Academic Practice Workshop Feedback 2011 -2012: Alison Chisholm, SCLS.

Report to DVC

In the first few workshops I asked students to complete a paper feedback form at the end of the session, but this brought in little, if any, useful information, so, as time in the workshops is limited, I abandoned this. In place I do a much more 'focus group' style feedback and take note of any comments. This starts at the beginning of the workshop when I ask the students what they are expecting and what they hope to learn. At the end we discuss whether they felt I had been able to answer the questions raised at the start; whether they had learnt anything unexpected, but useful; and what they would have liked more of/ less of etc.

At the start I try to ascertain whether the students were surprised by the allegation of plagiarism – the majority are, as they thought their work had been ok, or were not aware of the need to have good academic practice. Some who are aware of the need for good practice often say they thought their work was OK, but could see after that it wasn't. Only a few students attending the workshop said they knew before submission that their work wasn't of the correct standard.

Most students do comment that they feel there should be more skills/writing development input in the schools – not just on 'how to reference/not plagiarise' but on the whole process of writing an assignment and trying to understand how the use of literature builds and support argument etc. One ex-ISC student on a workshop, who is typical of this group, commented that all through his foundation year he had been told not to plagiarise, how to paraphrase etc.- and had received penalties on his work as he found this difficult- said he was not taught why evidence is used to support argument and how key this is to academic study – the APW workshop starts by trying to get students to develop and understand this concept. So, I would suggest that, in some cases, how good academic practice is taught in schools needs to be reviewed and embedded within the subject teaching; students can find it difficult to make the link between the information given in a referencing handbook/guide – which is usually limited to the technicalities and any examples show just very short sections of writing - and how a whole essay/written assignment should use literature and how to clearly present and reference that usage. These concepts can be particularly difficult for some international students to grasp if they come from an academic culture where discussion, comparison of ideas, and developing an argument are not such a key aspect of their studies and assessments.

Although I have just said that for many students a guide to referencing is not always helpful on its own, many students have commented that their schools do not let them know which referencing system to use, or they are told it is their choice. In some cases when students have said this, I know that their schools do provide this information; indeed, some schools provide very extensive and clear writing guidelines. However, if the schools do provide this information and the students are missing it, I would suggest that it needs to be made more readily available – for example a web link could be provided for each assignment set ; for UG students the academic advisors could talk through this in an early meeting. My view is that all schools should be required to name and provide a guide for the referencing system(s) they wish students to use. However, I would also suggest that if a student already knows a system well, and the system is suitable for the subject area, they should

be allowed to use this system. Some students in the APW workshops have said they have got confused trying to change system when under time pressure to produce work. For students who have come from an academic culture in which they have never had to reference, being told which system to use is essential.

Most of the students I see are in their first year, but there is a concern raised by those who are in the second or 3rd year as to why the issues with their writing have not been flagged up before. My impression is that now the workshops are in place, tutors are more willing to refer students than under the previous system, but maybe knowledge of the APW system has, in some school, is extensive enough. I think there is, to some extent, still the view that as students write more, good academic practice will develop alongside – this is the case for the vast majority of students, but this is not the case for all students. We need to ensure they get the input needed as early as possible.

Students also comment that if they do have input on academic practice and referencing, but this only takes place once, and this is often during induction/ at the start of term. At this stage the students have too much input and their concerns lie else were. It seems that this input needs to be just before/run alongside the first assignment. This means the information would be fresh in the students' minds and it would also highlight the fact that good academic practice is part and parcel of the assignment writing process. The other issue with giving key information so early in the year is that any latecomers miss this essential input. Having said this, some schools , e.g. Law, have a very through and supportive system.

In terms of the workshops, student do comment that I have to use a standard referencing system to demonstrate (I use Harvard). The students who use MLA, London, or another footnoting system would like me to us their system but, as in any one workshop I always have a mix of subject areas, I cannot cover all systems. Not enough students are referred to allow me to put on referencing specific workshops.

The sections of the workshop where students frequently comment that they have learnt something new are:

- Establishing the link between good referencing and developing a strong argument.
- That 'better' academic writing is (when for a discursive essay) argument led and supported, but uses more than one source i.e. that the student needs to make links and identify differences in the arguments presented and place their own view within this.
- The fact that the meaning can change depending on where the reference details are placed – e.g. attributing information directly/indirectly to the author etc.
- That there is a difference between how long and short quotes should be presented.
- That there is a difference between primary and secondary sources and these should be presented differently.

