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L. Y. Li
University of Canberra

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Linda Y. Li

University of Canberra
linda.li@canberra.edu.au

Abstract

Focused freewriting, broadly defined as writing without stopping and editing about a specific topic, has been viewed and used as a powerful tool for developing student writing in a wide spectrum of educational contexts. This study aimed to further explore the use of focused freewriting in the context of promoting students' academic skills development, particularly in the area of academic writing. The study was conducted in an intensive writing course provided for students from diverse disciplines during which focused freewriting was employed throughout the entire program to help students develop understanding of academic writing and effective writing strategies. The analysis of student freewriting and student feedback to the course reveals several emerging themes, which highlight the beneficial effects of using focused freewriting as a pedagogical tool in the intensive writing course. The study provides suggestions for utilising focused freewriting as an empowering learning tool beyond the writing class to enhance student learning in the disciplines.

Introduction

Writing has been a major means used by academic staff across the disciplines in assessment of student learning in higher education. Likewise, the ability to convey thoughts effectively in writing has been deemed crucial for success in tertiary studies (Crème & Lea, 1997; Lee & Stierer, 2000; Segall & Smart, 2005). Research into issues of student writing in higher education has identified varied problems manifested at different levels that students experience in academic writing. The student writers may have inadequate linguistic means (e.g. poor language skills, lack of subject specific vocabulary), or they may be unfamiliar with some common textual and academic conventions (e.g. essay structure, report format, referencing). Recent research has revealed that a vital source of difficulties in student writing lies in the student writers' lack of understanding of the nature and process of academic writing and confusion about the expectations and requirements of academic writing assignments in their field of study (Clerehan & Walker, 2004; Elander et al, 2006; Emerson, Rees & MacKay, 2005; Lillis & Turner, 2001). Such research findings point to the importance of developing not only effective writing skills, but also sound understanding of the fundamental nature of academic writing as well as subject-specific requirements for writing in order for students to become competent writers of academic texts.

In most Australian universities, obligatory classes in academic writing are uncommon. There is a general lack of explicit input and instruction on essential aspects of academic writing that is provided to students by subject lecturers (Storch & Tapper, 2000). In most instances, assistance with student writing in the form of workshops, intensive courses and individual consultations is offered by a central learning centre at the university. The students enrolled in a writing program delivered by a learning centre often exhibit a mixed profile of diverse fields of study and share a common need, which is to improve their writing capacities for successful learning. To address the need of such a diverse student group with a communal goal, it is imperative to explore and implement innovative teaching and learning methods that can contribute to engaging students in productive learning, which is a key finding of a recent study based on a large scale survey of student tertiary experience in Australian universities (Scott, 2006). Findings from the same study further suggest that student engagement can be enhanced when students are immersed in active learning that is "authentic, reflective and collaborative" (Scott, 2006, p. 6). Such emerging need in higher education inevitably challenges the traditional "skills- based" approach to student writing and calls for innovative pedagogies that are creative, motivating and stimulating, emphasising student engagement in a productive learning process.

In light of the imperative need for pedagogical innovation to enhance teaching and learning in higher education, this paper reports on the innovative use of the focused freewriting technique in an intensive writing course offered as an academic support program to a diverse group of students at an Australian university. Based on a thematic analysis of student freewriting samples, it examines the benefits of using focused freewriting as a powerful tool to engage students in continual writing practice through which they enhanced their understanding of the nature and process of academic writing at the university, became more aware of personal strengths and difficulties in writing, and thus developed more confidence in academic writing. The implications arising from the discussion based on student freewriting samples and feedback about their freewriting experiences suggest that focused freewriting can be used as an empowering learning tool beyond the writing class to enhance student learning in the disciplines.

