

The Linguistically-Diverse Student

# Teaching Academic Writing to International Students in an Interdisciplinary Writing Context: A Pedagogical Rough Guide

Angeniet Kam and Yvette Meinema, University of Groningen, the Netherlands [1]

*I changed schools, languages, countries and continents a number of times during my childhood. At each change I had the opportunity to re-create myself, to present a new facade, to bury past errors and misrepresentations (Martel).*

International students travel in many ways. First of all geographically: they move from one country to another. Secondly, they travel through their own identities: they have to find a new place in a new context by familiarizing themselves with new values and customs, while making sure they meet the requirements their studies ask of them. Writing an academic text is almost always one of these requirements. Faculty assign their (international) students to write academic texts because they want to know whether or not they comprehend the content of the course they have offered. Some faculty also want to know whether or not students have familiarized themselves with academic genres and conventions, which may vary according to country or discipline. Consequently, when faculty ask international students to write an academic text, they are requiring them to undertake yet a third journey. In the process, international students may travel through a variety of genre conventions, exploring the conventions of their host country in combination with the conventions in their (new) discipline. In addition to these travels, they also have to find their own voices and their own identities while writing a text.

Often, when they receive papers that they consider unsatisfactory, faculty assume that international students' capacities in academic writing are deficient. In this article, we will show how the design of two academic writing workshops for an international and interdisciplinary masters' program helped students in their interdisciplinary and international writing processes, not by working from a deficiency model, but by working from a contextual model. We will present the results in the conclusion by way of a pedagogical rough guide for teaching academic writing to international students.

## International Students and Their Writing

The problems international students encounter when they write academic texts have been studied by several authors. Baker (2003, 46-48) takes the perspective of the international students and identifies five domains in which they might experience difficulties when writing an academic text:

- **Culturally Coined:** Problems related to actual and assumed differences in the concepts of academic work between a host country and a country of origin.

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- **Domain-specific procedural:** Problems related to processes and products of academic writing and oral performances.
- **Content-specific:** Problems related to the content knowledge of the discipline in question.
- **Foreign language:** Problems related to the fact that students have to produce work in their second or third language.
- **General-linguistic:** Problems related to general linguistic knowledge or competency of the student i.e. problems that can not be accounted for by the second language deficiencies of the students.

Biggs (2003) concentrates first on faculty perceptions of student problems. He observes that many teachers believe problems relate to social-cultural adjustment, language, and learning/teaching problems due to culture (Biggs 2003, p.120). According to Biggs, problems within this last category have to do with the differences between learning styles of academics in the students' host and native countries:

In particular, many international students are too teacher-dependent, too uncritical of material they have been taught, prone to rote memorization; they misunderstand the cardinal sin of plagiarism, and lack knowledge of the genres of academic writing. [...]. How to cope with this is the problem. If it is a problem (Biggs, 2003. p. 122).

Biggs notes that research results indicate that the difficulties perceived by international students differ in *extent* from problems perceived by local students, and not in *kind*. He mentions the results of a study by Mullins et al. (1995) in which local and international students were asked to indicate the problems they faced when enrolled in academic classes. Both groups identified the following problems:

- poor teaching
- mismatch between student and staff expectations
- lack of access to staff
- heavy workload (Biggs, 2003, p. 137)

Biggs presents two models for describing the difficulties that students face: the deficit model and the contextual model. In a deficit model, faculty see students as having deficiencies and argue that they are in need of remediation before entering a regular academic program. In a contextual approach, which Biggs promotes, the 'problems' international students and teachers face are redefined as '[...] a matter of learning in context, not as a deficit.' (Biggs p.136). According to Biggs, learning in context also leads to deep learning for every student, regardless of his or her specific learning style. Biggs also argues that successful learning in context requires *aligned teaching*. Aligned teaching is relevant in any context, regardless of the background of the students or the teacher. In aligned teaching, students and faculty are aware of each others' expectations, faculty members are accessible to students, the objectives and tasks are consistent, and the workload is appropriate.

We agree with Biggs that aligned teaching is essential for deep learning by students. In this paper, we will discuss how we designed curricula and taught academic writing within the interdisciplinary and international context of the master's program of the Network on Humanitarian Assistance (NOHA). We will first briefly describe our background and the program NOHA offers and then describe the workshops we designed and their results.

