

## **Background for the Queen Mary Writing in the Disciplines (WiD) initiative**

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The Writing in the Disciplines initiative at Queen Mary (QM) came about from a sense of frustration with the status quo. Writing was seen as central to the assessment process but was almost invisible in the teaching process. Typically, writing development was seen as a problem and there was no space in the curriculum to fix it.

Extracurricular help was available from the Learning Development Unit (LDU). Up to 1997 this was only available to international students in the form of inessional courses in English for academic purposes. But since then we have also run a programme of short courses, drop-in classes and individual tutorials for the student body at large on a variety of 'study skills', including writing. However, although the inessional EAP programme was - and continues to be - very popular (over 400 international students attend our Academic Writing courses each year), the Study Skills Programme attracted few students – and in spite of our best efforts to promote it and to adapt it to the needs of our students, numbers have not risen significantly. Fewer than 60 students out of a total student population of nearly 9,000 make use of this facility each year.

Reasons for the poor take-up of the Study Skills Programme include (probably): lack of visibility (both physical and institutional), perceived lack of relevance to curriculum, lack of space in the timetable, lack of time, lack of awareness about what skills the university might require, and a sense of stigma in admitting that such skills need development. Most of these problems relate to the extra-curricular nature of the programme.

A further problem was that the discourse on writing in the College was on the whole unhelpful as means of arguing for change. The terminology (study skills, support, remediation, need, weakness, problems, mistakes) reinforces a perception of deficit which is still prevalent among many subject teachers, with more sophisticated conversations about socialisation and academic literacies only taking place among language specialists. Writing development has been viewed as a marginal activity and one needing specialist intervention.

This perception had to be countered. If writing was central to the way in which learning was assessed, then developing skills in it could not be marginal, nor could this be characterised as the mastery of a mere technical skill.

My dissatisfaction with the failure of the Study Skills Programme to attract students led me to seek stronger partnerships with academic course teachers. In part this was a PR exercise to raise the profile of the Study Skills Programme, but I was also convinced that writing would be developed most

effectively through the curriculum. Results of my efforts were mixed. Some departments just asked me to give a lecture on writing as part of their induction programme; some invited me to give one or more workshop sessions as a part of an introductory discipline-based course for 1<sup>st</sup> year students; the Engineering Dept commissioned the LDU to provide a module on note-taking and presentation skills as part of their first-week programme; the SMD required all postgrads who want to do a PhD to take a workshop with me on writing; and the Computer Science Dept has plugged me into their Advanced MSc course to deliver a series of workshop sessions on writing within the Research Methods course.

I value all of these partnerships because of the opportunity they offer for constructive dialogue with academic colleagues, even though the work I end up doing with students is sometimes of questionable benefit.

In 1999, however, I had a conversation with the Chair of German which had a fruitful outcome. Leonard Olschner had taught at Cornell and since arriving at QM had been exercised by the lack of attention within the curriculum to the development of student writing. After our discussion he emailed the director of Cornell's writing programme and this led to an invitation for us to attend Cornell's Summer Consortium for Writing in the Disciplines. This annual event is attended by a select number of universities seeking to develop their writing programmes. It is an opportunity for these institutions to share ideas on what they are doing and for Cornell to showcase its WiD programme. QM was the first non-American university to participate.

There was much to be impressed by. The scale and scope of the programme: over a hundred writing-intensive courses in subjects covering the full range of the curriculum; a rich variety of approaches, styles of teaching and tasks; and an impression of the intellectually challenging nature of the courses combined with a sense of serious playfulness.

Our experience of the Cornell consortia – and QM has had the privilege of participating in three, in 1999, 2000 and 2001 – has led us to see WiD as a promising way forward in changing the way writing development is treated and in changing the discourse about it. WiD places the teaching of writing squarely inside the curriculum, not just as an end in itself but as an effective way of learning disciplinary knowledge. It also sees it as the responsibility of the content teacher to develop her/his students' writing, rather than the role of a specialist to relieve them of a difficult 'chore'.

We were successful in bidding for HEFCE funds to set up our own WiD project and this is now nearly two-thirds of the way through its three-year life. An externally-funded project is, however, a long way from a College-wide writing programme, such as exists in American universities. The challenges we face in aiming to set up something approaching this are very many: one of them is to build up the profile of writing in the institution and in doing so to change the nature of discourse about writing development.

Alan Evison