Rationale for Freewriting in Higher Education

Freewriting, broadly defined as writing without stopping and editing, has been viewed and used as a powerful technique for developing student writing since it was initially advocated by writing theorist Peter Elbow (1973, 1998b). In the simplest terms, freewriting refers to the act of writing quickly for a set time from ten to fifteen minutes, just putting down whatever is in the mind, without pausing and worrying about what words to use, and without going back to modify what has been written. In Elbow's own words, "the only requirement is that you never stop." (1998b, p. 3)

The theoretical underpinning of freewriting is based on Elbow's developmental model of writing, which views writing as a process of learning and growing during which thinking is stimulated, enhanced and expressed (Elbow, 1973, 1989, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). According to Elbow, the spontaneous nature of freewriting eases the mental burden of trying to "think of words and also worry at the same time whether they are the right words" (Elbow, 1998b, p. 5). Such mental burden is regarded as the main source of the writer's block, which discourages many students from writing once they get stuck at the beginning (Boice, 1993). Freewriting also stimulates thinking by allowing the student writer to pour more attention, focus and energy into a brief writing act, which in turn, helps to discover and generate more ideas. When the anxiety about writing for a perfect product is removed, students will find the writing process more enjoyable, liberating and empowering (Elbow, 2000).

Freewriting has been tried and adopted in a wide spectrum of educational contexts. Previous research has reported the use of freewriting as a useful learning and instructional tool for varied purposes, both in writing classes and in the disciplines. For example, freewriting has been reported to be used as a writing technique for writing practice in the composition class (Reynolds, 1988), a vehicle for student self-expression and discovery (Collins, 1990), a method for developing metacognitive awareness (Soldner, 1997), a strategy for improving lecture comprehension (Hinkle & Hinkle, 1990), an assessment tool for reading comprehension (Bintz, 2000), and a disciplinary technique for developing student learning and writing in the disciplines (Fishman, 1997; George & Young, 1991; Somerville & Crème, 2005).

Despite its apparent benefits, freewriting is not free of criticism, the strongest of which has been directed towards its apparent lack of focus or control. While Elbow regards the non-editing aspect of freewriting as liberating and making writing less blocked, it creates scepticism among others who view freewriting as careless, random, incoherent and disorganised (e.g. Fox & Suhor, 1986). In defending freewriting, Elbow argues that writing is an organic, developmental process and it is a way to "end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking" (1998b, p. 15). In other words, the act of writing itself begets thinking, which in turn, develops writing. Elbow also emphasises reading over what one has written after a freewriting exercise, and trying to see what important ideas emerge. He refutes the critique of freewriting as merely "babbling" by pointing out that there are "genuinely better than usual" bits of writing in certain portions of one's freewriting (Elbow, 1998b, p. 8). This is because in a brief freewriting act, one can actually concentrate in a more intensive manner on thinking with greater intensity of involvement, and thus enabling the generation of more focused thoughts and more insightful ideas.

More recent application of the freewriting technique has experimented with focused freewriting, an adaptation of Elbow's non-stop, non-editing act of writing with a specific topic to give a focus during the freewriting process (e.g. Fishman, 1997; Somerville & Crème, 2005). In Fishman's (1997) study, focused freewriting was used as a writing-to-learn technique along with other techniques to help students grasp the disciplinary knowledge in

studying philosophy at an American university, and it was found to yield the most immediate results for the students. Somerville and Crème (2005) reported a cooperative project in which the focused freewriting technique was successfully used in a first year introductory archaeology course at a British university, which was co-taught by a subject lecturer and a writing specialist. Among the range of writing exercises the students did in the writing strand of the course, focused freewriting was found, from both the students' and the tutor's perspectives, to be the most successful part. When examining the connections between focused freewriting and essay writing for the course, the tutor was able to identify an evident link between the first piece of focused freewriting and the final essay, reflecting a chain of thought processes starting from a focused thought about the topic through the initial freewriting act, moving towards more understanding of the topic, and finally reaching a personal voice with authority on the subject matter. Somerville and Crème's (2005) study reflects the current increasing attention of academic staff to issues of student writing in higher education and collaborative innovations to address such issues.

