Practice makes perfect: a WID approach for Human Resource Management Honours students at a South African university

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how postgraduate students should be taught to write in their discipline. This research explores how a research preparation module supported Human Resource Management Honours students to write their research reports at a South African university. The module incorporated a 'Writing in the Disciplines' (WID) approach, because students, who worked in groups, wrote a series of developmental assignments marked according to rubrics that made the conventions of the report explicit. Many of the developmental assignments were rewritten as components of the research report. In order to determine if rewriting the assignments improved the students' writing, the assignments from four groups were evaluated against the students' rubrics. The redrafted assignments met more of the criteria in the marking rubrics. Since all group members spoke English as an additional language, this approach might benefit postgraduate students in similar contexts. The findings suggest that academic staff who want to offer developmental assignments prior to the submission of a larger research text should ensure that students are supported in two ways. Firstly, the design of the assignments should provide students with the opportunity to practice writing all the components of the larger piece of research writing. Secondly, supervisors and academic literacies practitioners should collaborate more effectively so that they can use what they learn from each other to better support students to write for their disciplines.

Introduction

Generally, undergraduate students receive much more support regarding essay writing, and much less guidance on how to conduct and write research in their discipline (Jackson, Meyer & Parkinson 2006:262; Lombard & Kloppers 2015:1). This means that students who enter into an Honours degree may know how to reproduce existing knowledge in essay format, but might not know how to show that they have produced new knowledge in their discipline (Lander 2002; Jackson *et al*. 2006:263).

Due to financial constraints, many South Africa students are only able to enrol in an Honours degree some years or decades after their undergraduate graduation. These students may need additional support in order to reacquaint themselves with the ways in which knowledge is produced and valued in their disciplines.

Although Honours students may need additional support in order to produce research texts in particular disciplines, relatively little is known about how such students should be taught to write for their disciplines (Butler 2007:10; Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit 2010:261; Fergie, Beeke, McKenna & Creme 2011:237). This research contributes to the literature by examining how submitting components of an Honours research report multiple times during a research preparation module improved the final research report. The findings from this research could assist academic and support staff who want to develop a support module based on WID principles where students write preparatory assignments prior to the submission of the final research report, or minor dissertation.

The paper begins by presenting the central research question of this study, and explaining the different components of the research module. The literature review then discusses how Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and Genre Pedagogy can be used to develop students' research writing. An overview of how the research module was designed according to WID principles follows. The next section explains why this research made use of a case study research design, and how the students' assignments were collected and analysed. The main findings from this study are then presented. The study found that later drafts written by all four groups managed to meet more of the research criteria, but that some of the groups had used argument, language, and tone less effectively in their final research reports. Based on these findings, this paper suggests several ways in which WID modules could be improved in the future. The final section of the paper summarises the key findings.

Research Question

To what extent does writing developmental assignments, submitted as part of a research preparation module, according to pre-determined criteria, improve the final Honours research report?

Background

The 2007 Higher Education Qualification Framework stipulates that in order to meet the National Qualification Level 8 descriptors, Honours degrees should include a 30-credit research component (CHE 2011:18). To comply with these requirements, and to prepare students to enter into the Master's programme, from 2015 the Batchelor of Commerce (B. Com) Human Resource Management (HRM) Honours degree required students to conduct research and submit a research report. The degree ran over two years. During the first year of the degree, students completed a research preparation module that prepared them to submit their final research report. The cohort who registered for the degree in 2015 were the first cohort to complete the research module. This module was compulsory and carried the same amounts of credits as the other modules in the degree.

