

Intervention Report: Pop-Up Writing Workshops

'I was anxious in case I failed, of course. I didn't understand anything I read. I felt I could never ever write an essay. I wanted to leave in semester one.' Shirley Anne Tate, 2018.

Writing is hard, my tutor wrote me as I contemplated leaving the writing programme I had only just begun. In an email my tutor and I discussed or rather I had been complaining about my own writing, how my writing would/could never match up to the writers I had been introduced to, read, and admired. However, my tutor's words consoled me.

Many years earlier I had studied graphic design, and I hadn't expected as much writing as there was. I was a visual thinker. I also hadn't expected to write in an alien language i.e., the language of academia. Imbued with rules and constraints and so far removed from my own voice and my own experiences. I wasn't prepared for it. I didn't seek support, because I didn't know how to articulate what it was, I needed support with, everyone else seem to just get it done. I struggled. I felt alone, excluded, and isolated which then impacted my studio practice projects, my relationships with peers and clouded my university experience. Many years later, studying writing allowed me to embrace the feeling of uncomfortableness, anxiousness and stressfulness framed within the context of simply being out of my comfort zone where I learnt through experience. Writing is hard, and harder still depending on who you are.

In a TEDx talk, Tate, (2018) dispels some of the myths surrounding the 'BPOC' Attainment Gap in UK Universities. She describes the cold climate in which she found herself studying at university created by the effects of institutional racism and racist microaggressions. Her individual experience shaped by intersectional identities; being black, female, *first generation. 35 years on, she points out, nothing has changed, there are still Black and People of Colour (BPOC) students who want to leave in semester one. BPOC students, students with disabilities, mature and part-time, low socioeconomic groups, and other such equity groups ... it shouldn't matter who you are.

My current practice involves teaching both contextual studies and studio practice on BA Graphic Design programmes, I often see a disconnect between the writing elements of the course and the practical, designing and making. For some students writing an essay is difficult, something they *have* to do ... reluctantly. Borg (2012, pp. 5) noted within Art and Design, students 'identify themselves with their creative practice and see writing in opposition to that practice'. Writing then becomes 'an unwelcome 'bolt-on' to their core activity of creative production' (Cattaneo, 2013). Forms of writing such as the academic essay can seem exclusionary, 'essay writing requires complex decoding of tacit understandings and conventions and as such often remain mysterious to those on the outside of academia ... serving as a gate-keeping mechanism' (Burke, 2008).

My intervention proposes a transformative approach to how we might see writing, think of writing, and talk about writing to foster an inclusive space (community) where different voices, and ways of knowing will be valued. This will take the form of a

series of 'pop-up' writing workshops (Appendix 1 below) introducing an alternative but not 'new' approach to creating the academic essay where writing becomes both a collaborative and individual process in unison. It will be in addition to and not in replace of Academic Support (AS) and will work in the space between CS lectures/seminars and AS. It will offer an opportunity to talk collectively about the process of writing, challenges, problems, supporting them in demystifying academic writing, its exclusionary aspects. Shawna Shapiro, (2020) explains 'academic writing courses have the potential to foster a sense of belonging, recognise and respect the varied social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of students.'

Richard Winter (2003, pp. 117) pioneered the 'patchwork' text as an alternative to the academic (conventional) essay within the fields of Health and the Social Sciences in a quest to examine whether essays are the most useful way of assessing deep learning. He suggested that if the task of writing an essay is broken down into smaller sections and gradually assembled overtime, it would be an opportunity for students to demonstrate the reflective process of learning, engaging 'with the material through a developmental dialogue over time and with others'. This method was adapted for the B.A. (Hons) Fine Art Contextual Studies module *Creative Arts Patchwork Project*. Students could approach a 2,500-word essay by producing a series of shorter essays (600 words) which were then 'patched' together and edited to create a longer essay and a poster communicating their research methods and theories. (Cattaneo, 2013).

Incorporating the idea of the patchwork text, the 'pop-up' writing workshops would be designed to support and encourage students to approach essay writing in stages and over time to lessen the burden of *tackling* the essay in its entirety, with other conflicting deadlines and in some cases alone. There would be a series of four 90min workshops with supervision once a week offering three types of support, tutor feedback, peer group feedback and thematic discussions. These would take place in the studio practice space, with some sessions in the library whilst students carryout research. Tutor feedback will be face-to-face based on drafts submitted during workshops. Peer group feedback discussions will be held in small groups with shorter drafts submitted in advance of the workshops. In addition to this, students will be given a feedback pro-forma to help structure their feedback.

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participate equally. Resources will be included on Moodle and in accessible formats.

