

Integrating Writing Development in Curricula: Writing Intensive Project Case Studies



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Case Studies:

Professor Mark de Vos, Professor Rosaan Kruger and Ms Liz Davies,
Ms Natalie Donaldson, Dr Caroline van der Mescht, Ms Laura de Lange

Editor: Carol Thomson

Cover photo: Roddy Fox

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Introduction

These case studies come from work done in the Writing Intensive Project (WIP) from its inception in 2013 until 2016 when formal funding from a Teacher Development Grant from the National Department of Higher Education ended. The project was unique for Rhodes University as it was the first time an intervention of this kind had ever been directed specifically at undergraduate writing development and support in the disciplines, and secondly, that participation by discipline-based academics in the project was entirely voluntary, thereby exemplifying a significant level of agency.

The WI Project itself was established in response to a long-standing and widespread reaction amongst many Rhodes staff to the ‘problem’ of student writing, with ‘the problem’ commonly understood as inherently belonging to students. This deficit view of students shifts accountability for ‘learning to write’ and ‘writing well’ to students and is rooted in an ‘autonomous’ construct of literacy practices, and language use, as neutral, a set of de-contextualised ‘skills’ which an individual can simply learn – or not. So the most important factors that determines how one understands ‘the problem of student writing’, and responds to it, is dependent on one’s theoretical, epistemological and ideological position on these and other related issues. In the case of the WI Project, it was underpinned by, as Lillis & Scott put it, both a ‘specific epistemology, that of literacy as social practice, and ideology, that of transformation’ (2007:7). Theoretically, it owes its framing primarily to work done in the field of New Literacy Studies, but also that of Rhetorical Genre Theory.

Given the rapidly changing nature of higher education and the increasing fiscal constraints facing institutions in South Africa, it would seem that the work of an academic must inevitably undergo a reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities. Rather than wait for a crisis to emerge, or an edict to be handed down

from an executive or government structure, the academics who introduced the Writing Intensive interventions in the case studies in this booklet, pre-empted this reconfiguration of their own accord in response to a changing context. In a rare example of agency amongst discipline specialists, over the full period of the four years of the WI Project, thirteen (13) academics in different departments (the majority in the Humanities), entered the project and set up courses. In doing so, they began a journey of disruption, challenge, stimulation, weariness, successes, disappointments and excitement. No intervention was the same as each academic developed a programme/ course according to a specific need and within a specific context. The only regret is that all thirteen academics were not in a position to write up their interventions and so the five in this booklet are of special value to those who read them.

Since each intervention was organically developed and context specific, the format of each case study is not identical and nor was it demanded to be so. Instead, their authors foregrounded that which they considered important and structured their contributions according to their personal preferences. If anyone would like to know from any of the contributors, please contact them on the email addresses provided.

Carol Thomson (PhD)

Co-ordinator

Writing Intensive Project (2013-2016)

c.thomson@ru.ac.za

Linguistics 1

In 2013, the department of English Language and Linguistics implemented a Writing Intensive Programme (WIP) at first year level. Despite the termination of funding from the Teacher Development Grant at the end of 2016, this writing programme is now so fully integrated into all first year courses that the department is confident of it continuing.

Goals of the writing intervention programme

- To engage in a process of re-curriculation to allow for the inclusion of more focused and regular writing tasks;
- To integrate these fully into all first year courses such that students would not recognise these tasks as ‘add-ons’;
- *To make extensive use of an online peer review process as a purposeful writing development strategy;*
- To bring all staff in the Linguistics Department on board with the rationale for ‘intensive writing’ (as understood in the WI Project).