Students completed their research project and assignments in groups of three to five, reducing supervisor load and allowing more students to be admitted into the degree. The assignments were developmental as they allowed students to write components of the research report, which they could

then rewrite as part of the final report. Prior to the submission of several of the assignments, students attended Academic Literacies tutorials where they were shown how to read and reproduce written conventions present in research articles and past students' research reports. The tutors showed the students how the academic articles used six of Butler's (2007:34-40) seven criteria for academic writing, including structure and argument, appropriate use of evidence, conciseness, formality, nominalisation, and objectivity. According to Butler (2007:34-40), academic texts are both impersonal and objective, however, the tutors of the Academic Literacy tutorials chose not to focus on how academic writing is sometimes impersonal because some qualitative researchers write in the first person for persuasive effect, or clarification. Since there was insufficient time to help students improve their grammar, students were not shown how to improve their grammatical correctness – Butler's (2007:37) seventh criteria for academic writing.

I facilitated half of the tutorials in 2015 – the other half were facilitated by a Postgraduate Writing Fellow (PGWF) employed by the Writing Centre of the university – and all the tutorials in 2016. Before the tutorials in 2015, I would meet with the PGWF and show him how I planned to help students understand the genre of HRM articles and research reports. We would then discuss the proposed tutorial and adapt the lesson where possible so that any explanation or activities were more clearly focused on demonstrating to students how certain genre conventions operate. The PGWFs were PhD candidates trained by the Writing Centre to facilitate writing consultations with postgraduate students. During two full-day 'writing-retreat' workshops, each group discussed their writing with a PGWF before they submitted the proposal and research report. Academic staff in the department also reminded students several times over the course of the module to book additional consultations with the PGWFs.

Literature review

Writing in the Disciplines (WID) is an approach to the teaching of writing that centres on teaching students how to produce texts that meet the conventions of their discipline (Clarence 2012:134; Hathaway 2015:510-511). Teaching students how to write for their discipline is important, because the way in which disciplines value and share knowledge affects the way in which researchers write in the discipline. The WID approach argues that teaching students a set of generic writing tips, or strategies, will be less effective than a programme that considers the demands that different disciplines place upon their students. Thus, all WID proponents reject the proposition that literacy is a set of skills that can be learnt in one context and easily transferred to different contexts (Wingate 2006:464; Downs & Wardle 2007:554-555; Lillis & Tuck 2016:35).

Though there are many different ways of teaching students how to write for their disciplines, the module was informed by Genre Pedagogy and the concept of scaffolding. When tasks are scaffolded, students complete developmental tasks, which are smaller and less cognitively challenging, before they attempt to complete larger, more complex tasks (Wood, Bruner & Ross 1976:90; Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood & Padayachee 2007:444). Scaffolding has been used in the past to help students improve their academic reading and writing (Parkinson *et al*. 2007:459). Genre Pedagogy is an approach that stresses the importance of teaching students how the genre, or hidden conventions, work within the text (Hyland 2005:26). The rationale behind Genre Pedagogy is that once students

understand how texts are constructed they will be better equipped to produce similar texts (Hyland 2003:26).

In this module, two role players were responsible for providing students with feedback on their texts, supervisors and support staff. Research suggests that partnerships between supervisors as the Disciplinary Specialists (DSs), and support staff, who are Academic Literacy Practitioners (ALPs), is most fruitful when both parties learn from each other (Jacobs 2005:480; Jacobs 2007:874). Ideally, the DSs should teach the ALPs more about how the discipline operates so that their advice and feedback aligns with the conventions of the students' discipline (Jacobs 2005:480; Jacobs 2007:874). By inducting ALPs into the discipline, supervisors are once again able to 'see', in action, the meaning-making practices that they have long since internalised, and are in a better position to demonstrate how these practices operate in text (Jacobs 2005:478-479; Jacobs 2007:873-874). Partnerships between ALPs and DSs usually operate quite differently from the ideal stated above. Since some supervisors do not understand the contributions that ALPs can make, or resent their student receiving guidance from someone else, ALPs often act as editors or grammar teachers rather than as literacies experts (Jacobs 2007:877; Clarence 2012:129; Manathunga 2005).

