

CHAPTER 26.

**TEACHING WRITING AT
AUT UNIVERSITY: A MODEL
OF A SEMINAR SERIES FOR
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS
WRITING THEIR FIRST THESIS
OR DISSERTATION**

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This essay describes and comments on a series of seminars that were designed by the author to meet the discourse needs of postgraduate students writing their first thesis or dissertation in English at AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand. In New Zealand, a dissertation is seen as a smaller report on research that has been carried out by a student in a bachelor honours programme, whereas a thesis may be at either master's or doctoral level. (Hereafter, the term 'thesis' should be understood to also refer to "dissertation.")

AUT University was originally the largest polytechnic in New Zealand, but just over 10 years ago, in 2000, it was granted university status. Postgraduate students at the institution had been writing theses well before it became a university. The University comprises five faculties (Applied Humanities, Business, Design and Creative Technologies, Health and Environmental Sciences, Te Ara Poutama) and each of these houses a number of schools and departments. According to the Director of the Postgraduate Centre, the overall student population at the university is in excess of 27,000, and 2,250 of these are postgraduate students (Banda, 2011). Depending on the programme they are enrolled in, not all postgraduate students are required to write a thesis, but more than half do. Since 2005, over 400 students have graduated with a master's degree that included a thesis and over 140 have graduated with a doctoral degree.

The university has a multi-national and multi-cultural population: 42% pakehas (white New Zealanders), 10% Maori (indigenous New Zealanders), 11% Pasifika (Pacific Islanders), 27% Asians (East and South Asian countries) and 10% others (Banda, 2011). While many of the students who enrol in a thesis are New Zealand residents who have completed undergraduate programmes at the university or at another New Zealand university, a growing number from other countries and, therefore, from other educational backgrounds may also enrol in a thesis at the university. Consequently, a number of these students are non-native speakers/writers of English, but before they are accepted as thesis students they are required to have an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score (or similar) with at least 6.5 in Reading, Speaking, and Listening and 7.0 in Writing.

This range of backgrounds means that the university must cater for the diverse needs of its equally diverse student population. Students who have completed short research projects and written up reports on this work before enrolling in postgraduate programmes often have a head start in knowing generally what is required in conducting and reporting on research. Even though these students bring a certain amount of knowledge, skill, and experience to their postgraduate study, their understanding of what is required at this level is sometimes quite different from what is expected at a New Zealand university. This difference can become an issue for those who have completed an honours or master's degree by thesis from a university in another country where different requirements and expectations exist. When a university such as ours accepts a student into a thesis-based programme, it needs to accept responsibility for ensuring that students have every chance of succeeding. Aware of the need to take responsibility for each of its students, AUT University established a Postgraduate Centre in the mid 1990s to coordinate all aspects of postgraduate study at the university, including that which is undertaken by faculties, schools, and departments.

WRITING SUPPORT FOR UNDERGRADUATES

Before describing what the Postgraduate Centre offers its students, it is worth noting that the university also provides writing support opportunities for its undergraduate students. Students in these earlier years of study are able to access various forms of writing support when required. For instance, the university's Keys Workshops are available to those seeking a credit-bearing certificate in generic writing skills. Te Tari Awhina, a writing support unit for one-on-one

and small group conferences and workshops that is available to all students, is another section of the university that provides one-on-one and small group support to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Each of these provisions were offered by the university when it was a polytechnic. At the faculty level, students are also able to access on-line writing support given by academics in the disciplines. Postgraduate students and staff who are upskilling their qualifications are able to obtain one-on-one feedback at writing retreats.

ROLES OF THE POSTGRADUATE CENTRE

One of the many roles of the Postgraduate Centre is to provide courses, seminars and workshops on skills (e.g., computer and statistics packages) that postgraduate students will need during their course of study. One of the needs that was identified in the early years of becoming a university was an understanding of what is involved in the writing of a thesis. Although individual schools, departments, and supervision staff understand that this is a role they must take responsibility for, the Postgraduate Centre felt there was a need to offer students an introductory seminar or workshop on the generic, non-discipline specific requirements of thesis writing, so that those writing their first thesis could begin the task with some understanding of what would be expected. The series of seminars that are now offered on writing the various part-genres or chapters of an empirically-based thesis (to be described below) originated in 2004 with a one-off workshop on the writing of a literature review. Seminars and workshops offered by the Centre are open to students across the faculties; attendance is voluntary.

Participation in these sessions cannot earn grades for degree programmes or coursework papers. Inevitably, this means that students who might benefit most from these sessions are the ones who choose not to attend, and those who have sufficient knowledge and experience come to all sessions. The overwhelming success of the first workshop (in the number of students who attended, the positive feedback given in the evaluation forms at the end of the workshop, and the feedback from staff across the university who had heard about the workshop from their students) meant that other workshops were scheduled. Many of the evaluation forms revealed a desire for seminars and workshops on other aspects of thesis-writing. This, of course, meant that the staff member facilitating the seminars was required to give more of his time and that the Centre had to fund his release time from the school in which he is employed as a fulltime staff member.