In light of previous research on the application of freewriting in teaching and learning, the current study aimed to further explore the use of focused freewriting in the context of promoting students' academic skills development, particularly in the area of academic writing. It differs from previous studies in several aspects. First, focused freewriting was used with a heterogeneous group of students at an Australian university. The students were from different disciplines and diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds including both Australian and international students. Second, freewriting was used as "public writing" rather than "private writing", which means students shared their freewriting with class members, with all the students in the class and the lecturer being possible readers. Third, students freewrote in an intensive mode, engaged in daily focused freewriting exercises continually during the entire program which lasted for two weeks. The ultimate aim was to enable students to realise the value and power of freewriting as a useful learning tool for their disciplinary studies through intensive application and practice with freewriting in the intensive writing program.

Background of the Study

The Intensive Writing Course

This study was conducted in an Intensive Grammar and Writing course at an Australian university, which was provided by the Academic Skills Program, an academic support unit committed to promoting tertiary literacy across all academic disciplines. The course was designed to improve students' ability to write correct, clear, concise and convincing academic discourses for successful studies at the university. It was offered during the 2006 winter break in an intensive mode with daily classes for two weeks, consisting of a total of forty contact hours. There were two separate strands in this course, grammar and writing, which were taught separately by two lecturers. The main data for this study were derived from the writing strand of the course.

The writing course aimed to help students enhance their understanding of the various requirements of academic writing at the university and develop effective strategies for successful academic writing. Covering a wide range of topics on academic writing, the course started with an overview of academic writing, covered essential academic writing skills, reading and research skills, emphasised effective integration of secondary sources in academic writing, introduced common genres in academic writing, and finished with student self reflection and evaluation of the course.

The Participants

The course was open for enrolment to all students at the university. A total of twenty seven students were enrolled in the course during the winter break in 2006. This group of students came from diverse disciplines including education, industrial design, advertising and public relations, applied science, communication, nursing, commerce, and tourism. Fourteen of the students were Australian students while thirteen of them were students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The majority of the students were first year undergraduates, and six were enrolled in a postgraduate coursework degree program. The diversity of this group of students forms a typical profile of the students attending workshops and courses offered by the Academic Skills Program. Despite the differences among the students in terms of academic disciplines, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they shared one characteristic in common, i.e. the motivation to improve their academic skills, especially academic writing skills for successful study at the university.

The Focused Freewriting Activities

The intensive writing course was delivered in the workshop format, which provided ample learning activities for students. One of the main learning activities was a ten to fifteen minute focused freewriting exercise at the start of each class. The topics of the focused freewriting exercises were closely related to the topics covered in class. For example, on Day One and Day Two, the class discussed the salient features of academic writing, brainstormed on what makes a good academic essay, and explored individual writing experiences and essay writing processes. On Day Three, students did a focused freewriting exercise responding to the writing prompt “Good academic writing is not /does not ...”.

For each freewriting task, the students were provided with clear written instructions on an A4 sheet of paper, with a writing prompt in the form of either a sentence, e.g. “Academic writing is research-based” or a phrase, e.g. “A good paragraph ...” or just a word, e.g. “Grammar ...”. Clear instructions were given to provide some useful hints to direct students’ focus on using the writing prompt to freewrite. For example, this is the instruction of the focused freewriting exercise on Day Six:

Your writing task: Now, midway through this intensive writing course, you have come to understand that academic writing is research-based. What is research? What does research involve? How do you view research in academic writing? Freewrite for 10 minutes to demonstrate your understanding of the role research plays in academic writing. Start your writing with “Research is ...”

To ensure that the students were able to fully exercise focused freewriting, the lecturer explained the nature of focused freewriting in the first class, emphasising the benefit of using focused freewriting as a means to explore the topics covered in the writing course, and to help students engage in daily practice of writing. The basic idea of writing as thoughts come to mind and not having to worry about editing and producing a perfect piece while freewriting was also made clear to the students. When the students finished writing, they were instructed to exchange their writing with a fellow student. They read and wrote down their responses to each other. Whenever time allowed, students were encouraged to take their writing to more than one fellow student in class for peer comments and responses.