Design of the module according to WID principles

The curriculum of the module was structured so that students completed a number of smaller assignments, which were components of the research report, before the final research report. Unlike most assignments, which are only submitted once, students submitted several assignments twice or thrice, and then included revised versions of these assignments in the research proposal and/or research report. For more information on the content of each assignment, including how the assignments differed for the 2015 and 2016 cohorts, see Appendix A. Prior to the submission of each assignment, students received a detailed rubric that clearly stated the key components to be included in the assignment. The supervisors graded each assignment according to this rubric.

The students' rubrics were tailored to the requirements of the discipline. Since many management-related fields, including Human Resource Management (HRM), value research with theoretical and practical implications, the rubric for the discussion chapter stressed that the findings should state how the study contributed to theory and practice (Goodier & Parkinson 2005). Students were expected to demonstrate that the research was relevant by presenting solutions to challenges faced by Human Resource Management practitioners in a particular industry, or set of industries.

Research Design and methodology

Since context affects the way in which postgraduate students write, this research acknowledges that the phenomenon in question needs to be interpreted within a particular context. Case study research, the chosen design, pays particular attention to understanding a phenomenon in context (Gillham 2000:11). Though the analysis of the assignments was the main data source in this research, additional insight into the students' context was gained through focus group discussions with students and interviews with their supervisors. The advantage of using multiple methods to gather data was that it allowed for a richer account of how the developmental assignments prepared the students to submit their research reports (Yin 2014:65).

Data collection

Data was collected once ethical permission for the study had been obtained from the Research Committee in the Faculty of Education at the university where the research was conducted. I conducted focus group interviews with 13 of the 14 students from the four groups, and individual interviews with their supervisors. The four groups had three supervisors, because two of the groups were supervised by the same supervisor. In total, I collected 36 of a possible 38 assignments from the four groups. For more information, see the table below:

Table 1: Assignments in the research preparation module

Assignment	Group
Substantiated problem statement	Group A, B, C and D (4)
Literature survey	Group A, B, C and D (4)
Research questions	Group A, C and D (3)
Literature review	Group A, B, C and D (4)
Concept research design	Group A, C and D (3)
Proposal	Group A, B, C and D (4)
Data collection*	Group C and D (2)
Results*	Group C and D (2)
Abstract, discussion, and conclusion*	Group C and D (2)
Research poster	Group A, B, C and D (4)
Research report	Group A, B, C and D (4)

* Groups A and B were not required to complete these assignments

Group A and B completed the module in 2015, and Group C and D completed the module in 2016. The data collection, results, abstract, discussion and conclusion assignments became part of the module in 2016. I analysed assignments from the cohorts who completed the module in 2015 and 2016 because I wanted to see if the additional assignments in 2016 had an effect on the students' writing.

Data analysis

In order to analyse the assignments, I developed a grid for each assignment based on the criteria outlined in the marking rubrics. I completed the grid by indicating when an assignment, and revised versions of the assignments included in the proposal and/or research report, had met or had failed to meet the criteria. An example grid is shown in Appendix B. Since students received the rubrics before each assignment, and their assignments were marked according to the criteria in the rubrics, this was a credible assessment of their written work.

I followed Trowler's (2016:27-36) three-step data analysis process to ensure that the findings would be more likely to be credible and trustworthy. The first step is becoming familiar with the data. I became familiar with the data when I evaluated the assignments according to the grid described above. The second step is the selection of the most important information. I selected the key information and used this information to write a summary of how the initial assignment of each group, and the rewritten versions, had met or failed to meet the criteria. I used this summary to compare

how much progress each group had made towards meeting the criteria in the rubrics. I also wrote a summary comparing the rewritten assignments from each group against Butler's (2007:34-40) seven criteria for academic writing (formality, conciseness and exactness, impersonality and objectivity, nominalisation, grammatical correctness, coherent and cohesive [logical] structure and argument, appropriate use of evidence). By comparing the progress of each group against these criteria, I gained additional insight into how each group had developed their writing over the course of the module. I then used these summaries, along with quotes from the original assignments, to structure a draft account of the findings.

