

# Empowering Thesis Writers

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*Writing at the postgraduate level can be both daunting and liberating. The reasons why it is daunting are obvious, given that there is far more at stake at this level than at the undergraduate level. It can be easy, however, to overlook how liberating postgraduate writing can be: this may be the first time students have the opportunity to experiment with writing and to explore their potential as a writer. In developing a writing module for thesis writers at Lincoln University, I have focused on creating an environment in which the students can experiment and explore, with the goal of empowering them as writers so that they can continue their writing growth beyond the end of the course. This paper outlines the rationale underlying the writing module. In the workshop I will discuss what has (and hasn't) been successful in the module, explore some of the activities used, and invite participants to share their experiences in helping postgraduate students to develop lifelong writing skills.*

## Introduction

Writing at the postgraduate level can be both daunting and liberating. The reasons why it is daunting are obvious, given that there are far higher expectations and costs of writing at this level than at the undergraduate level. It can be easy, however, to overlook how liberating postgraduate writing can be: this may be the first time students have the opportunity to experiment with writing and to explore their potential as a writer.

In reality, probably few postgraduate writers *feel* liberated – but it was this, perhaps overly idealistic, concept of ‘liberation’ I had in mind when I embarked on developing the writing component of a new module for thesis writers at Lincoln University. For me, the module was an opportunity to experiment with ways of empowering the students as writers: to motivate them to start writing (and keep writing), to allow them to explore a range of approaches to the writing process, and to encourage them to support each other as writers so that they could continue their writing growth beyond the end of the course.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the rationale underlying the writing module and highlight some of literature I have found most valuable, as a background to the workshop to be offered at this conference.

## Developing the writing skills of postgraduates: the Lincoln University module

Traditionally, the development of writing skills at the postgraduate level has been based on the biological model of ‘osmosis’. Universities, it seems, have assumed that postgraduate students will have developed the skills for research and writing simply by being part of the academic community (Frongia, 1995), and it is only relatively recently that institutions have begun to recognise the writing needs of these students. There

has been a long tradition of both generic and integrated writing programmes for undergraduate students, but it would be a mistake to draw too heavily on the undergraduate experience in developing writing programs for postgraduates. While there are clearly many similarities in the needs of the two groups, the postgraduate experience is different in many regards and this needs to be reflected in any writing programmes.

Until 1999, the only writing programmes for Lincoln University postgraduate students were those provided by the Student Learning Centre: a series of stand-alone workshops; individual consultations; and the 'writing network', an experimental thesis writers' group I had initiated the previous year. The Postgraduate and Research School had been discussing offering a generic communication skills module for postgraduate students, but it was not until 1999 that funding became available and my colleague, Neil Fleming<sup>1</sup>, and I were contracted to design and deliver the module.

The Postgraduate and Research School had already decided the basic format of the module: it would be a non-credit course, but with the incentive of a certificate on completion; it would be divided into two components – speaking (which was Neil's responsibility) and writing (my responsibility)<sup>2</sup> – each of which would be spread over four or five half days; and it would be open to students from any discipline and language background, enrolled in any postgraduate research degree. Beyond that, Neil and I were given almost free reign.

### **The rationale**

In developing the original writing component of the module, and modifying it over the past four years, I have drawn on the theoretical basis of my role as a learning adviser, literature on developing writing, and my own experiences in working with postgraduate writers – tempered by the practical constraints of the module – to develop a set of guiding principles. My prime goal has been to develop a programme that focuses on independence and life long learning. These are, of course, key planks of our work as learning developers, but in this case there was also a practical consideration – what could I offer in twelve hours, to such a mixed group, that would be of long-term value? The answer, for me, lay in four key principles.

#### ***1. Ensuring relevance and ownership***

The extensive literature from the broad 'Writing across the curriculum' (see Emerson, 1999, for an introduction) and 'Language across the curriculum' movements (for example, see Benesch, 1989), as well as that on discipline-specific academic literacies (Becher, 1989; Lea & Street, 1998), convincingly argues that writing is best learnt in the context of the discipline. Others, such as Brooke (1994), stress the need for student writers to have a sense of ownership in programmes to develop writing. These philosophies are reinforced daily for those of us who work with students on written drafts, and underpin our belief in the value of working one-to-one.