Since 2006, the series has included the writing of (1) an introduction chapter, (2) a literature review chapter(s), (3) a methodology chapter(s), (4) a presentation of results chapter, (5) a discussion of results chapter and (6) a conclusion chapter. Over the last three years, other seminars related to thesis research and writing have been offered, including (1) preparing a thesis proposal and (2) writing a journal article from a section of a thesis. These initiatives have come about as a result of students and staff requesting support in these high-stakes areas.

The typical needs of first-time thesis writers have been identified by both students and supervisors in the literature on students' needs and difficulties (Bitchener, 2010; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Cooley & Lewcowicz, 1997; Dong, 1998; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). While the needs of students at one university may be a little different from those at another university (this, for example, may be the result of certain disciplines being offered by some universities and not others), there tends to be a common need amongst students to understand (1) the type of content that should be included in the separate chapters or sections of a thesis, (2) ways to most effectively or rhetorically organise this material and (3) the register/language expected by the general academic community and by the discipline in which students are studying.

USING A GENRE APPROACH IN THE SEMINARS

Charged with the responsibility of deciding how the seminars/workshops could meet the typical needs of thesis writers, the member of staff who was asked to design and deliver the seminars decided that a genre approach would be the most effective. As Swales (2004) and Devitt (2004) explain, a genre is a text that has, amongst other characteristics, particular and distinctive communicative functions and recognisable patterns and norms of organisation and structure. Discourse analyses, reported in the literature of discipline-specific journal articles and thesis part-genres, reveal the inter-relationship amongst the function(s) of a text, its content, and structure. Kwan (2006), for example, explains that the crucial starting point for a "discourse move" analysis (that is, understanding the units of content required) is to consider the purposes or functions of the target genre (chapter or section) that regulate the choice of content, its schematic pattern (or organisational structure) and characteristic linguistic features. Discourse analyses also reveal that "discourse moves" are staged or organised through the use of various "sub-moves" (sometimes referred to as "strategies" or "steps"). Empirical evidence reveals that these moves

and sub-moves, employed within the various theme or topic sections of a part-genre, should be seen as options rather than as prescriptive requirements and that there may be a considerable recycling of moves and sub-moves within and across theme/topic sections.

The next section of this essay illustrates how this approach underpinned the content provided in the seminar/workshop on writing a “discussion of results” chapter. It should be noted that some theses combine the presentation and discussion of results in one chapter, that others have more than one results or discussion chapter, and that others include the conclusion of the thesis with the discussion of results. The seminar presenter makes this variety clear to students and explains how the content presented in the session can be applied just as effectively to whichever format is chosen.

The discussion of results seminar/workshop, like those for the other part-genres, takes approximately three hours (depending on the amount of interactive discussion and the number of analyses of sample texts considered) and is divided into the following sections: the approach taken (the genre approach), the purpose(s) or function(s), the content and its structure, key linguistic characteristics, frequently asked questions, and further activities and reading.

1. *The approach*

The genre approach and reasons for its use are explained to the students.

2. *The purpose(s) and function(s) of the discussion of results chapter*

This section includes the following stages: (1) participants discuss in pairs what they understand to be the purpose(s) and function(s) of the discussion of results chapter; (2) a plenary reporting back on the key ideas; (3) a presentation of the chart shown in Figure 1. Attention is drawn to the importance of functions 4 and 5.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An overview of the aims of the research that refers to the research questions or hypotheses 2. A summary of the theoretical and research contexts of the study 3. A summary of the methodological approach for investigating the research questions or hypotheses 4. A discussion of the contribution you believe your results or findings have made to the research questions or hypotheses and therefore to existing theory, research and practice (i.e. their importance and significance) 5. This discussion will often include an interpretation of your results, a comparison with other research, an explanation of why the results occurred as they did, and an evaluation of their contribution to the field of knowledge |
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Figure 1. *Functions of a thesis discussion of results chapter.*

Moves	Sub-moves
1. Provide background information	a. restatement of aims, research questions, hypotheses b. restatement of key published research c. restatement of research/methodological approach
2. Present a statement of result (SOR)	a. restatement of a key result b. expanded statement about a key result
3. Evaluate/comment on results or findings	a. explanation of result—suggest reasons for result b. (un)expected result—comment on whether it was an expected or unexpected result c. reference to previous research—compare result with previously published research d. exemplification—provide examples of result e. deduction or claim—make a more general claim arising from the result, e.g., drawing a conclusion or stating a hypothesis f. support from previous research—quote previous research to support the claim being made g. recommendation—make suggestion for future research h. justification for further research—explain why further research is recommended

Figure 2. Move and sub-move options.

3. *The content & structure of the discussion of results chapter*

The presenter explains that the discourse analyses of discussion of results chapters in the literature have identified a series of typical moves (content units) and sub-moves used to create each main move (see Figure 2). It is emphasised that these are options and that a recycling of moves and sub-moves is characteristic of the part-genre.

and modal verbs (may) and illustrates their use in the first paragraph of the text. It is also pointed out that adjectives such as “possible” might also be used for hedging purposes (e.g., It is possible that. . .). Other samples can then be analysed by the participants and these can be from any discipline.

