

CHAPTER 17.

PROVIDING A HUB FOR WRITING DEVELOPMENT: A PROFILE OF THE CENTRE FOR ACADEMIC WRITING (CAW), COVENTRY UNIVERSITY, ENGLAND

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Academic Writing is an emerging area for teaching and research in UK higher education. This profile essay outlines the work of the first centrally-funded UK writing centre, the Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) at Coventry University. The profile looks in detail at why and how CAW was established, and discusses the CAW model of a “hub” for three “spokes” of university writing development: student writing, staff development in the teaching of writing, and staff and postgraduate scholarly writing. The profile argues that to be effective and sustainable, writing provision and writing centres must evolve strategically to meet the needs of university students and staff.

The phoenix arising from the ashes is the symbol of the city of Coventry, England (Cheesewright, 2009).¹ Heavily bombed during World War II, Coventry was rebuilt and now celebrates its heritage as home of the British bicycle and automotive industry as well as a centre of peace and reconciliation (Richardson, 1972).² Coventry University, which also takes the phoenix as its emblem, developed in tandem with the city’s regeneration. As one of the “new universities” to grow out of government changes to polytechnics in 1992, Coventry University places a strong focus both on teaching and applied research. Today, in 2011, the university encompasses three Faculties (Business, Environment and Society; Engineering and Computing; Health and Life Sciences) and the Schools of Art and Design and Lifelong Learning. The student body comprises approximately

18,800 undergraduates and 3,000 postgraduates, and 18% are international students (Turton, 2011). As noted on the university's website, "Coventry is an evolving and innovative university" that provides "a caring and supportive environment, enriched by a unique blend of academic expertise and practical experience" (Coventry University, 2011).

Within this educational and research environment a leading UK university writing centre is flourishing.³ The Centre for Academic Writing (CAW), established at Coventry University in May 2004, provides writing support for undergraduate students, postgraduates, and academics. From its inception, CAW has promoted a strategy of "whole institution" writing development whose aim is to create a shared culture for valuing writing that enables students and staff to progress along a "continuum of writing development" (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004, pp. 37-39, 2009). This approach is articulated in CAW's mission statement, in which CAW serves as the "hub" for three "spokes" of university writing development:

The Centre for Academic Writing is an innovative teaching and research centre whose mission is to enable students at Coventry University to become independent writers, and to equip academic staff in all disciplines to achieve their full potential as authors and teachers of scholarly writing. (CAW, 2010)

This profile essay outlines the three spokes of CAW's work: student writing, staff development in the teaching of writing, and staff and postgraduate scholarly writing. In doing so, the profile aims to provide readers with a sense of what writing means to students and academics at Coventry University and of CAW's evolving role as a hub for Academic Writing development and research.

HISTORY OF THE CENTRE FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

The 2003 proposal to establish a writing centre at Coventry University resulted from over eight years of discussion about what could be done to help students strengthen their writing skills (Williams, 2004). The proposal was submitted by a committee chaired by the University Librarian and comprised of staff from the Student Disabilities Office, the English Language Unit, the Business School, the Library, and the Maths Support Centre. Dyslexia tutors identified the need for dedicated writing tuition because they had nowhere to send non-dyslexic students for writing advice, while staff at the English Lan-

guage Unit, whose remit was to support non-native English speakers, increasingly found native English speakers seeking writing support (Williams, 2004; Wilkinson, 2004). Subject Librarians also reported that students were asking for help on structuring, argumentation, and referencing for written assignments (Rock, 2004). These “pockets of provision around the university” became a major factor leading to the proposal for a writing centre (Rock, 2004).⁴ The centre’s proposed remit was to improve students’ writing skills, and its main features were to be “a dedicated space for students to visit,” “dedicated staff to provide face to face support”, “dedicated resources,” and “a realistic budget” (Noon, 2003, pp. 1-3). The proposal also stipulated the necessity for “a supportive approach and a name that attracts without stigma”:

