

‘Critical Intersections’

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The ‘training wheels’ of academic essay writing –
considered, coordinated and collaborative use of
writing models for commencing HE students

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Outline

1. 'Training wheels' analogy

2. Context and rationale

- Changing HE environment
- Current use of models - Issues and barriers

3. Effective use of writing models in HE

- Considered, Coordinated, Collaborative

3 points about training wheels



1. Not everyone needs them.

2. Most grow out of them
(they slow you down)



3. Few become dependent on them





Which of these cyclists started out with training wheels?

Use of models

- Used widely in daily life (Macbeth, 2010)
- **Writers at all levels use models for a range of reasons and purposes**
- Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educators often use writing models in teaching

Writing models and exemplars in HE

- Transitional (e.g. for commencing students)
 - Discipline-specific
 - Assignment-specific
- Using terms interchangeably
(Exemplar – typical example, **appropriate** model)
- Complete texts or sections of texts
- Range of levels of performance
- Annotated or not

My context

- ALL educator
- Based in College of Health & Biomedicine
 - Nursing
 - Midwifery
 - Biomedical Sciences
 - Health Sciences
 - Nutrition
 - Paramedics
- Typical early writing tasks
 - Essays
 - Case Studies
 - Research Reports
 - Laboratory Reports

Why this topic is important now

Changing HE student demographics

- Widening participation agenda
 - Non-traditional students
 - Under-prepared students
- Changing literacy levels
- New pathways into HE

Changing HE teaching and learning environment

- Larger class sizes
- Less favourable teacher-student ratios (Coates & Ransom, 2011)
- Reduced student access to teaching staff (Gibbs, 2006)
- Growth in online learning
- Falling on-campus attendance rates
- Requirement for students to be autonomous learners (Williamson & Goldsmith, 2013)

Growing demand for scaffolding of academic literacies

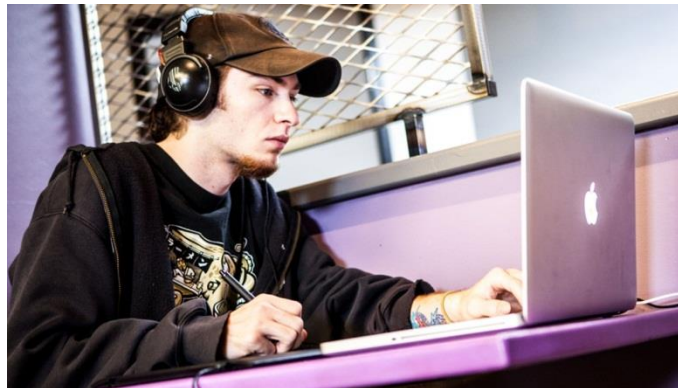
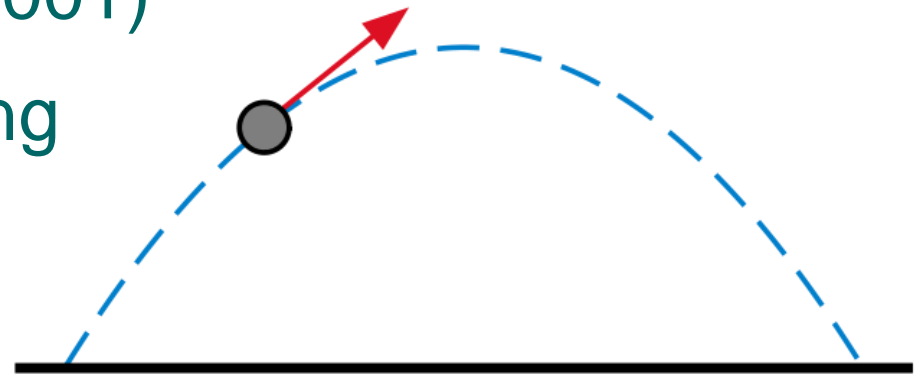
The scaffolding of academic literacies acquisition and development is moving from a recommended 'best practice' to a necessity dictated by the changing HE environment

- Increased need for learning support – sustainability
- Some traditional teaching approaches less effective
- Pressure to address retention and success agendas

Increased opportunities for collaboration between discipline teachers and ALL educators?