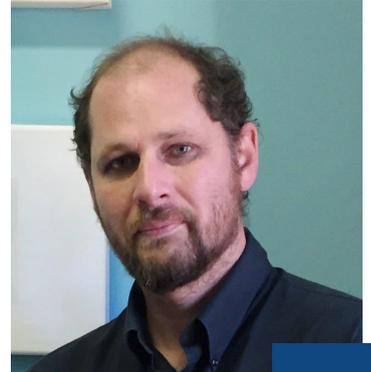
The Linguistics 1 writing intensive programme now comprises of several elements viz.:

- Weekly tutorial *workpoints*: These workpoints are structured around constrained writing tasks including referencing, summarising, making an argument etc. In other words, workpoints are included in each week’s tutorials which focus on developing reflexive awareness of writing, the writing process and the discourses associated with the discipline. These workpoints are evaluated by our existing student tutors.
- Managed peer evaluation administered via Workshop function of RuConnected.

Focus of this case study: Managed peer evaluation

The peer review mechanism in Linguistics 1 provides a qualitative rubric that directs students’ attention to core components of writing (e.g. Form: spelling and grammar; Discipline embeddedness: use of appropriate terminology, referencing norms etc; Rhetoric: quality and persuasiveness of argument etc.). The intent behind peer review is not only to provide students with feedback, but by the virtue of engaging with peer review to develop university competencies e.g. the need to critically engage, evaluate information, express evaluative opinions etc. To facilitate peer review, assessment rubrics were used which focus the attention of student assessors on qualitative aspects of writing (e.g. paragraph construction, use of jargon and technical terms, referencing, flow and force of argument etc.).

In the past, students have complained that peer evaluation is like “the blind leading the blind”. This is only true if one takes a narrow, content-based view of the types of learning experiences



Professor Mark de Vos
m.devos@ru.ac.za

available to students under peer evaluation. If one views education in terms of a social learning or developmental models, then one is able to view it in different terms. The true aim of peer evaluation is not so much to generate meaningful “comments” on students’ submissions – although that is a valuable subsidiary aim – but to expose students to texts in the first place and to give them an opportunity to critically evaluate them. Students will be exposed to examples of their peers’ work thus encouraging them to self-evaluate their own essays. Moreover, by being guided through a process of peer review, they will be developing their faculties of critical judgement of text – which is a hallmark of tertiary education in general irrespective of the writing

process. Thus, students will have the benefit of the qualitative input from writing respondents¹ as well as the benefit of peer assessment.

Students draw on the feedback provided – and, more importantly, on their direct experience of exercising critical judgement through the peer review process, to modify their essays before submitting them to the formal marking process.

¹ Writing respondents: These are main stream tutors taught and supported to act as ‘respondents’ to student writing beyond their regular role of providing ‘content’ support following lectures.

Points to ponder:

- What scope is there in your discipline to introduce peer evaluation mechanisms for the same reasons given in this case study?
- What ‘core components of writing’ characterize your discipline?
- How can you create more opportunities for your students to practice these in relevant, weekly tasks?

Law: Legal Theory 1

In 2015, the Law Faculty introduced the Writing Intensive Project into their Legal Theory 1 course. This course is semesterised and consists of Foundations of Law in the first semester and Introduction to Law in the second semester. The course runs over four lectures per week and is complemented by a compulsory tutorial programme addressing, inter alia, library skills, referencing, mock trials, preparation for formal compulsory assignments and problem-solving. Students in this course have traditionally had significant additional, but voluntary academic support in the form of supplemental instruction, language tutorials and academic development tutorials. Somehow, despite the extensive nature of this support, it never seemed to be enough, with high failure rates and low average marks being the trend over some years. In collaboration with the WIP coordinator, it was decided to complement the existing offerings with compulsory short writing tasks that would be focused on inducting students more explicitly into the world of legal writing. Meetings were first held towards the end of 2014, between the Legal Theory 1 course coordinators and the WIP coordinator to collaboratively identify relevant and effective writing tasks prior to a course beginning. Early in 2015, the writing respondents approached by the Law Faculty (all postgraduate LLB students) were inducted into the complex and demanding role of 'writing respondent' by the WIP coordinator.