## ETOC: Faculty Development, Professionalism and Faculty Awareness

The ETOC, the Expert Centre on Language, Communication and Education, is connected to the Arts Faculty of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. ETOC's goal is to translate scientific research on language, communication, and education to the everyday context of educational practice, starting at the primary level of education and moving up to the tertiary one. The tertiary educational level is the sphere of action for the Higher Education Team (HE-team). Since the beginning of 2000 the HE-team has been active in a project at two faculties within the University of Groningen: the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Law. [2]This project focused on faculty development, raising professionalism, and faculty awareness regarding WAC/CAC.[3]In order to achieve our goals, the HE-team concentrated on the following activities:

- Developing additional (didactic) course elements (e.g. developing writing assignments).
- Making teaching aids (handouts, good practices, assignments) available (by means of an online writing center).
- Developing policies concerning the teaching of communicative skills, aimed at imbedding teaching communicative skills into curricula (Van Kruiningen, 2004).

## Network on Humanitarian Assistance: The Master's Program

In 2002, one of the coordinators of the NOHA[4]program asked ETOC to support the students' writing. She had noticed that the levels of writing skills of NOHA students varied greatly, which resulted in problems with the assessment of the writing assignments. According to her, these problems were caused partly by differences in the cultural, disciplinary, and educational backgrounds of the students and partly by differences in the teaching and assessment styles of NOHA faculty members.

NOHA (Network on Humanitarian Assistance) is a one-year interuniversity, multidisciplinary master's program that provides academic education and professional competencies for personnel working or planning to work in the area of international humanitarian assistance. After their graduation, NOHA graduates will work in the field of humanitarian relief and international co-operation, serving a broad variety of functions, ranging from medical doctors and nurses to fund raisers and technicians.

The NOHA program consists of four components. It starts with a ten-day intensive program in which students, teachers and members of political and humanitarian institutions share knowledge and experiences from both theoretical and practical perspectives concerning the area of humanitarian assistance. The second component consists of five core modules: Geopolitics, Anthropology, International Humanitarian Law, Epidemiology and Medicine, and Management. Students attend classes for these modules at their home universities. During the third component of the program, students specialize in a specific area of Humanitarian Assistance. They often travel to another participating university, thus having the opportunity to study in an international and different cultural context. During the final component, students write their master's thesis and experience a two month internship.

NOHA students are not just faced with interdisciplinary and international contexts after their graduation. During their studies, they also need to perform in a linguistically and disciplinary diverse environment. In the academic year 2002-2003, students came to our Dutch university from various countries and disciplines, as Table 1 shows. Eleven students in this group were Dutch; the other students came from elsewhere. Thus, for at least half a year, all students lived in the Netherlands, studied at a Dutch university and communicated in English.

**Table 1. Countries of origin and disciplines of NOHA students 2002-2003**

Countries of Origin	Disciplines
France	Sociology
Germany	Medicine
Ireland	Psychology
Italy	Law
Netherlands	International Business
Tanzania	
Uganda	
UK	
US	

## Teaching Writing in the NOHA Program: Needs Assessment

Previous to designing teaching components about writing, we gathered information about the ways writing was being taught within the NOHA Program. We talked to the coordinator of the program and studied program documents and examples of student writing. From this analysis, it appeared that NOHA teachers approached writing tasks in different ways and students were taught and assessed differently, as well. The coordinator said:

They are confronted with a lot of issues, and therefore it is sometimes difficult for them to efficiently plan their learning time/ to perform their work in the right way (personal e-mail communication, October 2002).

Furthermore, faculty did not have much explicit knowledge of writing processes. In most cases, students were given the assignment to write an essay on a certain topic, but they often did not have a possibility to hand in a draft version or discuss a draft version with peers[5], nor did they receive much support in handling this writing task. Faculty did not seem familiar with the notion of genres in general, nor were they aware of the fact that students were confronted with different assessment criteria when they were asked to write in specific genres. Moreover, it seemed that faculty did not have much awareness of aligned teaching practices such as providing students with a clear written instruction about the aim, content, planning, and assessment of the writing task. On the other hand, the pedagogical climate contained elements which sustained learning processes. Students had many opportunities to work together and were given much responsibility for their own approaches to learning.

To improve the teaching of communicative skills within the NOHA program, we first proposed developing some workshops for faculty about constructing, supporting and evaluating academic writing tasks. Though the coordinator herself seemed to be convinced of the necessity of aligning faculties' ideas about teaching communicative skills, she thought they would not have time to attend such workshops. Moreover, since NOHA faculty work within different departments, it would be difficult to find a place and time that would be convenient for all of them to meet. Because of these roadblocks, we decided to concentrate our activities on the medicine module within the NOHA program. Because the budget and the schedule of the module

did not allow for more, we designed two three-hour workshops to support the students' writing within this module.