Early writing experiences:

- Sense of self efficacy (Zepke, 2013)
- Reassurance (Krause, 2001)
- Engagement with learning
- Self esteem
- Confidence
- Progress and success
- Retention



Use of writing models in HE

Issues with current use of writing models

Inconsistency

- Ad hoc
- Uncoordinated
- Different practices across units/courses

Lack of clarity

- Confusion over the **purpose** and intended **uses** of writing models (unclear expectations)
- Lack of shared understanding of their value

Issues with current use of writing models

Assumptions about their use

- Students will know how to use the model to inform their writing
- Provision of models is a substitute for, or alternative to, dialogue with students on their writing
- Models are best developed and used for teaching by ‘experts’ outside the discipline

Barriers to greater use of writing models

Time

- Time poor discipline teachers
 - Limited time to produce/review/update resources
 - Limited opportunities for **genuine collaboration**

Fear of creating dependence

- Students may come to rely on the model and expect one for every assignment

Barriers to greater use of writing models

Difficulty reaching **consensus** on appropriate writing models or exemplars

- Contested nature of discipline knowledge and conventions
- Limited opportunities for dialogue between discipline teachers
- Lack of unit-wide/course-wide planning

The process of reaching consensus can highlight inconsistencies and lack of clarity in task instructions

Barriers to greater use of writing models

Resistance – concerns over:

- Inhibiting writer identity
- Limiting creativity and expression
- Presenting writing conventions as fixed rather than dynamic (Macbeth, 2010)
- Influence on content development
- Copying
- Plagiarism

Potential interference with the process of **measuring** content knowledge

Western Sydney University (WSU)

- Audit of assessment practices as part of university-wide assessment strategy.

...lack of clarity [around assessments] was compounded by the absence of exemplars demonstrating standards and expectations to students. ***Exemplars were uncommon across the courses reviewed*** despite student feedback consistently communicating a desire for them and the UWS Assessment Policy strongly advocating their use.

(Gill, 2015, p.7)

Effective use of writing models for commencing academic writers



Considered, Coordinated, Collaborative

Considered

In order to make judgements about quality in writing students need “planned rather than random exposure to exemplars” and ideally opportunities to “engage in evaluative conversations” with teachers and peers.

(Sadler, 2010, p. 544)

Writing models as part of a:

Designed-in curriculum (Wilson & Devereux, 2014)

Intentional first year curriculum (Kift, Nelson & Clark, 2010)

Considered

- Fit for purpose – contextualised and assignment-specific
- Shared understanding of the *purpose*
- Clear *expectations* about use (what students are expected to **do** with them)
- *Explicit guidelines* on use



Discovering “the insufficiencies of the model” is an important aspect of the learning (Macbeth, 2010, p. 33).

...constructed exemplars may be preferable to authentic texts for some learning contexts (Handley & Williams, 2011).

Why not incorporate use of writing models into Marking Criteria?

- Encourage use of the model
(imitation of the model can be a *positive, desirable stage* in student writing)
- ‘Give permission’ for model use by acknowledging features of writing consistent with the model, and rewarding these
- Where appropriate, reward writing that transcends the model

Incorporating use of writing models into Marking Criteria

	HD	D	Cr	P	N
Text structure and organisation	Highly effective text structure and organisation. Sophisticated content development.	Text structure and organisation is effective and consistent with the models provided. Content is extended and developed	Text structure and organisation is adequate, and mostly consistent with the models provided. Some content extension and development.	Text lacking structure and organisation. May not be consistent with the models provided. Limited content extension and development.	Significant limitations in text structure and organisation. Influence from models not evident, or models adopted in highly formulaic ways. Content not extended or developed.

