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Writing Pedagogy and Arts Honours

Abstract:

Writing programs are shaped by the way in which academics approach writing practices from disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives and respond to students' interests in the art and craft of writing for personal development, for academic study, or as relevant to future employment. Responding to these interests calls for a willingness to experiment with pedagogic approaches that assist students to apply and test disciplinary ideas by analysing and using a range of genres. Whilst Arts honours programs often have small – sometimes declining – enrolments, they represent a peak in the uncertainties about student needs and interests in relation to writing programs and how to respond to them. These uncertainties are compounded by concerns about the purpose of a program that completes study for some students but initiates higher-level study for others. To what extent should honours include vocationally relevant learning, or be the training ground for postgraduate research? And how can it help students to build on their strengths from undergraduate studies and develop the ability to make new and informed choices of study topics, assessment and forms of writing in managing their progression through a learning program?

The paper presents a case study that explores the teaching of writing in this context of uncertainty. The case study discusses the introduction, into a Communication Studies honours program, of a 'Writing Practices' elective, which combines theoretical and practical work across a range of academic, organisational, professional and media-based genres. Students taking the elective aspire to careers involving writing and creativity, although their interests differ and career objectives remain unfocused. A framework based on rhetoric accommodates interdisciplinary convergence between studies in media, literature, and professional and public communication, and guides students towards more independent and self-directed learning through engagement with a range of genres. The case study shows how the use of this rhetorical framework offers a process of guided student choice for negotiating the elective content and assessment, and seeks to extend the students' capacities as writers and strengthen their confidence in their competence and futures.

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Introduction

Creativity and uncertainty characterise the Australian higher education sector as universities strive to strengthen their positions as distinctive and preferred destinations for high-achieving students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. As a result, the sector has seen such bold moves as the University of Melbourne's reconfiguration of its course offerings into broad undergraduate and specialised postgraduate programs, and Monash University's restructuring of its honours program to 'fast-track high performers into research from as early as their first undergraduate year' (Trounson 2008: 25). The Monash model does not dispense with the end-on honours year taken after a three-year bachelor program, an arrangement that has become widespread for the arts and humanities in Australian universities. But it is promoted as giving flexibility to accommodate the accelerated development of promising student-researchers, meet the aspirations of higher-achieving students feeling inadequately challenged, and continue 'the growth of existing programs where honours numbers have been increasing' (Trounson 2008: 25). Both these examples represent a reconceptualising of pathways between undergraduate and postgraduate studies, but in relation to honours the Monash redesign is particularly interesting in its focus on a degree that has traditionally been unique to Australian higher education (Murray 2006: 93) and has had enrolments low relative to undergraduate numbers.

Trounson (2008) places the Monash initiative within a cluster of other developments that show an appreciation and reappraisal of the honours degree within Australian higher education. He also mentions the disparity of honours programs offered by Australian universities, which raises questions for those involved in curriculum design of what honours should do and be. Exacerbating this is 'a dearth of international academic research on the topic' (Murray 2006: 93-94), although some valuable local contributions have been made to understanding the potential of honours in some disciplines (eg, Kroll 2000, Woods 2000 in creative writing, and Murray 2006 in communication studies). Adding to these challenges in fields such as writing is the possible intersection with other disciplines, which may be advantageous for students pedagogically and necessary in a practical, organisational context. And, further, the ground is shifting around honours as coursework postgraduate options such as graduate certificates and masters emerge in writing and related fields. Notwithstanding the increase in available study pathways, there are still strong signs of enthusiasm for honours among staff and students in the arts and humanities.

Translating enthusiasm into a pedagogically sound program that responds to the needs, interests and aspirations of students, however, can represent a peak in the uncertainties about how to respond to student needs and interests that must be negotiated in curriculum design and that revolve around choice of content, assessment and delivery of the program. These uncertainties are compounded at honours level by concerns about the purpose of a program that completes study for some students but begins higher-level study for others. It has been recognised that even strong coursework performance does not necessarily prepare students to make a transition to independent research with confidence (Harris 2006, Lovitts 2005). To what extent

should honours be the training ground for postgraduate research or focus also on vocationally relevant learning? How can it help students to build on their strengths from undergraduate studies and develop the ability to make new and informed choices in managing their progression through an advanced learning program?