The Course Guide of the Medicine Module and the instruction of the writing task the students had received the previous year gave a detailed overview of what had been assigned. Under these conditions, students did not receive documented information about the aim of the writing task or the genre they were supposed to produce. Also, there were no specific instructions for the authors or criteria the writing task would be assessed for.<sup>[6]</sup> We also received some examples of the students' written work from the previous year to give us an impression of its quality. These examples showed that students had been indecisive about the voice they should assume (academic versus journalistic) and about the genre in which they were supposed to write (an essay).

## Workshop Design

The two workshops were designed in close cooperation with the faculty member who taught the module<sup>[7]</sup>. For the workshops, we proposed a schedule in which several elements of teaching writing were integrated: choosing a specific genre, planning the writing process within the medicine module, selecting which elements of the writing process to support explicitly, and supporting writing in groups.

Firstly, we suggested replacing the essay writing task with a more specific, functional realistic genre such as a policy paper or an article for an academic medical journal. This would help the students in getting a clear idea of the rhetorical situation. The audience of a functional and realistic genre is often more specific and the requirements of the genre are more explicit compared to the audience and requirements of an essay. We asked the faculty member to provide an appropriate example of the kind of text she wanted the students to write. This example was to function as a heuristic tool for students who were inexperienced with the specific genre. Together with the faculty member, we decided that students would be assigned to write an article for a medical journal.

Secondly, we discussed with the faculty member how best to integrate the writing task into the module. We thought it important that students would have the opportunity to hand in an outline of their articles and to discuss this with their teacher. Furthermore, we wanted students to be able to peer review a first version of their text since this usually means a considerable improvement in the final version.

Thirdly, we selected certain aspects of the writing process that we wanted to pay specific attention to. The writing groups consisted of members with different educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Some of them were already familiar with the process of writing and with the academic genre they were asked to write; however, some of these aspects could be totally new to other students. By making these aspects of the writing process explicit, we were at least sure that the expectations that had to be met would be the same for every student. We chose those aspects that we felt would be helpful not only for this particular writing task, but for other writing tasks as well, such as: (individual) writing strategies, developing a good research question, making an outline, (paragraph) structure, discipline-specific conventions regarding referencing and the use of footnotes, journalistic versus academic register, and revision.

Furthermore, since students were supposed to perform the writing tasks in groups, we felt it was important to give them some support for writing together. Writing individually can sometimes be a taxing task in itself; writing together with others is even more so, as it involves insight in group member's writing strategies, strengths and weaknesses of each writing team member, and a clear focus on the method of writing together. We suggested that writing teams keep a journal to report their progress with the writing task. This journal was to be sent to the teacher on a weekly basis. This way, she could monitor the working method of the writing group and intervene if necessary.

In concert with aligned teaching, we did not want to be the "sage on the stage," but "the guide on the side" (McLeod and Maimon, 2000, p. 580). At the ETOC, we try to practice what we preach, and that means that

we aim to develop our workshops in such a manner that it is what the students do that is important. In this case we aimed for active learning. We wanted to create opportunities for students to work together and exchange and discuss ideas about writing during the workshops. Here are some of the activities that we used:[8]

- Students freewrote about their experiences with writing academic texts and shared these with each other.
- Students formulated a central question for the article they were going to write, and discussed and improved each other's formulations.
- Students made a genre analysis[9] of the article they were supposed to write.
- Within their writing subgroup, students made an outline for their article.
- Students commented on examples of texts that were problematic for specific reasons, such as referencing and journalistic versus academic register.
- Students actively reflected upon each others texts, assuming the role of editors of the medical journal they were supposed to write for.
- Within their writing groups, students reviewed an article of one of the other writing groups.

The faculty member who taught the medicine module sat in on our workshops. Thus, she was able to give clarifications about the writing assignment or answer students' questions immediately.

## Student Reactions

At the end of the second workshop, we asked the students to fill in an anonymous evaluation sheet.[10] This was a simple sheet, consisting of six questions in which we asked them to explicitly reflect on making an outline, the genre analysis, and the reflective practice. We also asked them if they had missed important information or exercises, and we asked them what they thought about the relation between these workshops and the medicine module. Finally, they had the opportunity to make any further remarks they wanted to. Obviously, an evaluation such as this provides some interesting qualitative data, but it cannot be used for statistically valid measurements.

The student evaluation of the two workshops was positive. Students indicated that the content of the workshops was useful to them and the faculty member stated that she thought the quality of students' texts had improved. Apparently we addressed the problems international students (and their teacher) experience in an adequate way.