My feedback on the workshops and assessments

- For many of the students who attend the workshops, the whole process of adapting to study at Sussex and /or in a UK academic culture has been difficult, and therefore for many a two-hour workshop does not provide sufficient time to develop good academic practice skills.

- For another group of students, time management and the ability to pay attention to details and follow instructions can be problematic: this may well have contributed to the misconduct allegation in the first place.
- However, there is not the funding to provide a series of workshops, and the students themselves might well say they do not have the time to attend more.
- The final group of students are those who are keen to 'get things right' and see the importance of accuracy in their work – for these students the two hours is sufficient.

After the workshop, the students are required to complete two assessments and demonstrate the following 'Can Do' statements:

	CanDo	Assessment Activity	Yes	No
1.	Can paraphrase effectively, using own language to express the ideas from a text	**Summary**		
2.	Can use any named referencing system to acknowledge sources when paraphrasing	**Summary**		
3	Can use any named referencing system to acknowledge sources when quoting verbatim (either short or a long quote)	**Summary**		
4	Can use any named referencing system to construct a bibliography/references correctly	**Summary**		
5.	Can recognise both' language based' and 'ideas based' plagiarism. From the Plagiarism Awareness Quiz. 10 questions, of which student must achieve 7/10		**7/10 needed**	

The assessments are:

- a plagiarism awareness quiz which is completed online and assesses the students' ability to recognise language- based or ideas- based plagiarism. Students are required to achieve 7/10
- (main assessment) to answer a question by writing a synthesised summary based on a reading pack containing three texts. This is submitted through 'grade mark', a system aligned to Turnitin. This allows any text- based plagiarism to be identified easily.

I mark all assessments and provide feedback to students. Should the assessment not make the required standard, I provide extensive feedback on the issues and the student can then re-submit their amended work. If I find the work is far from the required standard I will offer the student a one to one tutorial.

For the students who have time management/ attention to detail issues who do not make the required standard, I rarely arrange a tutorial. However, I do need to point out that I have clearly highlighted each issue, and provided checklists for them to follow.

The main issues with the assessments which do not meet the required standard are:

- Issues with accuracy of secondary citations, both in-text and in the bibliography.
- Issues with the detail of in-text references: first names rather than surnames, initials included, dates missing etc.
- Some language-based plagiarism

Last year I spent a great deal of time chasing students to complete the assessments, although we gave a two week deadline. I spent even more time chasing some students to make corrections and re-submit. To try and alleviate this problem, this year we will run an assessment session after each workshop. I will be available to answer questions and offer clarification should there be any questions. I am keen to make this process as efficient and beneficial as possible for the students and as efficient as possible to me. When the APW system was established, I was allocated the time to run 15 x 2-hour workshops per year and time to mark the assessments. But, due to the background of the students attending with workshop, and the need for some to resubmit assessments and attend tutorials, far more time is required – there is no funding for this extra time.

In order to gather some more systematic feedback, we have added a feedback form to the study direct site, and we will ask students to complete this when their assessments have met the required standard. We will also be sending out feedback forms to the students who attended workshops over the summer, the majority of whom will recently have received their MA/MSc results, to ascertain whether the APW workshop were of benefit at this final stage. There will always be students who find developing a good standard of academic practice a challenge, and support in the form of APWs and tutorial should always be available, but with continuing internationalization and widening participation, more skills teaching needs to be embedded into academic courses to ensure all students are given the opportunity to reach their full potential.

I have also attached:

- a document which contains feedback from students who have emailed me both during and after the APW workshop/assessment process.
- the PPT used in the workshop.

With reference to Clare Hardman's and Sara Dyer's emails about induction I would like to add:

In previous years when the international students arrived early I/SCLS staff spoke briefly at each of the inductions and highlighted the specific language/skills support available to students: UG, PG and V&E. In this week we also ran 3 or 4 one-hour sessions in which a we discussed different academic

cultures; highlighted some of the issues and looked at what is meant by academic misconduct etc. During these sessions we also re-explained the support available and how to access it.

This year, as induction was for all students together (UG), I felt that it would be inappropriate to highlight specific support for international students, so, after discussion with Clare, it was decided that she would do all the induction talks and in these sessions highlight that all students have differing needs and therefore there will be different channels of support/help depending on specific needs. This was not an easy task given the length of the sessions, but I think Clare did an excellent job.

In terms of disseminating information, Susan Blaylock contacts all school co-ordinators just after term has started and sends out posters, bookmarks and details of the Academic Development workshops we run throughout the term for international students. Susan also re-contacts schools just before the end of term departmental meeting with the same information. We could, if it was felt appropriate, add the information about the APW to this email, although I have in the past left this communication to the I/Os within the school.