[A]ny name we give. . . must avoid terms such as “skills” or “study skills” and any sense of being a remedial centre
If we want students to willingly use the centre either through referral or of their own volition it will need to project a supportive image that encourages students to see it as a normal part of their learning experience. (Noon, 2003, p. 3)⁵

A new permanent full-time post of Centre Co-ordinator, a set-up budget, and “a budget to deliver service . . . on a continuing basis” were also outlined (Noon, 4). The proposal was “strongly supported at Academic Executive and in the Vice-Chancellor’s group” (Pennington, 2003), who decided the writing centre would run in its start-up phase as a project of the department responsible for staff development across the University: the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED). This positioning within CHED, whose lecturers supported “the implementation of the [University’s] Learning and Teaching Strategy” through collaborations with academic staff, staff development seminars, and a staff teaching certificate’ (Learning, 10), gave the writing centre a staff development remit to “organise staff development activities to assist academic and academic-related staff in helping students to improve their academic writing” that went beyond the original proposal’s direct student focus (Coventry University, 2003, p.1). In August 2003, Vice-Chancellor Michael Goldstein approved the proposal and allocated funding to found the new Centre for Academic Writing.⁶ The proposal’s success was made public in the job description for the Co-ordinator post in December 2003, which announced the Centre for Academic Writing as “a strategic priority within the university” (Coventry University, 2003, p. 1).

In 2004, Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, co-author of this profile essay, was appointed Co-ordinator. She brought to the role her US university background in

composition teaching, writing centre tutoring, and an MA and PhD in Rhetoric and Composition; experience of working in UK higher education as a post-doctoral research fellow in Academic Writing sponsored by the Royal Literary Fund and as Co-ordinator of Academic Writing for the University of Warwick Writing Programme; and links with the international writing research community. Within the first months of CAW's operation, she appointed two professional writing tutors and an administrator, Penny Gilchrist, who had previously managed the "Learning Zone" at a local Further Education college. Mary Deane, co-author of this profile, joined this small team as CAW's first Lecturer in Academic Writing early in 2005. In the seven years since CAW's founding, its staffing has grown exponentially and now comprises three full-time lecturers/senior lecturers, 10 part-time professional Academic Writing Tutors,⁷ two full-time administrators, and two part-time receptionist/clerical staff. The Centre's remit has also expanded, not only to incorporate staff as well as student writing development, but to engage in writing research that is recognised internationally and that grows out of and informs CAW's work.

STUDENT WRITING

The first "spoke" of CAW's mission statement, "to enable students to become independent writers," aims to transform the student learning experience by teaching students to view writing as a process, including how to plan, structure, critique, revise and edit their own writing. CAW offers individualised/small-group writing tutorials focusing on students' own assignments. Fifty-minute tutorials enable students to meet with an Academic Writing Tutor to have in-depth discussions of writing assignments and to cover topics such as essay structure and argumentation. Twenty-minute bookable-on-the-day tutorials are available for students who need immediate advice to clarify a specific writing issue, problem, or question. Students at all levels of study and educational preparation attend CAW tutorials. At the conclusion of a tutorial, students give feedback via CAW's electronic recordkeeping system. Typical comments include:

The tutor gave structured comments and feedback at a level I could understand. (Student 1, 2010)

I feel confident to continue with my paper, taking on board the writing tutor's comments. (Student 2, 2010)

Research undertaken into the impact of individualised tutorials at CAW has found that these sessions help assist students to move from a writer-based perspective on their own work to a reader-based approach (Borg & Deane, 2009, p. 16). Students gain confidence and competence, and are encouraged to apply the writing strategies they learn to the rest of their studies.