Most students explicitly stated that the workshops had been helpful in structuring their own thinking about the writing task, the group writing process, and the requirements the specific writing task had to meet. Therefore we think we succeeded in achieving our general aim: to give students some support for writing in general, even though we focused on a medical journal during these workshops. From some remarks, we inferred that deep learning and transfer had taken place for at least some students. For example, we asked students whether the outline had been supportive in organizing thoughts about the article and in motivating their answers. One student said he formulated the research question for another parallel module with help of the materials he received in our workshop:

I also used it for making an outline, more specific the research question, for a paper for the psychology module. I was already used to work in this way, but I especially liked your description of various types of research questions.[11]

In answer to the question about whether the workshop had provided concrete pointers on revising the text, one student explicitly wrote that these would be useful in future writing as well:

Yes, it did. It is good to have an overview of things you have to pay attention to in writing an article (also useful for future writing).

Similar remarks were made by others:

Though organized within the medicine module, the workshops made general contribution to my writing skills such as I can use elsewhere.

It has been revealing for me and I have learnt how to write a scientific journal. I have also learnt some skills that I can apply for the other module papers I am writing, e.g. the use of indented paragraphs.

I didn't know what to expect from this workshop, but I think overall it was really useful. Not only for medicine but for my other courses as well.

We consider these remarks to be signs of transfer. Even if students will not actually use what they have learned again, the workshops have contributed to providing knowledge about writing skills and strategies they could use in other writing settings as well.

Students made some interesting remarks about the mismatch between students' and teachers' expectations and workload, two aspects international students as well as local students mentioned as problematic in the research by Mullins *et al.* (Biggs 2003, p. 137). For example, in answer to the question about the connection between these workshops and the Medicine module, it became clear that the alignment of the communicative skills teaching within the NOHA program could still be improved. Almost all students remarked that the workshops should have taken place immediately at the beginning of the year. Here is one student's comment:

It would have been nice to have this workshop at the beginning of the year, when we haven't had to write any papers yet. Now we have, and it seems that every teacher expects something different from us in our paper. It would be nice if everybody would follow these steps of this workshop.

A few students made explicit remarks about the fact that the workshops contributed to their already heavy course load:

A good combination [medicine module and writing workshops] because you can use a "real" course to apply what you learn, but combined with the many contact hours of medicine, it was a bit too much. The balance between this and other courses is a bit gone.

The writing skills module was more adapted to our pace and our group evolution than the medicine expectation were/are. 6 weeks to get familiar with a disease, collect data, formulate a problematic and do a research ... writing an article in 3 weeks was a crash task.<sup>[12]</sup>

Many students reported positive effects of the exercises on the group work. Outlining worked especially well in this respect, but the reflective practice was also appreciated:

It [the reflective practice] encouraged us to sit down together and go through the whole text together, giving us all a greater insight into each others priorities, ideas and opinions.

For me, the workshops were very handy in helping to structure our writing process, because it made us do certain things on fixed times.

Of course there were some critical comments, as well. Interestingly, in critical remarks students often referred to the fact that they either already knew about aspects of academic writing beforehand or that they still knew too little about a certain topic. General linguistic skills such as referencing, paragraph division and lexical cohesion were mentioned. One student wrote the following in answer to the question if important information had been missing during the workshop:

Maybe some general information of the different styles of writing of people (styles they are taught) because you have to work as a group with different opinions about the right way to do that. This also includes references. This information can be useful to give advice how to cope with these problems or at least raise awareness.

## Conclusion: A Pedagogical Rough Guide for Teaching Academic Writing

With Biggs' notion of aligned teaching and our NOHA experience in the back of our minds we formulated the following guidelines for faculty for teaching academic writing to international students.

### Prime Directive

Make sure that teaching is aligned teaching.

How can this be achieved? Below we formulate some guidelines for teachers and faculty developers/curriculum coordinators.

### Guidelines for Teachers

1. If you are a teacher of academic writing, the following guidelines may be helpful to make sure that the teaching in the curriculum is aligned:
  - Make sure that teachers and students know what to expect of each other and of the writing task at hand. Provide (at the very least) written instructions in which you clearly state what kind of text the student should produce (genre), when it should be submitted, how long the text should be, and which possibilities there are for further support of the writing task, such as handing in an outline, peer reviewing sessions, writing center support, etc. Other activities possibly helpful in clarifying expectations are: providing students with examples of the kind of text they are supposed to write or have students freewrite about writing, to bring their (and your) expectations to the surface.
  - Make sure that students know how you are going to assess their work. In talking to teachers, we often notice that they are not aware that they expect students to meet specific requirements, or they suppose students are aware of these requirements. Making the (genre) criteria students have to meet when writing explicit- which also often sets the criteria for assessment—is a revealing exercise.
  - Make sure that the work load does not become too much. Writing takes time; it is not something students can do on the side. The writing itself is the learning.