Data Collection

The main data of this study consisted of a total of 190 short pieces of freewriting samples composed by participants in response to ten different focused freewriting prompts in class during the intensive writing course. The length of these writing samples ranged between 130 and 350 words. A second source of data came from the students' written evaluation of the course on the last day. The student feedback questionnaire includes both multiple choice and open-ended questions. The multiple choice questions elicit student feedback on the effectiveness and usefulness of the course in its various aspects. The open-ended questions invite students to make further comments on the effectiveness of the writing activities and other learning activities in the course. The teacher/researcher kept a teaching/research log throughout the course, in which she recorded the observations she made about student learning during the class, which also provided information for the subsequent analysis and discussion.

Analysis and Discussion of Student Freewriting

The freewriting prompts were designed to facilitate student understanding of academic writing, its salient features, the essential skills required, as well as the student writers' own processes of coming to terms with academic writing. The analysis of the students' freewriting samples reveals several emerging themes, which reflect the efforts students made to explore and understand what academic writing entails, as well as the struggles and difficulties they encountered in their academic writing experiences. The following presents a thematic analysis and discussion of students' freewriting to highlight the beneficial effects of using focused freewriting as a pedagogical tool in the intensive writing course. The analysis and discussion are illustrated with summaries and excerpts from student focused freewriting, students' perceptions elicited from the course evaluation survey, and the teacher/researcher's classroom observations.

Enhanced Understanding of Academic Writing

A most apparent outcome from the course is students' enhanced understanding of the nature and process of academic writing, which was achieved by engaging students in a series of focused freewriting exercises on topics addressing essential aspects of academic writing. These topics provided relevant and interesting prompts to encourage students to explore and understand the expectations and criteria of effective academic writing, e.g. "Academic writing is ...", "A good essay is not ...", "An effective paragraph ...". The writing prompts also addressed issues central to the academic writing process, e.g. "Reading is important in academic writing", "Research is ...". In light of current research findings of student confusion about what is required in their academic writing assignments (Clerehan & Walker, 2004; Elander et al, 2006; Emerson, Rees & MacKay, 2005; Lillis & Turner, 2001), such freewriting exercises allowed students to focus on exploring the most pertinent aspects of academic writing and clarify for themselves the expectations and requirements they need to meet for successful writing at the university. Freewriting thus served as a useful thinking tool for exploration and understanding.

An analysis of students' freewriting shows thoughtful exploration and an enhanced understanding of what is required in academic writing and what is entailed in the writing process. Their freewriting demonstrates the understanding that academic writing involves "a great deal of reading, learning and thinking", is based on "research, evidence and analysis", combines "logical and creative thinking", presents "debatable views in an academic community", develops "a convincing argument with support", reflects "thorough understanding of the topic", follows "a clear structure and sequence", seeks to "engage the reader in a dialogue", uses "correct grammar, formal style and language", and is "a process work, with a good plan, revision, and persistent practice". These emerging ideas in the students' freewriting indicate that they were able to consider both the analytical and the linguistic elements of academic writing; they realised the important role of critical reading, thinking and research in academic writing; they became aware of audience issues; they placed emphasis on argument, evidence, logic and analysis in academic writing; and they recognised the value of practice and taking time to go through the writing process. The freewriting exercise gave students an opportunity to explore and reflect upon their understanding of the fundamental nature of academic writing and what academic writing entails. This is an important first step in successful completion of academic writing assignments (Segall & Smart, 2005).

It should be noted that while students were freewriting, they were encouraged to relate their understanding to the requirements and conventions of their particular field of study in order to make the task more relevant to their learning. The following is an example from a student majoring in industrial design who wrote about her understanding of what makes a good paragraph:

A good paragraph is like a brick in a building. It does not provide an overview of what the building is going to be like; it does not stand out very much from the rest. However, each brick bears a unique purpose and together they construct the building, making it solid. Without each of these bricks, the whole structure may collapse or it may simply look incomplete. If the brick is made in an inappropriate shape, it will not fit. Instead of stabilising, it undermines. In short, a good paragraph fits in the context it belongs to.