The third step is checking the final data set for accuracy. I reviewed the information in the grid and the summary notes to ensure that all the important information was present in the draft version of the findings, and revised the findings accordingly. By following a well-structured process, which contains measures to increase credibility and trustworthiness, I could be more certain that the findings were accurate and complete.

Findings

Conceptualising the research problem

In 2016, students completed the literature survey before the problem statement assignment, whereas in 2015 students wrote the problem statement assignment first. After comparing the problem statement assignments against the marking criteria, it was clear that Group C and D, who completed the module in 2016, wrote better initial problem statements than the groups who completed the module in 2015. This result indicates that students were better able to complete a problem statement after reading through the literature.

While the initial problem statements of the two groups in 2016 were more precise, all four groups managed to write problem statements in the final research reports that met many of the criteria outlined in the rubric. The students in the four groups met these criteria by providing: the context of the research, evidence that research on the topic was lacking, and a statement about how this research would contribute to the 'knowledge gap'. These students were able to formulate their problem within a particular body of knowledge, a knowledge production practice that most postgraduate students find a challenge (Rinto, Bowles-Terry & Santos 2016:759). The final problem statement may have been so well substantiated, because each group submitted their problem statements three times: firstly, as an assignment, secondly, as part of the research proposal, and thirdly as part of the final research report.

While the revised problem statements generally met more of the criteria stated in the rubric, one aspect that two of the groups could have improved upon was the formulation of the research objectives. Both Group C and D mentioned that an objective of their research was to distribute questionnaires, and one of Group C's objectives was to conduct a literature review. Both groups failed to understand that distributing a questionnaire and completing a literature review help the researchers to meet their aims, but that these are not objectives, or aims, of the research.

Locating the study in a context

As postgraduate students must explain their research in relation to existing concepts and theories, the marking rubric for the literature review assignment stated that students should be able to discuss the key theories and concepts in the study (Davidson & Crateau 1998:252). Each of the four groups' initial literature review assignments explained prior theories and concepts in a superficial way. For instance, Group B's use of bullet points to explain key concepts meant that the literature review resembled a list instead of a discussion. Group A, B, and C's use of numerous and/or repetitive sub-headings meant that the structure of the literature review assignment did not show the reader how the chosen theories and concepts related to the present study.

The initial literature review indicated that the groups were unfamiliar with the literature on the topic, and had limited knowledge of how to write literature reviews. However, groups substantially revised their literature review assignment by:

1. removing theories and concepts that were not relevant to the study,
2. providing definitions, or clearer definitions, of key concepts,
3. revising the sequence of ideas – so that general information was presented before specific information, and
4. renaming unclear headings.

By redrafting the literature review chapter multiple times, the four groups were able to write literature review chapters in their research report that were structured more clearly and better explained the chosen concepts and theories. The quality of the final literature review chapter suggests that students can improve a literature review chapter if they receive structured feedback, via a marking rubric, on multiple drafts of the chapter.

Confusion around pre-writing tasks

Literature survey assignment

Students completed a literature survey assignment by reading journal articles and populating a table. An example of the table used to complete the assignment can be found below:

Table 2: Example of the Literature Survey Grid Headings

No.	Title of paper	Full reference	Problem *(Problem and list of key concepts investigated)	Context *(Definition of concepts & theories and arguments)	Methods	Findings *(Discussion, assumptions, and limitations)	Link to own research

* Criteria shown in brackets were added in 2016

Since many of the students had not previously read a journal article, or had read very few of them, the Academic Literacies tutors explained the journal article genre to the students. The articles used in the tutorials were from the HRM discipline, and had been recommended to the tutors by academic

staff from the department. Students later said that because their Academic Literacies tutor taught them to read an abstract to see if the article was relevant for their research, they were more likely to read pertinent articles, and that this had saved them time.