5 *Frequently Asked Questions*

The frequently asked questions shown in Figure 5 are then discussed. Often, they will be addressed during the course of the seminar/workshop but it is useful to return to them towards the end of the session.

6 *Further Activities and Reading*

It is useful to have samples and/or recommendations of other textual material for participants to use in a classroom context or in their own time. Some

1. Whether L1 or L2 was used as the medium of communication also *appeared* to exert an influence on learners' WTC. 2. As MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 546) have suggested, the differences between L1 and L2 WTC *may* be due to “the uncertainty inherent in L2 use,” and the level of linguistic competency can be one differentiating factor existing in L1 and L2 WTC. 3. In this study, Jerry noted that a lack of linguistic competence in L2 inhibited communication, but when L1 was used, such a problem was not present. 4. Cathy also considered a lack of lexical resources in L2 as a factor affecting her perceived competence, which in turn influenced willingness to communicate at times. 5. This *seems* to support House's (2004) claim that lack of actual linguistic competence in L2 can prevent communication.

6. Differences in L1 and L2 WTC were also detected in task engagement in pair work. 7. Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) found that learners' relationships with their interlocutor had a considerable impact on the extent of their engagement in the task in L1, but this relationship failed to emerge in an L2 task. 8. They suggested that when L2 was used as the medium of communication, the challenge of trying to express one's thoughts using a limited linguistic code in addition to decoding the interlocutor's utterances, created an emotional state different from the communication mode in L1, which *may* “alter one's perceptions of the constraints of the interaction” (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000, p. 293). 9. Differences in WTC in pair work in both L1 and L2 were, however, beyond the scope of this study and were not, as a consequence, examined. 10. It *appears* to be another area for further research.

Figure 4. Text illustrating hedging possibilities.

students may also be interested in the literature informing the content presented in the seminar/workshop. Examples of further activities and reading can be found in Bitchener (2010).

EVALUATION OF THE APPROACH

The approach described here is one approach. It has proven to be effective for those who have been introduced to it, as several different types of evidence reveal. First, the approach has been used with postgraduate students at a number of overseas universities (e.g., Brock University, Edith Cowan University, Nanyang Technological University, University of Melbourne, Murcia University, Michigan State University, Purdue University, University of California). Evaluative feedback (using a 7-point Likert scale to determine level of perceived usefulness from the programme employing the approach) from a total of 840 participants over a seven-year period at AUT University reveal an extremely high level of satisfaction: 92% rated it at level 7 (extremely useful), 6% at level 6 (very useful) and 2% at level 5 (useful). In the evaluations, qualitative assessments were also sought. As an example of the type of statement made, four from a recent seminar commented as follows:

Course provided a solid foundation structure for both masters and doctoral style thesis construction and useful for all disciplines

Handouts and format of the session was brilliant—feel very confident to approach my thesis now—thanks John!

1. Can I introduce any new literature in the discussion of results section?
2. How much of the literature review do I need to refer to when comparing one of my results with those of a study referred to in the literature review?
3. To what extent do the ideas presented in the discussion chapter have to be based on the literature presented in the literature review?

Figure 5. Frequently Asked Questions.

After attending John's workshops, I took on board his comments, information provided and would like to advise that I got an "A"

The veil has now lifted!

Empirical evidence (for example, Bitchener & Banda, 2007; Cheng, 2007; Turner & Bitchener, 2009) also attests to its effectiveness.

The approach described here is one that can be easily adapted if a less presenter-centred style is preferred and if time permits a more deductive approach. Group sessions can be in the form of seminars, workshops, and classroom-based lessons. Illustrative textual material can be drawn from any discipline. Greatest value for students tends to result if they are required to analyse textual material as soon as sample analyses have been discussed. Finally, it needs to be remembered that the genre approach presented in this essay draws upon the research findings of numerous journal articles reporting empirical investigations of what are typically the requirements and expectations for each of part-genres of these in specific discipline areas.

CONCLUSION: ISSUES TO CONSIDER

While the implementation of this approach and the seminar series generally has been largely trouble-free, there are a couple of issues that might be usefully highlighted. First, some students have commented that they would have liked to have had the seminar time extended so that more attention could be given to analysis and discussion of sample texts, but not all students shared this view. A credit-bearing course based on this approach would be one way of meeting this request. Second, scheduling the seminars to suit a wide range of students can be problematic, especially if they are offered during a typical working week. Some students are distance-learners and not able to attend sessions, and others may be working part-time or fulltime and are only able to attend some sessions.

The solution to these issues has been to offer the seminars on the weekend. Six hours on Saturday and another six hours on Sunday proved popular with some students, but others felt this schedule was too much over two days. In recent years, we have spread the seminars over two consecutive weekends, with six hours on the first Sunday for the Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology chapters and the second six hours the following Sunday for the Results, Discussion, and Conclusion chapters.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the success of the seminar series is to a large extent the result of not only the content that is provided and the way in which it is delivered, as well as the willingness of the Centre and the presenter to respond to suggestions given in the evaluations completed at the end of each session, but also of the support given by supervisors across the University who strongly recommend that their students attend the seminars.

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