In this module, with its cross-disciplinary mix of students, I could not hope to 'teach' discipline-specific conventions, but have harnessed the value of context in another way. The module is open only to students currently writing proposal or chapter drafts and has been designed so that, as far as practicable, students work on their drafts during and between each session. Not only does this enhance the relevance of the sessions, but it also ensures that the module supports the students in their research writing, rather than adding to their workload.

## **2. Establishing and maintaining productivity**

Writing is often the greatest challenge researchers, both experienced and novice, face (Boice, 1992, 1993; Phillips & Pugh, 1994). Boice (1993, p.22) highlights the severity of this challenge for academic staff when he claims that “the incidence of those who publish is the square root of those who presumably could”. I have encountered a similar phenomenon amongst thesis writers: once freed from the tyranny of the deadlines of their undergraduate years, many have difficulty starting (and continuing writing) and lose confidence as a result.

Establishing and maintaining productivity, then, is an essential goal for thesis writers, and provides a useful common focus for groups of students from mixed disciplines and language backgrounds. In the module, I have included a range of practical writing strategies, such as generative writing and brief regular writing, drawing on Boice’s (1987, 1990) work on enhancing the productivity of academic staff.

## **3. Encouraging experimentation**

There is no one right way to write. This may be an uncomfortable assumption for those students who are looking for the certainty of rules, or who prefer that the writing teacher retains the role of expert, but there are strong arguments against too prescriptive an approach in teaching (Vance, 1995) and texts (Cadman, 2002). For those who work with thesis writers, the fact that blocked writers tend to stick too rigidly to rules (Rose, 1980, cited in Daly, 1985) is an added caution.

In this module, I have assumed that effective writers need to have a range of strategies at their disposal. Throughout the module students experiment, individually and in groups, to build up their ‘writer’s toolbox’.

## **4. Building partnerships**

Writing, as many have pointed out (for example, Boice, 1990; Brooke, 1994), is a social act. To be effective, then, writers need to develop a range of partnerships.

Partnerships can provide valuable mentoring and peer support for postgraduate students who, as we know, are often isolated (Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Murray & Gunn, 1999). Partnerships also have a more direct link with effective writing because of the social context in which writing exists and the way in which meaning is negotiated between writer and reader. Writers need to share unfinished writing with others to clarify their ideas, to learn how a reader will react to their writing, and to broaden their awareness of what it means to be a writer (Boice, 1990; Brooke, 1994; Chanock, 2000). Those who avoid such partnerships, who are ‘private’ rather than ‘sociable’ writers, are likely to be less effective (Boice, 1992).

The partnerships that thesis writers develop vary in their extent and quality. Research students have a partnership with their supervisor, but the unequal power relationship between student and supervisor, and the inability of some supervisors to provide effective feedback (Knowles, 2001; Murray, 2001), means these are rarely sufficient in themselves. The students may compensate for these deficiencies by developing partnerships with a learning adviser or a trusted friend. They are less likely, though, to form writing groups with their peers, a type of partnership that has been shown to be particularly effective (Murray & MacKay, 1998b). Even when these writing partnerships exist, they may fail to fulfil their potential if the writers lack the confidence and skills to make best use of feedback opportunities (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000; Murray & Gunn, 1999).

Thesis writers, then, have much to gain from being part of writing groups such as those Murray has trialed with both students and academic staff (Murray & MacKay, 1998a, 1998b; Murray & Gunn, 1999). Simply participating in a group is not enough, however; the writers also need training in seeking and providing feedback on their drafts (Boice, 1990; Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). Together these form a key component of the writing module.

### **Providing writing with 'space' and 'status'**

This module was not intended to focus simply on skills, but on developing long term effective writing habits through motivation, experimentation and partnerships. The extent to which that has been successful is yet to be determined. The module has, though, had another less tangible outcome. For the thesis writers, the luxury of four uninterrupted half days to devote to writing, in a public writing space, has enhanced the status and value of writing in their lives, making it less likely to be regarded as secondary to the 'real' work of their research. These writers may not yet be 'liberated', but perhaps they have begun that journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Fleming was the Director of the Education Centre at Lincoln University until 1998. Since then he has worked as a freelance educational consultant, specialising in faculty development.

<sup>2</sup> The module has been given a variety of names, but is most often referred to by staff and students simply as the "Postgraduate speaking and writing module".