Because student demand for writing tutorials is not scalable, and because CAW aims to provide an array of learning opportunities, CAW also offers credit-bearing writing modules, group workshops, paper-based and electronic writing resources, and “Protected Writing Time” sessions for students to work on their writing with an Academic Writing Tutor on-hand.⁸ The Coventry University Harvard Reference Style Guide, a CAW project Mary Deane carried out in response to the need for a consistent, teachable system of referencing to be used in all undergraduate teaching and learning materials, is a resource that is particularly valued throughout the institution and is used by other UK universities.⁹

That CAW’s work with students is well-regarded within the university is evidenced by the attitudes of students, academics and senior managers. Students have said: “I am very happy that such a one-on-one tutoring system exists” (Student 3, 2010) and “CAW is the most useful thing in the university because they really help students (Student 4, 2010). Colleagues have noted that “Students who have attended CAW before resubmission of their coursework have improved dramatically” (Davies, 2009) and that CAW’s teaching “has resulted in a higher proportion of doctoral students producing better quality written work” (de Nahlik, 2009). At a 2009 meeting of the university’s Teaching and Learning Committee, Faculty Deans and other senior managers unanimously advocated the work of CAW (Watts 2010).

As part of a university-wide “Add+vantage” initiative to enhance student employability (Atkins, 1999), CAW also offers a range of undergraduate modules. Students attend a two-hour seminar each week for ten weeks, and learn about the theory and practice of writing for assessment, academic genres, and research, and are expected to apply these topics to studying in their own disciplines. As a result, most students gain confidence as scholars in their fields. For instance, a student gave this feedback: “I thank you for all the help you have given me, you have certainly made me a better academic writer because I have not just achieved a good grade in this coursework, but in other coursework as well” (Student 5, 2011).

Add+vantage modules are not the only kind of group writing development CAW offers. CAW lecturers also work in a staff development mode with academics in the disciplines to support their teaching of writing to undergraduate and postgraduate students (Deane & O’Neill, 2011).

STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Staff development to “equip academic staff in all disciplines to achieve their full potential as teachers of scholarly writing,” the second “spoke,” is central to CAW’s mission. By working with academics on strategies for teaching writing, CAW lecturers reach large numbers of students in a cost-effective way (Purser et al., 2008). Subject experts who integrate explicit writing instruction into their courses are well placed to connect generic competencies with discipline-specific knowledge, so students have the most intellectually challenging and meaningful experience of academic writing development (Monroe, 2003). Furthermore, collaboration between writing specialists and disciplinary experts can lead to research and publication on academic genres and pedagogic approaches for supporting student writers, which can benefit the wider academic community (Samuels & Deane, 2008).

CAW lecturers provide nine hours per week of one-to-one staff writing consultancy by appointment. The format of these appointments varies according to the issues a colleague wishes to tackle, which can include designing written assessments, providing timely and constructive feedback, or supporting students with academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism. During an appointment, the Academic Writing lecturer asks the subject-based colleague about the strengths and weaknesses he or she has perceived in a particular cohort of students, and together they establish a goal for a targeted teaching intervention to address a priority issue. For instance, if they plan to improve the students’ ability to produce well-structured written work that addresses the assignment brief, they may aim to introduce a formative assessment into a course to give students guided practice and feedback the students can implement in their summative assessment task. Writing specialists recommend readings and resources to support the intervention, helping to produce tailored teaching materials if required. Importantly, the discipline-based teaching interventions are led by subject specialists, because they are authoritative on the content students must also master. This is a good way to maximise the impact of writing development around the university, because subject experts develop additional expertise in writing pedagogies which they share with all the students they teach. This “Writing in the Disciplines” (WiD) approach embeds writing instruction into disciplinary teaching, and is beneficial for students because they learn how to construct and articulate arguments in the genres of their field (Bean, 2006).

One example of a WiD teaching intervention at Coventry is a collaboration between Law specialist Dr. Steve Foster and Academic Writing lecturer Dr. Mary Deane, who worked together to support Law students’ transition to university and adoption of legal writing conventions, including referencing,

analysis of cases, and formal expression (Strong, 2006, p. 8). Foster, in consultation with Deane, taught legal writing to 150 students on Coventry's LLB Law Degree in their first term at university through an intervention that lasted for five weeks of the 10-week long autumn term. The teaching was informed by the premise that academic study involves learning about genres as well as developing disciplinary knowledge (Monroe, 2003). Foster and Deane were also influenced by the Australian "Developing Academic Literacies in Context" (DALiC) approach to embedding the teaching of academic genres into subject courses (Skillen et al., 1999).