This is an inclusive approach because students attending universities will have come from a range of educational backgrounds; mature students who may not have written essays since leaving school, students who may not have done A levels, international students whose first language is not English, students with disabilities, dyslexia, neurodiverse students, all of whom may find the unfamiliarity of academic language writing difficult.

There are challenges to consider such as acknowledging that some students will be at different stages, not able to attend all sessions. The academic essay in its structure is linear, the process of writing is not. Writing is a messy business, the workshops are designed as standalone sessions, creating resources accessible in Moodle. Working with large cohorts also presents challenges, there could be an opportunity to co-teach with PhD students currently writing their thesis, as Jusslin and Widlund (2024, pp. 235) note 'research has also shown that teachers, or writing tutors, found that their writing improved when teaching workshops'. Additionally, my positionality; being black, female, working class and not coming from an academic background in sharing both the challenges I faced and techniques I learnt could help and 'influence students' beliefs and experiences' (Jusslin and Widlund, 2024).

There are many reasons why students experience various challenges in writing formal academic essays, such as the confusion about what academic writing is and its requirements. The constraints of academic language and the lack of preparation time for writing it and being able to complete the essay on time. Jusslin and Widlund (2024, pp. 234) argue that these 'struggles can prolong study time and increase drop-out, and this can worsen because students work alone'. Kieron Devlin (2016, pp. 34) discusses the use of 'I' when a student had asked, 'but why can't I use my own opinion?' his response, 'don't use "I" or "we" in academic writing as it relies on an unquestioned assumption about who is speaking' the student he explained remained baffled. He describes the anguish of 'the wall that students confront when facing the demands of academic writing ... it can short-circuit their brains, paralysing them into poor confidence with writing'. He suggests more creative experimentation in writing for Art and Design students at UAL that have specific learning difficulties, emphasising the benefits for students who are visual/spatial thinkers (2016), or those with different levels of educational backgrounds. Being constrained by formal academic language can lead to poor writing, making students, feel anxious, guilty ashamed. Being able to discuss challenges and share understandings, hopes, fears, and uncertainties about writing amongst peers 'may improve emotional states and feelings' (Jusslin and Widlund 2024).

Feedback from peers had been a positive response offering insights of their experiences and challenges faced in writing academic, many of which are echoed within this report. One insight related to cultural differences in critical thinking, with the acknowledgment that there are different ways students can express their views. It has not been possible to run these workshops but will do this during the first semester and as part of my Action Research Project. Future considerations would be working with Ai, threat or inclusive? and developing writing workshops online.

Writing is empowering, it's also hard.

Word count [1,641]

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Appendix 1

Outline of 90min 'Pop-Up' Workshop sessions

Primarily for level 4 students, but can be adapted for levels 5 and 6. Four 90min writing workshops to be delivered between the briefing session and submission deadline. The workshops will cover literature review, essay titles (research questions), introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions. Working with smaller parts will allow me to discuss the work of students, and to address several different kinds of writing problems. Below is an example session. The sessions outlined will be adapted and be inline with the themes and learning outcomes.

Shawna Shapiro, (2020) offers ways in which to both build communities and foster sense of belonging.

1. Warm-up exercise - 15min - either in pairs or small groups students to take part in a *jigsaw survey* (Shapiro, 2020), where each student chooses one question from a given list. They ask that question to as many other members of the class as possible. Questions might include: "What is one of your strengths as a writer?" or "What is one question or concern you have about the research process?". Students can then report back orally or reflect in writing on what they learned.

15min - Open discussion and Keywords - a discussion will take place around the themes the students have already chosen, highlighting key words during the process.

20min - They will then be asked to make a list of keys words including their own both familiar and unfamiliar and asked to choose two from each list and spend 3mins on each of the four key words freewriting what they think the word means and how it might relate to their chosen topic. An open discussion will follow enabling students to share and or ask questions - orally or in writing. The aim would be to collate a list of keywords that could be made available a few days after the session and added to Moodle in accessible formats.

30min - Students choose two images related to their themes – this would be a pre-task – in session using writing prompts such as how do the images relate to your theme? how will you speak about them? What do we need to know about them (context)? how can we talk about images, formal, personal, through the lens of graphic design? When talking about their chosen images, students are encouraged to use their own perception and develop their own voice rather than replicate the opinions of experts. They would be encouraged to begin 500-word (draft) comparison of their images to bring to class to share and discuss with their peers and tutor. During the session feedback can be given.

10min - for questions either written or orally.

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Each session would include a warm-up session and 10 minutes for any questions.

2. Session focused on essay titles, research questions and introductions
3. Session focused on reading to write, texts to analyse, paragraphs
4. Session focused on conclusions, editing, referencing