

Active Blended Learning at Scale: University–Wide Writing Programmes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter analyses the deployment of active and blended approaches to course design and teaching across one of the largest writing programmes in the British higher education sector. The programme, which teaches and assesses 12,000 students per academic year, adopts an entirely active and blended approach to all elements of its design. This chapter presents the pedagogical underpinnings to the programme, a case study of how the programme has been deployed, and discussion of some key challenges. The chapter establishes that active and blended learning approaches were central to the success of the programme, and that without such pedagogical designs the programme would have failed to meet its essential requirements.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant challenges facing modern universities lies in combining effective teaching of academic writing and realistic opportunity (Kolb et al., 2013) for students to develop their writing skills. Widening participation programmes, internationalisation of student cohorts, and the expansion of higher education have resulted in increased awareness of, and need for, universities to provide embedded development of writing skills: “there is an increasing understanding in [...] Anglophone countries that coordinated institution-wide approaches to the development of academic language and learning (ALL) are necessary” (Fenton-Smith et al., 2018). In the British context, discussion has noted that it was unlikely that a research-intensive institution would ever put in place a university-wide programme of student writing development (Wingate, 2006). The development of new pedagogies, based around online and blended learning, as well as increasingly common use of technology to promote active learn-

ing, has meant that the dire predictions of no British university adopting such large-scale programmes is no longer true (Boyle et al., 2019).

The changed market of Higher Education has pushed universities to work to enhance, promote and sell their graduates' attributes. At the same time, ongoing, perennial fears of "our students cannot write!" invades the popular narrative (Goldstein, 2017; Lynch, 2018; Young, 2019). These three factors combined have resulted in a growing awareness of, and need for, increased opportunity for students to improve, and reflect on, their academic writing as a key academic and graduate skill.

As a result of these pressures, one of the Scottish Ancient, Russell Group universities has adopted an institution-wide, compulsory writing programme that adopts an active blended pedagogical model. This programme runs as a compulsory element of every incoming undergraduate and postgraduate student's course, and students are enrolled onto the programme automatically. The programme has at its heart a number of crucial elements.

1. The programme must meet the requirements of active blended pedagogy in its provision in order to meet the requirements of learner development approaches/pedagogies, student needs, and course success.
2. Students must be actively engaged in their development of writing.
3. Students must receive meaningful, actionable feedback that allows them to enhance their writing.
4. The course must be compact in time in order to provide students with feedback before their first summative assessments.
5. The course must act as the first major point of contact between students and the institution, and must therefore provide students with a clear, coherent, justified rationale for the coursework.
6. The course should look to engage students in the process of studying - or, ideally, of life-long development of academic writing.

These requirements were no easy task, and the programme has undergone substantial development, enhancement and revisioning to allow it to meet these demands.

This chapter examines the implementation of this university-wide, large-scale writing development programme. The writing programme uses active blended learning to assess and develop over 12,000 students per academic year. Utilising active blended pedagogies and approaches, and with the promotion of ongoing engagement with the development of students' writing, the programme is a novel example of the use of learning technology, new approaches to assessment-at-scale, and the use of multiple learning spaces to best target provision towards student need.

The programme was initially developed as a way to improve retention within the arts and humanities. Largely based on face-to-face provision and small in scale, the programme targeted particular cohorts of 'at risk' students. In 2012, the programme was centralised into the university's Learning Development (LD) department. The department looked to expand, enhance, and embed the programme, and began the process of creating a truly active blended model that developed students' academic literacies. Since 2018, the programme has been a compulsory course for all incoming undergraduate and Masters students at the institution (roughly 12,000 students per academic year). The programme consists of active engagement with online materials and courses of study, the submission of (most) students' first piece of written work for assessment, and tailored, targeted, ongoing online, blended and face-to-face participation in active writing development (Drinkwater et al., 2014).

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