In this short paragraph about a good paragraph, the student writer situated her thoughts within the context of her discipline, relating her writing to the disciplinary knowledge in her attempt to understand effective writing. The analogy used in comparing a paragraph to a brick in a building and the function of the paragraph in an essay as the brick in a building is creatively refreshing. When the lecturer asked the student writer to share this piece of writing with the class, all students were impressed by the writer's skilful use of both metaphorical and disciplinary language in explaining and illustrating the concept of a good paragraph. Understanding what counts as "good writing" from a discipline-specific perspective and within the disciplinary context is an effective way to approach writing in higher education (Segall & Smart, 2005; Lee & Stierer, 2000). It is encouraging to observe that the use of appropriate focused writing prompts in this generic writing course enabled the students to relate writing to the disciplinary context of their studies.

Improved Self-confidence

As students came to gain a clearer understanding of the requirements of academic writing, they became less confused and anxious, and their self-confidence about academic writing improved. Development of student self-confidence was further enhanced with increased self-awareness of their personal strengths and weaknesses in writing, which were discovered and reinforced by students themselves through continual, daily freewriting practice throughout the entire writing course.

At the beginning of the course, the students were asked to answer a few questions about themselves and their thoughts about their own writing on an "Information Sheet" provided by the lecturer who intended to gather some information on student need in order to make the course more relevant to the group. The majority of the students expressed a low level of confidence about academic writing, which they stated as one of the main reasons for enrolling in the writing course. When asked about their personal strengths and weakness in writing, quite a number of students made a list of their problems, yet could hardly recognise their own strengths in writing. One student even put "None" and another student simply put "I don't know" under the question about personal strengths in writing.

As self-confidence is crucial in tackling academic writing, the students were prompted to explore what could possibly make them feel confident in academic writing through a freewriting prompt that starts with "Writing becomes easier for me when ...". This is a deliberate prompt to encourage positive thinking, which has been evidenced in the counselling literature as an effective method of building up self confidence (Corey, 2001).

The students' freewriting indicates that an evident source of confidence is a clear understanding of the purpose and topic as well as the process of writing, which was echoed in the freewriting of a number of students. Being able to personally engage in writing also makes the writing task easier for students, and so does having access to resources and getting feedback and help. When the students feel they are encouraged and supported, have a sense of purpose and direction, they will have more confidence in writing, and they will find their writing tasks easier to complete.

At the end of the course, students reported an improved level of self-confidence in tackling academic writing in the course evaluation survey. Student confidence about writing was also observed through their improved ability to express themselves freely, which is associated with the free aspect of the writing exercises (Elbow, 1998b). As the students did more freewriting practice, they felt less anxious about writing, and they were able to write faster and more within the given time.

The literature on student writing is replete with reports of difficulties and problems (e.g. Clerehan & Walker, 2004). Inadequate research has been conducted to tap into students' more positive thoughts about their writing, though there is common understanding that both strengths and weaknesses should be recognised. It is argued that encouraging students to develop self awareness about personal strengths, in particular, strengths in tackling academic writing tasks, is an effective way to establish self confidence. This is also a way for students who experience difficulties to come up with effective strategies to overcome personal difficulties in writing. For example, when a student realises that having a plan makes writing easier, he/she will continue to use planning for his/her writing. Similarly, when a student recognises that getting feedback and seeking help give him/her confidence, he/she would explore ways of getting feedback and help in the writing process.

Engagement in Collaborative Learning

The sharing aspect of the focused freewriting exercises created a collaborative learning environment in the writing class. After each 10-15 minute freewriting, the students read each other's freewriting and provided written comments for each other. It was observed that at the beginning of the class, not all students felt comfortable about showing their freewriting to others. One student admitted that she had never had her writing read by anyone but the tutor. To remove possible anxiety and create a trusting atmosphere for the sharing activity, the lecturer encouraged students to read and respond in a non-judgmental manner. As the course went on, the students became more and more enthusiastic about reading and commenting for each other, and they tried to read more than one piece and have their own freewriting read by more than one person. The peer comments were largely positive and encouraging, reflecting genuine sharing among the students as interested readers of each other's writing. Take for example, the following comments made on a student's freewriting on the prompt "Reading skills are important in academic writing":

Reading indeed need to be practised and it is a process of thinking too.