This paper presents a case study that explores the teaching of writing at honours level in this context of uncertainty. The case study discusses the introduction, in 2008, of an elective called Writing Practices into a Bachelor of Communication Studies honours program at the University of New England. The elective is a first and formative step towards the possible development of a full honours program in writing. At present it is part of an overall structure in which the dissertation and coursework each represent fifty per cent of the honours work and assessment, and the coursework is divided into a module on disciplinary scholarship and research and three electives, of which Writing Practices is one. As some universities already offer more extensive and established honours programs in writing, the intention here is not to press claims of innovative course development, but rather to use our example to reflect on key issues that arise at this honours level and may be negotiated differently, depending on institutional contexts. We focus on the process of assisting students to make judgments and choices in negotiating course contents, forms of writing and assessment, and through this example join wider initiatives to relate pedagogic approaches to 'students' perception of their writing and reading practices and their needs as writers in transition' through higher education (Woods 2008: par 1, Abstract).

The transitional nature of honours study

Honours 'may be taken as an additional year following the three year degree or is awarded on the basis of meritorious achievement in degrees of four or more years' (Australian Qualifications Framework [AQF] 2008). The example we give here is in the context of the one-year, add-on honours program following the bachelor degree. Honours, according to the Australian Qualifications Framework, 'involves some research preparation' (AQF 2008); it may be the first step in further, research-intensive study, but it may also be seen to improve students' career prospects by deepening and extending their disciplinary knowledge and experience, and their generic skills. This dual purpose, and the fact that honours sits ambiguously between undergraduate coursework and postgraduate degrees, prompt many questions about how best to respond to the needs of honours students. Jeri Kroll asks:

Do they live just around the corner from the ordinary undergraduate or have they packed up and left the old neighbourhood? Have they strayed across the divide between undergraduate and postgraduate . . . When they begin, do honours students have a clear idea of what they want? (Kroll 2000: par 1)

The concern to understand the nature of students' expectations of writing courses and what 'they bring with them to our classes' also relates, of course, to undergraduate years and the transition into university study (Woods 2008: par 15). What is

distinctive about honours programs, however, is the extent to which they enable students to progress toward more independent modes of investigation and learning, or the ‘self-motivated learning’ that is central to successful completion of research higher degrees (Murray 2006: 94) and that may also improve generic workforce skills such as the ability to work autonomously and manage projects. Murray (2006: 94) defines ‘self-motivated learning’ as that which is ‘enthusiastic, proactive, self-directed, characterised by minimal staff oversight, and [that] results in successful fulfilment of course requirements’. Progression toward ‘self-motivated learning’ is implied at a broad level in the typical structure of the honours program, which, like undergraduate programs, comprises a series of discrete coursework units but which concludes with the submission of a dissertation that represents a level of research competence higher than that attained in the undergraduate degree.

From the dissertation arise opportunities to introduce students to the stages, mechanisms and forms of writing involved in larger-scale, research-based projects within disciplinary contexts. When, how and the extent to which this happens depends on local (organisational) requirements (eg, the submission of a research proposal or presentation of a seminar), supervisory practices and, of course, the students themselves. But ideally the dissertation is a guided process through which the student makes the transition to a higher level of independent learning.

Honours coursework and the transition to self-directed learning

Coursework, too, may guide this transition – earlier and in a more structured and group-based way than may occur with the dissertation – and in doing so provide a critical transition between undergraduate and honours years. This may be overt in units that are specifically designed to induct students into research methodologies on which they can base their dissertation research and theoretical frameworks that can inform their research, and that teach particular forms of academic writing, such as the literature review.