In 2016, the same process and curriculum have been applied.

Goals of the writing intensive project intervention

- To supplement existing additional, voluntary academic support tutorials with compulsory, legal writing-specific tutorials;
- To provide increased opportunities to practice 'legal writing';
- To provide constructive feedback from 'writing respondents' steeped in the writing practices and discourses of Law.

How it worked

There were nine intensive writing tasks as part of this intervention (in addition to the six compulsory assignments and four tests that counted for marks in Legal Theory 1). These writing tasks were split over the two semesters with five tasks being completed in the first semester and four in the second semester, and were purely formative in nature. Each student received individual feedback from five writing respondents.

The writing tasks varied from lecturer to lecturer, the first task merely requiring the students to write short narratives about themselves and the reasons why they chose Legal Theory 1 as one of their first year subjects. The purpose of this task was to get students to do free writing without a prescribed format. This, theoretically



Professor Rosaan Kruger
r.kruger@ru.ac.za
 Ms Liz Davies
e.davies@ru.ac.za

at least, would enable lecturers to gauge the students' proficiency and writing ability. This was not considered by the respondents, but merely 'oiled the wheels'. Follow-up writing tasks included short comprehension exercises, summaries, case research and analysis, short opinions and problem-solving. These were then handed in by the students in class and given to the writing respondents who prepared individual and combined feedback in line with the guidance they received from the lecturers who set the respective tasks.

The writing respondent also gave detailed feedback to the lecturers concerned about students' presentation, their writing ability, referencing and the content addressed in the writing tasks. This was most useful as the course co-ordinators for Legal Theory 1 were able to feed this to the mainstream tutors who were also experiencing similar writing issues.

The Legal Theory 1 class has ranged between 430 and 340 over the past two years. While this represents a difference of 100 students, the class can nevertheless be classified as 'large', making the five writing respondents' workload excessive. Despite this, both groups of respondents over the two years have managed to give individual feedback to each student which is to be highly recommended.

Points to ponder:

- Legal discourse is notoriously inhibiting to 'outsiders' so the process of induction of first year students into how language and linguistic resources are used to constitute it, is critical. How 'inhibiting' is the discourse of your discipline and what explicit reading and writing tasks can you design to induct your students into it?
- 'Evidence' to legitimate 'claims', Law students are told, come from only two sources: 1) the Law itself; and 2) previous trial cases. What kinds of evidence 'legitimate' claims in your discipline? How often are students explicitly given formative writing tasks to learn and practice your 'rules' in this regard?
- In Legal Theory 1, one of the greatest difficulties students face is the quantity and specificity of 'technical' legal terms, most of them still in their Latin form. To what extent does 'specialist vocabulary' act as a barrier to learning in your discipline and what steps do you, or can you take to, to lower this barrier through carefully integrated reading and writing tasks?

Psychology 1

The Psychology 1 course is one of several ‘very large class’ courses in the Humanities Faculty. The number of students who were registered for this course when a writing intensive intervention programme was first implemented in 2014, numbered 525 but rose to 671 in 2016. In terms of tutor support for students, this has meant in turn, supporting and developing a team of, on average, 25 tutors per year with each tutor usually taking two student groups. Natalie Donaldson has been the key agent in the Psychology Department responsible for taking up the challenge of providing all students in the first year course with academic writing support and development. None of this has been easy as the narrative below shows, but with each iteration of the programme, changes have been made in response to a previous run in an attempt to make it relevant and meaningful to students.



Ms Natalie Donaldson
n.donaldson@ru.ac.za

Goals of the writing intervention

- Prioritise writing development (instead of foregrounding content) in the majority of tutorials per semester (four out of six);
- Provide students with a ‘graded’ engagement with academic writing ‘purposes’ in tutorials;
- Compliment the *plenary* format delivery of three per semester, Supplementary Instruction lectures (focusing on academic reading and writing);
- Engage all first year lecturers with the aims and intentions of the writing intervention.