I've never thought reading is to show my understanding and ideas, etc. But it's TRUE! You pointed out an important point of reading.

I agree with you because I also spent too much time reading everything.

The sharing activity was evaluated by most students as one of the most helpful aspects of the course. As one student commented:

I really enjoyed giving other members of the group feedback about their writing. I think this will help me with how I edit my own work. I also enjoyed reading people's feedback about my writing particularly as people became more confident about providing constructive criticism.

Other students also mentioned that the sharing encouraged them to step out of their habitual comfort zone and experience writing as both an individual and a social act (Lee & Stierer, 2000). The social aspect of the freewriting exercises was highly appreciated by the students. While relating to each other through writing, the students were exposed to diverse perspectives of thinking and way of writing about a focused topic. The collaborative aspect of the freewriting practice led to a stimulating and engaging learning experience for the students.

Student Empowerment

Used as a teaching and learning strategy in the writing course, the continual focused freewriting practice has yielded a number of immediate benefits among the students. At the end of the course, the students completed a formal course evaluation administered by the University's Centre for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Scholarship. The summary of student feedback from this evaluation indicates the following most helpful aspects of the course: 10-minute writing exercises; group work/discussion; reviewing each other's writing; and listening to other members of the group about their approach to academic writing. In particular, the students, without exception, commented on the benefits they gained from the focused freewriting exercises. Following are a few examples of student comments on their personal gains from freewriting:

I have benefited greatly from practising my writing every day, as it has improved my confidence and has improved my overall thought processes of what are the important aspects of writing.

In the writing exercises I have learnt how to write about certain topics within a limited time frame. It makes me really think and put into practice what I have learnt throughout the course.

Freewriting is a good way of allowing me to think about a topic without any distractions. It is a good way to help me understand a topic and practice writing.

The focused aspect of the freewriting exercises enabled the students to concentrate on thoughts about a specific topic and generate insightful thoughts and ideas. The brevity of the writing exercise also made the students realise that it is possible to practise writing within a short time. When done in a focused manner, for a short period of time, and in a free way, writing was no longer viewed as so daunting a task to most students at the end of the course as at the beginning. This changed perception also led to a changed attitude towards writing, which is well reflected in one student's evaluative comment:

This writing course not only taught me useful academic writing skills but also encouraged me to write with fun. Academic writing seems boring to me because it is, in a sense, formulaic. My attitude towards academic writing has shifted to the positive one through the 10-minute freewriting. Sometimes the topic was difficult to write, but I could concentrate myself on writing.

When students take on a positive attitude towards writing, they are empowered to write with self interest, motivation and confidence, and they will find writing an enjoyable and rewarding experience rather than a daunting task and an obligatory chore. The liberating power of freewriting obviously led to student empowerment, which is realised in students' increased self confidence and a more positive attitude towards academic writing. This is deemed the most beneficial effect of using the focused freewriting technique in the writing course.

Freewriting for Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines

The present study shows that this group of students from different disciplines intensively experienced focused freewriting and the benefits associated with focused freewriting through daily practice in the writing course they participated in. They were encouraged to continue to use focused freewriting as a helpful learning tool in their own field of study. Then what are the implications of the focused freewriting technique beyond the writing class? In what ways can focused freewriting be employed in the broader contexts of teaching and learning in the disciplines? What issues should be brought to the attention of subject lecturers in the use of focused freewriting?

The power of freewriting is realised in its focus on the process of learning and discovering through on-going thinking and writing. As a "writing-thinking-discovery" tool, focused freewriting can be used to promote critical thinking in disciplinary learning. The following are some suggestions for the procedures of using focused freewriting to promote critical thinking. This technique is particularly useful for addressing the students' need to comprehend complex theoretical concepts, a common learning task in most fields of study:

1. Select a theoretical concept that is covered in the week's lecture. Use this concept as a focused freewriting prompt.
2. Freewrite for 10-15 minutes about this concept.