Other coursework may be more focussed on disciplinary content, but nevertheless offer opportunities to guide the transition to self-directed learning. In choosing the types of writing around which to organise the activities of the small group in the Writing Practices elective, for example, we were keen to reflect students’ interests and consequently met informally with them early in the honours year to discuss their expectations of, and preferences for, the elective. This might be seen as responding to a sense shared also by some undergraduates that, while they are not sure what a writing course will entail, they feel capable of undertaking it successfully within an anticipated curriculum structure (Paul Skrebels cited in Woods 2008: par 23). What our initial discussions were dealing with, though, were the implications for students of the fact that more responsibility falls on them at honours level to choose or formulate topics – to exercise the faculty of invention, in rhetorical terms – and decide on appropriate methods of research and analysis and modes of presentation for their work. Behind our deliberate and collective discussion of content was the idea of open choice, which was for some students a confronting departure from the frameworks within which choices had been made in undergraduate units, but which was also an

early and important stage in a guided progression toward self-directed learning culminating in the dissertation.

From this discussion with students, common ground emerged: all expressed aspirations to careers involving writing and creativity. Beyond that, however, career objectives remained unfocussed: all wanted to obtain steady employment, preferably in the fields of interest chosen for the dissertation, although they were open to other possibilities. Some did not rule out returning to university to undertake a research higher degree in the future. Their interests differed, too, and included screenwriting and film reviewing, journalism and online magazine publication. In all cases, though, the students' hopes for the Writing Practices elective largely revolved around their chosen dissertation areas, which perhaps reflects some nervousness or uncertainty about the dissertation, especially the relative weight attached to it in determining the final honours classification. We were concerned, though, that the elective should neither replicate nor replace the work undertaken in the dissertation, but rather add to the students' knowledge base while creating the spaces and intellectual technology for negotiating uncertainties and *gaining capacity* for self-motivated learning.

From curriculum design to a process of guided choice

As curriculum designers, we had a general idea that the Writing Practices elective would extend the analytical, practical and research skills introduced in undergraduate units. It would do so through workshops that extended the study of different genres undertaken at undergraduate level, aided by consideration of how rhetorical variables including authorship (eg, individual or collaborative), purpose, context, medium, genre, structure, style, register and tone come into play in diverse circumstances. From undergraduate units in writing, it was noted, students were familiar with principles and techniques of writing in a broad range of genres in print or electronic media – academic (eg, the essay), organisational (eg, discussion papers, reports, proposals), media-based or arts-based (eg, radio, screen and play scripts; reviews), among others. Keeping in mind the dual purpose of honours in preparing students for academic research and giving them a workforce 'edge', the new content set out in curriculum design was explained as introducing them to other types of specialised writing that they would encounter in higher-level academic study, organisations beyond the university or possible career contexts. These types were chosen for their relevance to the common ground shared by the students that had emerged at the first meeting, but also to complement rather than duplicate those forms of representation considered in the students' dissertations. Workshops and readings were thus organised in segments on the following forms of writing.

- Academic writing: forms and processes beyond the essay and journal article, including abstracts and peer reviews
- Corporate writing: codes of conduct and other documents governing workplace behaviour; policies and procedures
- Resource-based writing: strategic plans; proposals and applications for funding and support
- Educational/instructional writing

Where possible we gave students documents that had some relevance to them, such as from the university or their own fields of professional interest. In corporate writing, for example, we looked at the former Film Australia (2008) strategic/vision statement. Our selection of particular types of writing – for instance, within corporate writing, codes of conduct and mission statements – drew on the premise within rhetorical criticism that similar or recurring situations prompt distinctive types of rhetorical responses to what audiences need and expect (Hart & Daughton 2005; 116; Foss 2004: 193). Using examples of the forms, we considered the situational context of the writing and what decisions about variables such as medium, tone, register and style had been made by writers because of that context. The response to the uncertainty about the role of honours for students has thus been to pursue disciplinary studies in rhetoric and writing in ways that help students to develop the ability to work in a range of genres, some of which would often not be encountered in an arts and humanities context, according to their perceptions of changing opportunities and contexts of communication.