Compared to the previous year's cohort, the majority of students produced more structured assignments with more appropriate paragraphing, whilst many showed an improved ability to cite and evaluate legal sources. There was also evidence that the students were more capable of addressing and answering the set question than previous cohorts. Most of the students improved their basic legal essay writing as a result of this WiD intervention, and encouraged by this, Foster and Deane shared their methods with colleagues in the Law department, and Foster developed further resources to address issues they felt they had not fully resolved. This collaboration has also contributed to Foster and Deane's research profiles (e.g., Foster & Deane, 2011) and to CAW's eligibility to participate in Coventry University's submission to the UK's national Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise.¹⁰

STAFF AND POSTGRADUATE SCHOLARLY WRITING

The third "spoke" of CAW's mission statement, "to equip academic staff in all disciplines to achieve their full potential as authors of scholarly writing," also contributes to the university's applied research and publication agenda and is valued by many academics and postgraduates. CAW facilitates staff and postgraduate writing development by offering writing consultations, Scholarly Writing Retreats and Protected Writing Time sessions that make it possible for participants to progress their writing projects and publications.

As noted in the previous section, CAW lecturers offer staff writing consultancy by appointment. In addition to obtaining advice about teaching writing, academics and postgraduates can attend these appointments for support with their own research and publication writing, including planning for submission, targeting publication outputs, responding to peer reviews, managing extended writing tasks, and preparing grant applications. The Academic Writing lecturer completes a record of these meetings, noting the main recommendations and action points. The lecturer reads the colleague's work-in-progress and works in

a facilitative mode, asking questions to encourage the writer to strengthen key arguments and boost the audience appeal of a text in line with its purpose and genre.

In addition to individual staff consultations, CAW lecturers facilitate Protected Writing Time sessions for postgraduates and academics. Sessions usually last for two hours and the format is flexible but requires:

1. A writing specialist available to read work-in-progress
2. Participants with a plan for the session
3. A quiet space with no distractions

Participants are responsible for using this protected time efficiently, and facilitators have found that writers' productivity increases the more familiar they become with this time-bound and focused approach to writing (Murray, 2009). As this type of provision directly addresses CAW's mission to promote writers' independence, facilitators often adopt a non-interventionist approach (e.g., Clark, 2001), which can be surprisingly fruitful once participants have learnt how to develop realistic writing objectives.

Scholarly Writing Retreats, which CAW has been running since 2006, are an extended type of protected writing time that allows participants to establish a more sustained writing rhythm and the opportunity to fulfill a substantial writing objective (Murray, 2009). Retreats support writers in becoming more independent because they foster strategies for managing limited time to complete a specific writing task, and delegates often feel motivated when they realise just how productive they can be to use the strategies they learn on Retreats to inform their daily writing routines.

Participants attend a one-hour planning workshop a month before the event, where they identify the amount and type of writing they will produce during each half-day period. Participants are also informed that they will be expected to deliver a short presentation at the close of the Retreat about the writing they have produced and the extent to which they achieved their main goal. These presentations allow delegates to obtain feedback from peers and help them to stay focused by making Retreats outcome-orientated.

CONCLUSION

Within a national higher education climate in which the subject of "writing development" has only recently begun to be recognised, CAW has developed its mission and established writing provision to meet the needs of university students and staff.¹¹ Arising from this context, CAW has tried to be strategic in creating forms of provision that are targeted but flexible. The need for a fluid

approach to writing development is paramount in the face of economic challenges that are now affecting the UK, with reduction in government funding for higher education heralding budget cuts across the sector. Whilst CAW will continue working toward the aims articulated in its mission statement, CAW staff are aware that in terms of sustainability, the means of achieving these aims may need to adapt and change. CAW's provision, therefore, will continue to evolve. One direction will be writing and technology, as CAW currently is preparing to introduce its online component, the Coventry Online Writing Lab (COWL), to offer synchronous and asynchronous online writing support.¹²

Another direction will be to launch an “MA in Academic Writing Theory and Practice,” which will engage with the international community of Academic Writing scholars and practitioners and which CAW staff are taking through the university's course approval process at present.¹³ A third direction may be to begin a student peer tutoring scheme, to fulfil the university's commitment to providing work opportunities for students and to enhancing students' employability by providing work experiences to help them to gain graduate jobs.

