A way with embedded skills

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Research question

Rationale

Research focus

Research design

Data collection & analysis

Reconnaissance

Main study

Conclusions

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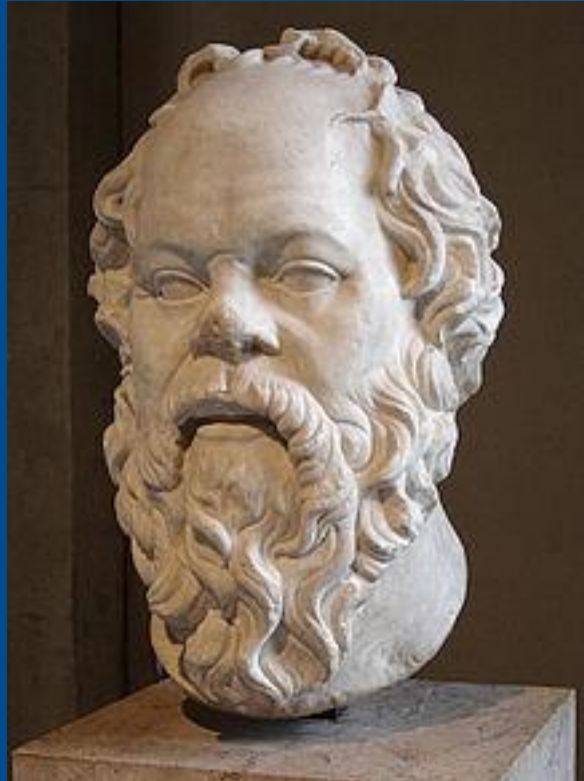
Can a tertiary learning advisor (TLA), working as **an informal writing consultant** to staff and students of a disciplinary programme within a New Zealand university (NZU), contribute to positive changes in **writing pedagogy** and **tertiary learning advice**?

Students develop mastery of academic and professional discourse within their disciplinary programmes / communities of practice.

"… writing needs to be taught explicitly within the subject context, by subject tutors" (Wingate, 1996, p. 464)

TLA practice has traditionally taken place outside these programmes in the institutional margins.

Wingate, U. (1996). Doing away with 'study skills'. *Teaching in Higher Education, 11*(4), 457-469).

Bachelor of Applied Health

4 year programme leading to professional certification

Professional practice an increasingly important component of the programme from year 2 onwards

Students mostly female, domestic, NZ European, high-achievers

Concern from BAH staff at insufficient standards of literacy prompted invitation to provide additional learning support

An Action Research study comprising:

Reconnaissance (2011)

3 annual cycles of writing support initiatives (2012 – 2014)

Reconnaissance

- 2 observations of one BAH staff member setting an assignment in class
- Analysis of 79 marked BAH Year 1 assignments
- Interviews with 3 BAH staff members
- Focus group with 7 BAH students
- 61 reflective journal entries

Main study

- Interviews with 33 NZU staff & 23 NZ TLAs
- 21 interviews with BAH staff
- 3 'think aloud' recordings of BAH staff marking scripts
- 7 focus groups and 11 interviews with BAH students
- 76 reflective journal entries

Example of coding

code	theme	transcript	memo
11	LC producing relevant assignment-specific writing support	SLT10: The examples did not relate to our field of practice. And that's where your lectures were just fantastic. You actually took real examples, brought them into the lecture and shared it with the students, and they really got it. That was probably the winning point, having them so real	Interesting that these views of LC expertise and practice can co-exist – being seen as a go-to person for punctuation does not preclude being seen as someone with expertise in producing discipline-specific writing development resources and workshops

Example of *resonance* in a student focus group

She seems very personally invested in the paper.

She does.

Yeah.

Which is really good and really

I find it's motivating

Inspiring

She's inspiring

She is

Yeah

Like her passion for Applied Health makes you

Yeah

Yeah

Makes you want to go and change someone's life as well

yeah

Like she obviously is so keen to

BAH students had a very clear idea of the desired qualities of writing in the discipline / profession.