This extended rhetorical work was a logical progression from undergraduate study. But by undertaking it in the transitional and uncertain context of honours we also found that the form of workshop interaction supported the process of guided choice by allowing immediate applications of the variables to the study context. This was not necessarily envisioned in the curriculum planning phase. So, for example, although we did not see it so at the time, the first meeting with students became the initial stage in an exercise that simulated collaborative writing and other practices in the workplace. At the conclusion of the first meeting, we undertook to prepare a document for students that, based on our discussion but supplemented by us, would outline the content, scope and objectives of the Writing Practices elective, as well as some pointers to general reading in their individual areas of interest. This was circulated to students as a draft discussion document for their comment. It was followed by other documents that we produced to guide workshops, taking into account students' comments. The circulation of documents, and arrangement of times to discuss them, was done by email and informally in person, with the group having to negotiate others' commitments and unforeseen circumstances. For some, this extended a body of knowledge of workplace writing practices gained in the undergraduate unit *Writing for Work: Styles and Contexts*, in which tutorials are conducted as meetings at which unit content is discussed by the group led by a nominated student chair, and at which students produce minutes and agendas (Brien, McDougall & Williamson 2005a, Williamson 2005). It represented a negotiation of the way in which content was paced and delivered that moved students beyond the prescriptive framework of the semester and placed more responsibility on them for the timing, pace and delivery of content; all opted, for example, to cluster most workshops between first and second semesters, which fitted best with other honours commitments as well as personal circumstances.

Another example of the way in which mechanisms of a workshop can help students to develop capacities of choice and self-motivated learning comes from an adjustment to

the normal delivery mode of honours teaching. For this honours elective, we proposed to prepare study guides for each of the segments on the specialised types of writing listed above. Each guide would comprise a brief explanation of what was to be covered, plus readings and questions. Providing such guides is unusual at honours level. In our institution, we would normally only provide them in undergraduate programs or coursework postgraduate programs, for external students, and in that context they would be more comprehensive. However, in addition to the practical interest in building up a set of resources that could be reconfigured to suit other student cohorts (internal and external) in the future, whether as part of Writing Practices elective or a full honours course in writing, the immediate pedagogic reason was to ease the transition to self-guided learning. The documents provided a ‘scaffolding’ of content from which the students could undertake further work, at their own pace. Also, we invited them, as they went through the elective, to consider the guides critically as pieces of writing that have a purpose, context, audience, register, content and structure. We asked them to do this both from editorial perspectives (all had done our Publishing and Editing unit), and for the documents’ effectiveness as generic writing for educational purposes – again, not something we had done in writing units at undergraduate level. Students had been used to participating in surveys to evaluate teaching and units, but this was the first time they had been invited to offer a critique of our work openly within a generic context. The adjustment in teaching delivery was thus to provide materials that gave some advisory directions for student work but also opened a space for a collaborative writing and review process between staff and students that occurs more typically in the context of higher degree research relations between supervisors and candidates.

Finally, the students’ descriptions of their ideas relating to dissertations led us to focus on various genres that had relevance for dissertation topics. Inserted into the analyses of specialised genres mentioned above, as workshops progressed, was other content prompted by the students themselves. This included the emergence of cyber-genres in relation to online writing, and forms of public and political essay in relation to shifts of researched journalistic writing across print and online media. Supporting varied dissertation-driven interests, the exploratory work on these genres (without study guides) also indicated the value that strategies such as reading into different and new areas, in order to compare notes and methods with others in a careful listening mode, can have for one’s development as a researcher and writer (cf Woods 2008).

Professional and creative writing reconsidered

In any arts discipline, of course, writing is one of the ways in which the process of self-directed learning can be negotiated; it is also an academic product (the essay, creative work, exegesis, dissertation) that affirms that the process has been negotiated successfully, and, by the allocation of a mark and grade, to what degree. But ‘writing’ also denotes a disciplinary field in which students study and attain competence in different genres while learning about the industry and other social contexts in which writing is produced, and which may be further divided into ‘professional’ and ‘creative’ categories. The designation of degrees, and components of them, as ‘writing’ depends on disciplinary positioning and nomenclature, although key

concerns of the writing discipline may be present in other disciplines, for instance in considering principles and techniques of historical writing for publication (White 2004) or of professional writing in policy studies within the social sciences.