This profile essay has outlined the history and mission of CAW as well as the range of Academic Writing provision offered by this UK-based writing centre. In detailing the three spokes of CAW's existing activity—student writing, staff development in the teaching of writing, and staff and postgraduate scholarly writing—as well as its evolving possibilities, the profile has demonstrated how the active engagement by CAW staff in both teaching and research is integral to all areas of the writing centre's work. In each of these ways, the Centre for Academic Writing functions as a hub for writing development and research at Coventry University.

NOTES

1. The phoenix is a mythical bird that burns and is reborn from its own ashes. See, for example, R. van den Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix - According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions*, Leiden: Brill, 1972.

2. On Coventry's motor industry heritage, see the Coventry Transport Museum <http://www.transport-museum.com/>. On Coventry's peace and reconciliation ethos, see the Peace and Reconciliation Gallery at Coventry's Herbert Art Gallery and Museum: <http://www.theherbert.org/index.php/home/permanent-galleries/peace-and-reconciliation-gallery>. Coventry University is home to the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies (<http://wwwm.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/cprs/Pages/Home.aspx>).

3. The “writing centre” is still a very new type of provision in UK higher education. As early as 1979 there was an attempt to set up a US-university-style writing cen-

tre modelled on those in US universities at Newcastle Polytechnic (now Northumbria University) (Hebron, 1984, p. 92), and another, in 2002, at the University of Glasgow, Crichton Campus. CAW was the first centrally-funded UK university writing centre and has served as a model upon which other universities have drawn (e.g., London Met, Gloucestershire, Liverpool Hope, Limerick).

4. Staff from Coventry University's Maths Support Centre, established in the early 1990s, contributed their experience of setting up and managing a centre to the university's conversation about a writing centre (Reed, 2004).

5. The name "Effective Academic Writing Centre" was recommended by the committee. Other names considered were "Literacy Centre," "Learner Development Centre," "Learning Skills Drop-in Centre," and "Academic Writing Skills Support Centre" (Noon, 2003).

6. A further factor enabling the creation of the centre was the existence of a vacant space in an old building and the plan to re-locate to a purpose-built suite of rooms upon completion of the university's new student centre building. This purpose-built space proving too small, in 2007 CAW was relocated instead to a self-contained annexe in a central ground-floor position adjacent to the Coventry University Library.

7. For a map of CAW's activities in support of student writing (2004-2010), see: <http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/cu/items/c9110b81-0b1a-dfa6-23e9-6b96402d6ba0/1/AMENDED%20CAW%20Model%20v3%2015.3.10%20FINAL.pdf>.

8. The Coventry University Harvard Reference Style Guide is officially used by the University of the Highlands and Islands and by Nottingham Trent University. It is now in its third version and is edited by CAW lecturer Dr. Catalina Neculai.

9. Originating as the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) in the 1980s, the REF (Research Excellence Framework) is a system for assessing the quality of journal articles and other research outputs of UK higher education institutions (see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/>).

10. On the growth of Academic Writing as a field for teaching and research in the UK, see, for example Lillis, 2001; Bergstrom, 2004; and Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006 and 2010.

11. One early effect of budget reductions in 2009, for example, was the restructuring of the staff development centre at Coventry University, which resulted in CAW becoming affiliated with the Library—a move which emphasised CAW's student and staff research support remit.

12. The COWL research project (2008-2010) was generously funded by JISC, a UK government-funded organisation whose purpose is to "inspire . . . UK colleges and universities in the innovative use of digital technologies," <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/aboutus.aspx>.

13. Indeed, this initiative was approved in Autumn 2011 and will be launched in Autumn 2012. It consists of three components: Coventry's new MA in Academic Writing Theory and Practice, Postgraduate Diploma in Academic Writing Theory and Practice, and Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Writing Development.

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