The rationale for implementing the writing intensive intervention through the tutorial programme is that at Psychology 1 level, the lecture times do not provide enough space to do this and cover all necessary content. Initially, this required a significant re-visioning of the tutorial programme such that four out of six tutorials per semester were allocated to ‘writing’ and two to ‘content’.

Students have an essay due each semester and so the four ‘writing’ tutorials of each semester are geared towards writing tasks that help them plan, structure and draft their essays. Ideally, if students complete each writing task to the best of their ability and work with constructive comments provided by tutors, these four tutorial writing exercises together could form their essay. Our intention, therefore, is to focus on the relevance of writing tasks and provide adequate support and training on a weekly basis to tutors in order that they respond effectively to each writing task.

In addition, at the outset we also felt that tutorial exercises, like the term essays, need to work on a progression, where reading and writing tasks get more difficult with each session and build on the ways in which academic assignments or essays are structured.

For this reason we planned what we considered a 'graded' approach to the main 'purpose' of an essay based on the cognitive and academic literacies demands made on students. The first semester essay, therefore, requires students to 'compare and contrast' two theories on Development, whilst the second semester essay requires students to 'critically' engage with a particular theory from Personality Psychology, providing claims and evidence to support an evolving argument.

A Supplementary Instruction lecture to the full cohort of first year students further complements the focus of each essay 'purpose'. This lecture is given by an academic, usually the first year coordinator. A third SI lecture focuses on how to manage Multiple Choice Questions.

Ongoing challenges – and points to ponder

- Developing an evenness of capacity and/or commitment to the new and demanding role of *writing respondent* (in addition to that of 'mediator of content') in a very large tutor body.
- Devising strategies to attract students to the Supplementary Instruction lectures, despite the fact that they are voluntary. At present, attendance is often low, with students sometimes leaving during the class, despite the acknowledged value of these lectures by students.
- Evoking interest and sustained commitment to the writing project by all staff teaching on the first year Psychology programme.
- Finding ways to address the very low level of written English proficiency which hinders at least 10% – 15% of the first year cohort and which the WI project does not and cannot address.

Bachelor of Education (Foundation Phase)

The Bachelor of Education, Foundation Phase (B.Ed. FP) is the first undergraduate full time degree being offered in the Education department since 1997. It is in line with new curriculum requirements (Government Gazette, 2011, volume 55, number 34467) that students are enrolled for two subjects in the Education Department and two languages in the Faculty of Arts. The 2015 – 2017 intakes are pilot cohorts, which, if successful, will enable the Rhodes Education Department to graduate 60 Foundation Phase teachers each year thereafter.



Dr Caroline van der Mescht
c.vandermescht@ru.ac.za

Goals of the intervention

- To introduce B.Ed FP students to the concept and practice of ‘academic writing’;
- To engage explicitly with appropriate macro (structure, logic, argument), meso (paragraphing, coherence, transitional statements) and micro level language and linguistic use;
- To create a ‘community of practice’ amongst these students and their PGCE tutors.

What we do

Every week, the selected group of PGCE tutors¹ is supplied with a full lesson plan and the materials to support their teaching in the dedicated WIP sessions, designed by the WIP coordinator. Tutors attend a weekly meeting for the first two terms of the year, meetings which are considered key to coordinating the tutoring, to picking up problems in the programme, attendance by B.Ed. FP students, and to planning ahead. Frequently tutorials are designed around suggestions tutors make at these meetings.

a. ‘Academic writing’ activities designed to meet the first two goals of the intervention identified above

1. *Writing from a selection of sources using your own words*

The B.Ed Foundation Phase students are asked to read a selection of explanations of the term ‘Academic writing’ (4 x half page texts). This gives reading practice, reinforcement of definitions but differences and similarities too, referencing practice, integrating sources, and an introduction to what is meant by using one’s ‘own voice’. They are also asked to focus on paragraphing and the editing of their own work. A ‘response’ sheet which is included can be used

¹ PGCE students are used as tutors in the B.Ed FP WIP programme as there are no 3rd or 4th year B.Ed students yet. Applications are invited from all PGCE students who are registered for English Home or English Additional Language Method (FET phase). They do a task before attending a training session on responding to student writing and this dovetails well with their own career focus as future high school language teachers. Approximately 8 are appointed on the basis of their performance in this selection process.

as a 'checklist' for students' own writing and for peer assessment. Length: 1 and half pages.