Table 6: *Features of applied health writing mentioned by staff and students*

	succinct	clear	evidence-based	objective	tailored for audience	critical
Maria	Y	Y	Y	Y		
Stacey	Y	Y	Y	Y		
Sarah	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Students	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

However, for the students, these 'rules' created a high level of anxiety about being punished for any transgressions.

This anxiety was reinforced by the strong tendency of BAH staff to correct and / or comment on errors in marking student work.

Table 5: *Analysis of Sarah's comments on student assignments*

	Word length of student assignments	Number of staff comments
	mean [standard deviation]	mean [standard deviation]
All assignments (n=15)	6312 [1369]	60 [18]
A grade (n=2)	6814 [133]	31 [2.5]
B / B+ grades (n=5)	6729 [838]	48 [13]
B-/C+/C grades (n=8)	5995 [1687]	67 [13]

I also found no evidence of WTL (Writing To Learn – i.e. as an unassessed learning activity)

BAH students felt they needed more clarity about what kinds of texts were required.

I feel I wasted an awful lot of time where I could have been making my assignment better, just trying to figure it out.

But BAH staff were reluctant to provide models.

If they have a set form, they all tend to write the same.

INITIATIVE

GOAL: **To decrease the amount of correction and increase formative feedback on student writing**

A BAH lecturer completed a tick-box form, indicating areas of concern, and referred students to CTL for revision and resubmission.

FINDINGS

Not achieved

Did not bring about a change in orientation towards error

Reinforced the remedial framing of learning support which students brought with them into uni

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INITIATIVE

GOAL: To raise students' awareness of the features of BAH writing in advance

Provide a discipline-specific orientation workshop

FINDINGS

Not achieved

Students not yet ready to take it on board

Limited value of advice divorced from the context of practice

My understanding of BAH writing turned out to have been oversimplistic

INITIATIVE

GOAL: **To provide Y1 students with 'just-in-time' support for assessed writing**

Collaborate with BAH staff on a set of assignment-based workshops

Produce detailed frameworks for assignments, addressing staff concerns about students copying models

FINDINGS

Achieved

There have been some essays where I literally had no idea how to begin until we had a writing workshop.

It's added a level of showing that we're serious and we do have expectations that they're actively attempting to better themselves as writers.

IMPACT ON UPTAKE OF ONE-TO-ONE SUPPORT

Table 10: Consultations with BAH students during the project

	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Total
2011	1	11	4	5	21
2012	36	0	26	6	68
2013	18	12	10	41	81
2014	40	6	6	18	70

ONE BAH LECTURER INCORPORATED ONE TO ONES

I realised that what you're doing with them is one on one attention, specific to their needs, and so I felt that that's what teaching and learning IS, so I wanted to come up with a similar concept and that's when I did the one-on-one conferences.

INITIATIVE

GOAL: To provide targeted support for BAH students after Y1

Run reflective writing workshops for Y1 & Y2 and a research report workshop for Y4

FINDINGS

Achieved

Reflective writing proved especially 'fertile' in terms of impact on staff and student practice

Y4 students also needed support with new rhetorical challenges & had more positive attitudes to engaging with learning support

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INITIATIVE

GOAL: *To bring about positive changes in BAH staff's practices in teaching and assessing writing*

- Run staff development workshops
- Design WTL activities for BAH staff to use in class
- Devise a BAH writing curriculum framework
- Support staff in revising assignments & rubrics
- Hand over writing workshops to staff

FINDINGS

(partially) achieved

- Workshops established credibility & stimulated collaboration
- WTL was very challenging for BAH staff
- The curriculum framework stimulated change in assessment
- Staff especially receptive to revisions which reduced burden
- BAH staff saw added value in the TLA delivering a workshop

TLAs do not need to see their practice as 'bolted on'. It can be formative and constructive as part of an integrated programme of support, especially in courses in which there is a 'plurality of expertise'.

One-to-one consultations contribute to TLA expertise and form a positive, mutually constitutive relationship to other practices. They are not inherently remedial.

Informal collaboration with disciplinary teaching colleagues can be an effective strategy for TLAs to achieve positive change within dynamic and unpredictable institutional environments. Relationships can outlast 'embedded' artefacts.