While our students in a Communication Studies honours program saw themselves as entering careers involving writing, at our initial meeting they did not express a clear sense of whether they saw the content of the Writing Practices elective in terms of 'professional' or 'creative' writing. At that meeting, we also asked what type of assessment they would prefer to submit at the end of the unit; some opted for projects combining applied writing and exegetical components, whereas others suggested analyses of writing genres. All had completed a writing major that offers some assessment options involving applied writing but avoids the distinction between 'creative' and 'professional' writing. Integrated into some undergraduate units is the principle that all types of writing demand creative negotiation of rhetorical variables; for example, *Writing for Work: Styles and Contexts*, which covers diverse forms of writing in different professional contexts, includes proposals and radio feature treatments, and asks students to analyse writing in terms of the variables of context, audience, purpose, style, tone, medium and register, and then apply and demonstrate their understanding of those variables in the production of a piece of writing. Other units develop the research skills required of writers (*Research in Writing*), give an industry perspective on writing (*Publishing and Editing*) and develop capacities in media writing. The factors that we have considered specifically at honours level – students' uncertainty, diversity of interests, questions of how to build on undergraduate approaches to writing – have encouraged us further to overcome divisions between such categories as 'professional' and 'creative' or, possibly more contentious, 'academic' and 'administrative' (Brien, McDougall & Williamson 2005b). Articles in *TEXT* have encouraged an inclusive view of the types of writing taught and researched within the discipline of writing (eg, Surma 2005, Woods 2008), and our approach not only fits with this view, but also advocates abandoning the 'creative' and 'professional' divide. Like Woods (2008), we assert that writing is 'a shared territory' and acknowledge that, institutionally, writing may have many different disciplinary homes.

In relation to curriculum design, our approach has been to develop in students a set of skills that could be applied across different writing genres and contexts. A framework based on rhetoric accommodates interdisciplinary convergence between studies in media, literature, and professional and public communication, and guides students towards more independent and self-directed learning:

Writing is ... a complex, dynamic, and situated mode of communication, and persuasion – the aim to influence – is a dimension of all writing, not a distinct type or genre of discourse that can be separated from 'informative' or 'expressive' or other supposedly nonpersuasive types. Researchers who seek to understand these dimensions of writing – the interactions of writer, reader, context, and text – enter the province of rhetoric, the classical art of

choosing from among the available means of persuasion. (Miller & Charney 2008: 583)

Without necessarily agreeing that all forms of writing are always persuasive by intention, what we take from the rhetorical tradition and its approaches is the importance of assisting students to develop this ‘art of choosing’ from the means of representation in particular circumstances for different purposes. For this reason, in the honours program we included readings of work such as the arguments of Anne Surma (2005) on the imaginative and rhetorical dimensions of diverse forms of writing, not just those conventionally referred to as creative. This gave students some common reference points as they were making their own choices about topic, method and modes of writing for assessment. Including such arguments for reflection can help students to develop a sense of the disciplinary field in which they are studying and situate their work for themselves and others in relation to wider discourses.

Potentially this rhetorically based approach would also ease the transition for students coming to our program from elsewhere or our graduates moving to other institutions. And more generally, it helps students to understand, and work with, the different ways in which categories such as ‘professional’, ‘academic’, ‘persuasive’, ‘technical’ and ‘creative’ may be applied in particular social circumstances. In sum, a rhetorical approach can widen the range of forms of writing that it is possible to study with students in the arts and humanities, from those such as literary or media genres that are more familiar to them through to less familiar organisational, technical and professional modes. Pursued at honours level, this approach can enhance students’ capacities to engage with writing practices relevant to further scholarly research and contexts beyond the university, and help them gain independence in making judgments on these matters.

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