2. Using the 'PEDAL' approach

The PEDAL approach provides a simple mnemonic for remembering a simple structure to the basic claims/evidence demand of academic writing. P = Point, E = Evidence, D = Description of evidence, A = Analysis of Evidence, and L = Link which can be a transitional statement to the next paragraph or a statement circling back to the topic sentence.

It is emphasised that this is ONE approach but a useful one to start with. An initial task is one where students are given a first year piece of writing and asked to review it against PEDAL requirements, and then rewrite it. If there is time, students micro edit as well. This last task can be done as a peer exercise too.

3. Exploring genres and connectors

For example: Writing explanations of how something works. In one particular task, this is about a consonant or vowel in a home language; In another, the focus is on logical sequence and logical connectors. If 'time' is relevant then e.g. firstly, secondly etc. or 'cause and effect' e.g. because, so that, as a result etc., and conjunctions.

4. Free writing

5. Discipline-specific vocabulary

6. Weaving quotes into writing: examples of what works and what doesn't, and an analysis of why

7. The role and relevance of referencing sources

b. Creating a 'community of practice' amongst B.Ed FP students and their PGCE tutors

Anecdotal accounts suggest that student study groups and social groups often originate in tutorials. It is important that the students in the B.Ed. FP programme feel at home in the department and on the campus and that they support each other in their academic project. Research (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999) suggests that tutors may help retain undergraduate students, particularly those in their first year, by being mentors and role models as well as tutors. When the PGCE students leave the Education Department on their own extended teaching practice (July – October) their support for B.Ed. FP students' writing changes to responses through emails with track-changes and editing suggestions, thus sustaining support for them.

Points to ponder:

- We are, however, facing some challenges. The first comes from the ability of PGCE tutors to manage their own time effectively while teaching on the WIP programme. The PGCE programme is a full one, and there are additional demands on students for community engagement and school visits. Their Teaching Practice takes place from mid-July to mid-October, and their sessions with B.Ed. FP students need to be managed around that. The PGCE student-tutors' students' uptake of email support during this period was also uneven, so this aspect needs to be managed more carefully. It is also not yet clear whether B.Ed. third and fourth year students would be differently placed as they will also go on Teaching Practice.
- The second challenge is that some of the B.E. FP students remain weak in English as well as academic literacy skills beyond their first year. Models for extending the WIP support into second year are being considered.
- A final challenge is funding. Fortunately in 2017, the Education Faculty itself will fund the PGCE tutors necessary to continue with the above writing intervention for the next group of first year B.Ed Foundation Phase teachers.

Philosophy

Philosophy, partly due to its high semantic density and the rigour expected from practitioners in argumentation and logic, is *de facto* a writing intensive subject. Students are expected to know how to produce the required style of philosophical writing, and are graded on it, but never explicitly taught it. A writing intensive programme was a logical step in trying to help inexperienced philosophers to develop. In 2014, on the recommendation of the then HoD, additional writing intensive tutorials were offered for the first time to all Philosophy students who achieved between 40%–50% at the end of the first semester. Due to the low response rate, first years were then targeted directly. While 10 expressed an immediate interest, only three students attended consistently, with one other student showing moderate dedication. Unfortunately, staff changes in the Philosophy Department meant that further development of the role of the Writing Intensive Project did not proceed beyond 2014. Despite this, we believe that the experience has value beyond that small group and the Philosophy department itself, hence the inclusion of this case study in this series.