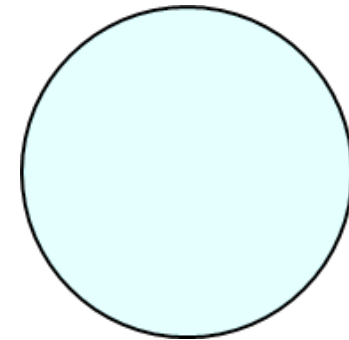
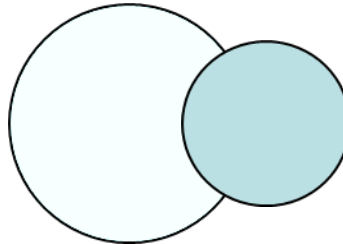
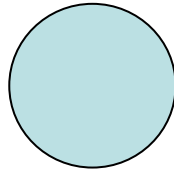
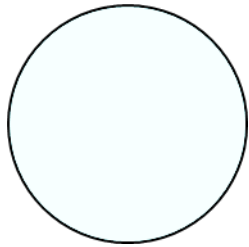
Coordinated

- Range of models provided (rather than ‘the one’)
- **Consistent** modelling of key components of relevant texts within and across units (i.e. course-wide approach)
- Used across progressive assignments
- **Gradual** withdrawal of the scaffolding across units/courses

Collaborative

- Discipline teachers (on-going, sessional)
- ALL educators
- Students
- When collaborative, the process of developing an exemplar can involve valuable dialogue and 'negotiation' between stakeholders, leading to **more consistent, shared understandings** of task requirements and expectations
- Exemplars can provide a basis for **marker moderation and calibration** as part of the assignment marking process (Handley & Williams, 2011).

Collaborative Positioning of ALL educator



Collaborative

Questions for the **teaching team** to consider:

1. Is the model well chosen?
2. Why are we providing it?
3. Do we plan to use it in our teaching? How?
4. How do we expect the students to use it?
5. Have we effectively communicated some of the intended uses to the students?
6. Would it be appropriate/useful to build use of the model into the Marking Criteria?

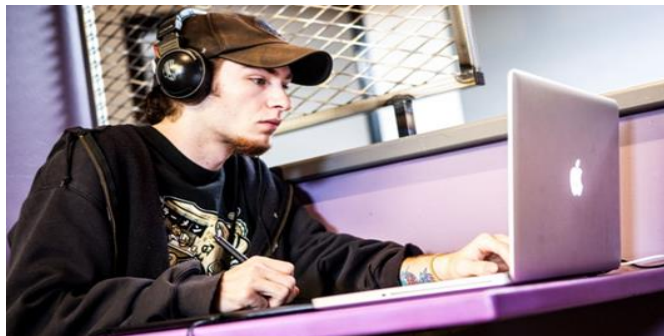
Concluding remarks



The journey from **novice** to **proficient** academic writer requires scaffolding that is *considered* and *coordinated*. This may best be developed *collaboratively*, through teamwork involving discipline teachers, ALL educators and students.

Desired impact

- Greater clarity (for all) on intended purpose
- Collaborative development
 - Discipline-specific
 - Contextualised
 - Well-designed (and accessible)
- Clearer guidelines to students on intended uses
- Greater use for teaching and learning



A **scaffolded** transition process

Use of *transitional* writing models as a process

The scaffolding metaphor emphasises that students should be able to stand alone as a result of the teaching-learning process – becoming autonomous rather than reliant on peer and teacher support.

(Wilson & Devereux, 2014, p. A-93)



Questions?
Comments?

Questions to consider



1. Do you use writing models in *your* teaching?
2. To what extent is the process ***coordinated***?
3. To what extent is the process ***collaborative***?
4. Do you meet ***resistance*** to use of writing models?
5. To what extent are concerns about the use of writing models justified?

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