2. Set fixed deadlines for different steps in the writing process, especially when you teach students who do not have much writing experience yet. Setting fixed deadlines for writing groups works well to streamline the writing process within the group. It prevents procrastinating.
3. Make sure that students are at work by developing active teaching methods that engage them. For ideas of active teaching methods in teaching academic writing, there are some excellent sources, for example, *The Elements of Teaching Writing. A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines* (2004) by Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj and the book by John Bean (1998) that is somewhat older in date but still very up to date in content.

## Guidelines for Curriculum Coordinators/Faculty Developers

1. If you are a curriculum coordinator or a faculty developer and more than one teacher is involved in teaching academic writing within your program, make sure that teachers are in agreement among themselves about teaching academic writing. This may be attained by providing them with an opportunity to exchange best practices and experiences and to share problems and ideas with regard to academic writing. Organize (informal lunch)meetings, start an e-community through the electronic learning environment, organize team-teaching sessions or invite someone from a successful writing program to share success stories.
2. Make sure that teachers have some basic and explicit knowledge about writing processes. This will enable them to help students in planning their writing process. It is not necessary to present teachers with literature about writing processes (though that sometimes may be of help). It may be enough to talk to them about their own writing processes: how do they write? What do they do when they write an article for a medical journal? When are they satisfied with their own texts? And which steps do they take themselves when writing?
3. Make sure that the pedagogical climate facilitates deep and active learning. This means that teachers should get the opportunity to be the guides on the side, instead of the sage on the stage.

Though ours was a small project, we believe that its results can be generalized to a wide variety of academic programs, not only in the Netherlands, but elsewhere in Europe and the world. We hope to provide additional information and workshops for international students throughout the university.

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## Notes

- [1] We would like to thank our colleagues Femke Kramer and Jacqueline van Kruiningen for their constructive remarks about improving this article.
- [2] From 1997-1999 members of the Etoc Higher Education Team at the time conducted a project on the development of Academic Writing Skills within the Faculty of Arts (Kramer, Van Kruiningen, Padmos. 2003). The experiences and evaluation results of this project have been important for developing the current approach of the Higher Education Team.
- [3] For a more detailed description of this project, see Van Kruiningen (2004).
- [4] In 1993, five European Universities founded the Network on Humanitarian Assistance (NOHA). In close co-operation these universities initiated a one year Masters program aiming to provide "high quality academic education and professional competencies for personnel working or intending to work in the field of Humanitarian Assistance" (NOHA website, 2004).
- [5] In contrast to the US, at European universities writing centers where students have the opportunity to discuss draft versions with peers are not an integrated facility. Nijmegen University has taken the lead in the Netherlands; it started the first Academic Writing Center in the spring of 2005. For more information, see <http://www.asn.nl>.
- [6] See Appendix 1 for the assignment description in the Medicine Module Course Guide 2001-2002.
- [7] It may seem inefficient to have two people design a workshop in cooperation with only one faculty member. However, in other projects we have found that one faculty member may profoundly affect other faculty's teaching practice. In this particular case we know that the faculty member has used our approach and workshop materials in the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 Medicine modules in the NOHA programme and that she has discussed a previous version of this article in a faculty meeting.
- [8] See Appendix 2 for some examples of the teaching materials and handouts we used in this workshop.
- [9] For this genre analysis, we asked the students to analyse an article from a reviewed medical journal, using a checklist and writing down their observations. The checklist contained pointers about the outward appearance, structure and text parts, and style of the article. See Appendix 2 for the assignment.
- [10] See Appendix 3.
- [11] We want to emphasize that students did not have much time to fill in these sheets, which probably explains the wording and spelling mistakes. Students obviously wrote down what was in their heads and in their hearts at that particular moment.
- [12] In response to these remarks, the coordinator of the program remarked that this kind of "crash tasks" is exactly what is expected of students once they are working in the field of humanitarian assistance. She agreed, however, that it could be helpful to explain this more explicitly to students at the beginning of the course. Also there might be a difference between students who are learning content and learn to write about this content in a specific genre and

professionals who have—hopefully—had more experience with this kind of writing tasks at the moment they are supposed to perform them.

## Contact Information

Angeniet Kam  
Delft University of Technology  
Email: [A.Kam@tbm.tudelft.nl](mailto:A.Kam@tbm.tudelft.nl)

Yvette Meinema  
University of Groningen  
Email: [Y.E.Meinema@rug.nl](mailto:Y.E.Meinema@rug.nl)