that kept the reader entertained and the avoidance of stock phrases were commented on. They worked very much as an editorial team with a clear identity. [Tutor’s name] mentioned the need for an intellectual adventurousness in the writing. What was interesting was that they had clearly developed their own critical language as a group.’
Conclusions

Evaluating broadly

Impact on students’ learning experience
– Largely positive feedback from students
– Some excellent work produced
– High motivation when benefits seen beyond studying
– RBL initiatives can enhance engagement with subject knowledge and writing development

Impact on staff development
– Most overestimated what students would be able to produce
– Need to find effective ways of facilitating and assessing group work
– Have clear ideas of how to proceed
– Working towards a ‘community of practice’

Still a lot to be done
– Adjustments to modules needed
– Further research on impact needed if the approach is to be extended

A useful way of framing writing
– Students can see its usefulness for future professional / academic practice
– More tightly linked with disciplinary knowledge and epistemology
– Creates an authentic need for skills development
– ‘Writing by stealth’

Evaluation as a formative process
– Important to clarify purposes of evaluation from the start
– Value of developmental evaluation (process and experience are important)
– Needs to be contextualised
– Peer evaluation and expertise
References


Thank you for listening.

Any questions?

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