Laura de Lange
lauradelange@gmail.com

Motivation for the intervention

The primary motivation for this intervention was to try and find out the possible causes for failing/ close to failing grades of a sizeable cohort of students. Three propositions were put forward to account for these weak grades. They were:

1. *Missing the basics*

“Students cannot make use of the conceptual work done in the tutorials because they do not pick up on the basic theories discussed in lectures, but also the basic argumentative moves and philosophical terminology assumed as baseline, general knowledge”.

2. *Power dynamics*

“Students who are battling with philosophy usually occupy the lowest power positions in a given tut. Students, who already feel self-conscious or uncomfortable because they do not have a good grip on the work, might also be black, female, poor or in the extended studies programme. This could possibly prevent students from feeling comfortable to ask questions, seek clarification or share their ideas”.

3. *Language*

“Some of the difficulties arise from not being able to interact with the philosophical concepts in the mother tongue of the student. This links into the ‘basic concept’ proposition and provides a reason for why the basics are missing; that it is difficult to grasp a new concept and debate and interrogate it within your system of beliefs when this task of understanding has to be done in your second or third language”.

What we did in weekly WIP tutorials

Generative, free writing played a big role. Students used this to write about basic concepts, about how concepts fit together, about other people's arguments and about how to structure a particular essay topic. Students found this very helpful because it showed what they knew and exactly where the gaps in the understanding lay. The WIP tutor found it useful because as she said, 'In a regular tutorial, if you explain anything and ask if the students understand, everyone invariably nods, even when you know it cannot possibly be true'. Free writing *straight after an explanation* allowed students to figure out what about an explanation they had internalised, how it fitted in with what they already knew and where the gaps still were, and allowed them to ask questions of clarification immediately, thus cementing their understanding there and then.

After some generative writing sessions, students would read their writing out loud. Sometimes the WIP coordinator and the tutor would comment on the use of language, sometimes they would comment on the line of argument, and sometimes they would invite the other students to comment on each other's work. This worked well and the students would have benefited from more of this had we had time.

One session of 'close text' reading of the prescribed reading for one week was also done. Students gained great insights into how the writer's use of language and linguistic resources constituted philosophical discourse and argument. The decision to do this was based on lecturers' directives to students generally that lectures and mainstream tutorials were important to attend for gaining an understanding of the basic concepts, but that writing should be modelled on prescribed readings. In future, much more of this is recommended to be done.

Response to 'propositions'

The intervention confirmed Propositions 1 and 2. The 3 (sometimes 4) students in the group said at the end that they do not want to look stupid in a tutorial, that sometimes they feel that their tutor will get impatient, that they feel that other students have a better grasp of the material and do not want to go back to the basics, that they do not want to hold the tut back etc. In the WIP tutorials, the tone was consistently friendly and informal, and the students seemed able to overcome some of the power dynamic barriers which they normally face in mainstream tutorials.

The WIP coordinator and the Philosophy tutor had a strong sense that all students left with a greater understanding of what it means for something to be a piece of 'philosophical writing'. They got insight into the rigours of the argumentative structure, and how to use different positions against one another. This created a much more holistic and integrated understanding of the course material. Three of the students also found a marked improvement in their writing style and in their grasp of the basic concepts.

It was not possible to confirm or disconfirm Proposition 3 because the class was so small and the three students who attended consistently did not share the same mother tongue. However, we did notice that the extreme semantic density of philosophy as an academic subject seems to act as a language barrier to everyone, including first language speakers. Trying to unpick the multiple strands of meaning in each sentence of philosophical writing, and simultaneously identify an argument, is like translating a different language. For this reason, it might be misguided to emphasise 'mother tongue' barriers to achievement, but rather to integrate more opportunities for all students to write relevant, shorter pieces, more regularly, that all in some way contribute to furthering their engagement with philosophical texts, argument and logic.