3. Stop and go over what have been written, circling or underlying key words and phrases that bring out some important points that are worth further exploration about the concept.
4. Use one of these key words or phrases to form a new focused freewriting prompt. Start a new round of focused freewriting about this point.
5. Repeat the process, focusing on related points to explore further until reaching a clear understanding of the concept.
6. Write a paragraph defining the concept.

The procedure outlined above reflects the critical thinking process the student is guided to engage in while attempting to understand a theoretical concept. It starts with an initial exploration of a complex idea, which creates the opportunity for free association of ideas related to the central concept. The exploration gains greater depth as new insights and ideas emerge from the act of freewriting. The thinking process also tends to be more analytical as connections between ideas and thoughts are being discovered through the different tiers of freewriting, each time focusing on an idea that is related and contributes to understanding the central concept. By completing such a series of focused freewriting exercises, students are led through a critical thinking process that is blended with both creative and analytical elements, which are conducive to the process of effective academic writing.

Subject lecturers can build freewriting assignments into the overall subject assessment scheme to engage students in on-going thinking and reflection of the subject matter in a specific field of study, as reported in previous studies of the application of freewriting in the disciplines (e.g. Fishman, 1997; George & Young, 1991; Somerville & Crème, 2005). It deserves noting that caution should be made about the way lecturers would assess such “process work”. Different from other formal written assignments, e.g. essays, reports, freewriting is not meant to be the finished piece. Rather, it is a useful means to generate thoughts and ideas, a springboard for developing key points and ideas into a final complete piece of writing. Given the nature and purpose of freewriting as process work, it should be used as part of the formative rather than the summative assessment scheme. Students’ freewriting can be counted, but not necessarily assessed separately. For example, freewriting can be used as the basis for an assessed piece of formal writing such as reflective writing. In their final piece of writing, students can take excerpts and examples from their freewriting, but the freewriting itself is not graded. The rationale for not formally assessing freewriting, as suggested by Crème (2005) about other informal kinds of writing assignments such as learning journals, is to uphold the process nature of this kind of work and avoid imposing a sense of final judgement on work in process.

In order for students to genuinely practise focused freewriting, lecturers should provide clear instructions about the process of focused freewriting. The non-stopping and non-edit act of freewriting facilitates the process of putting thoughts into words in a spontaneous way, yet some students might tend to write with their habitual pauses and corrections and not feel comfortable about writing without stops and corrections (Belanoff, Elbow & Fontaine, 1991). To remove possible discomfort during the freewriting process, the rationale for non-stop and non-editing should be clearly explained before students are instructed to freewrite. It is important for the lecturer to set the right tone by encouraging students to use writing as a means of exploration and discovery to make sense of the subject matter they are learning.

To maximise the benefits of freewriting, it has to be a meaningful exercise relevant to students’ needs and interests, not just some sort of writing to keep students busy in and out of class. This requires setting appropriate freewriting prompts parallel to the teaching and learning sequence in a specific subject, as those used in the present study. A series of

questions can be created for focused freewriting to lead students through all the necessary thinking stages of a writing task. The freewriting exercises should be designed in such a way that they take students to write through a problem, moving from straightforward summaries and responses to more complex topics which require speculation and interpretation. When designed in this way, focused freewriting becomes a useful means to engage students in continual exploration and understanding of the subject content.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have provided classroom-based evidence to support the use of focused freewriting as a useful pedagogical tool in the context of academic skills development, particularly in the area of academic writing. The findings from this study suggest that focused freewriting has the potential for wider applications in the broader contexts of teaching and learning to enhance student engagement in higher education. As illustrated in this study, when focused freewriting is fully utilised and becomes a regular and integral part of the teaching and learning process, students will be empowered to think through problems, make discoveries, gain insights, and express themselves with confidence through spontaneous writing focusing on a specific topic. The empowering function of focused freewriting deserves further application and research amongst the collective endeavours of academic staff and students in enhancing teaching and learning practice at the university.

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