Students wrote the literature survey assignment so that they would have enough knowledge of the topic to write the literature review assignment in 2015 and the problem statement assignment in 2016. Students often completed the assignment by merely transferring whole sentences from the articles into the literature survey table. Since these sentences formed part of an article, the verbatim copying often failed to meet the assignment criteria outlined in the rubric. As students sometimes selected sentences from the article that did not relate well to the column heading, the information in the literature survey tables was rather disjointed at times.

Students may have failed to meet some of the criteria in the rubric because they did not have enough time to complete this assignment. In 2015, the students had two weeks to survey 30 articles, and in 2016, the students had three weeks to survey 20 articles. Students said that reading and summarising the articles in a few weeks was challenging for them. This task may have been especially challenging for students because they had recently begun the module, and were still unaccustomed to reading academic articles. Academically weaker groups, Group A in particular, struggled to read the articles at the level of understanding required.

Literature review questions

At the end of the literature review assignment, students were required to submit several questions that their literature review would address. These questions were part of the planning phase because they would help students focus their literature review, and should not have been included in the final research report. Group D did not seem to understand this exercise, and included two of these planning questions, which asked whether their two constructs were reliable, as research questions. The two questions were not true research questions as the group had already provided the answers to these questions in the literature review of their research report.

Effect of additional scaffolding in 2016

In 2016, Group C and D drafted two versions of the results chapter, discussion and conclusion chapter, and the abstract, whereas in 2015 Group A and B only submitted a final version of these two chapters and the abstract. This gave the groups in 2016 an advantage over the groups in 2015. This advantage could be one of the reasons why the groups in 2016 wrote abstracts, results chapters, and discussion and conclusion chapters that met more of the criteria in the rubrics than the groups in 2015. Compared to the groups who completed the module in 2015, the abstracts and final two chapters of the groups who completed the module in 2016 better explained how the findings contributed to the body of knowledge, and could assist HRM practitioners. In summary, without the additional opportunity to submit draft versions of the final chapters and abstracts, neither of the groups in 2015 managed to write the two chapters or abstracts in a way that fully explained the contributions of their studies.

Argumentation and language

By the end of the module, the groups whose supervisor paid more attention to the ways in which language creates meaning in text were better able to use language to create arguments in text than the groups whose supervisors focused more on content. The students in Group C (2016) felt that their supervisor was particularly focused on their writing: "He sort of focused more on the language and not necessarily the content." I found it interesting that this group was the only group to use certain features of metadiscourse effectively. Metadiscourse is any part of a text where the author does not deal with the subject matter and instead engages the reader directly by discussing the structure of the text, or his or her own position on the text (Crismore 1983:3; Hyland 2003:3-6).

One way in which researchers and postgraduate students try to encourage their readers to adopt a particular reading of the text is through the use of relational markers, such as the first person plural pronouns 'we' and 'us' (Akbras 2012:39; Lamberti 2013:115). Group C (2016) used the pronoun 'we' for persuasive effect in the final discussion and conclusion chapter of the research report. The group addressed the reader directly in the following sentence: "In conclusion of the results we can confidently accept all the research questions." The use of the word 'we' in this sentence made the group's argument more explicit for the reader, and directed the reader towards a particular reading of the text. None of the other three groups used relational markers to encourage their readers to adopt a particular stance in relation to the text. Group A and B may not have used relational markers as skilfully because their supervisor said that she did not "see" the language and found it easier to provide the students with feedback on the subject matter rather than on their language use.

Another aspect of metadiscourse is the use of tentative language, or hedges, and the use of words that convey certainty, called boosters (Lamberti 2013:37). In academic writing, an author builds trust with his or her readers by honestly telling them which findings he or she is more certain or less certain of (Lamberti 2013:158). Although all of the four groups used hedges and boosters to strengthen or weaken their knowledge claims, only three groups used these modifiers effectively. Group D (2016) used too many hedges throughout the research report, and particularly in the abstract, where the word 'may' was used seven times. The overuse of the word 'may', particularly in a quantitative research project, made the group seem uncertain about how credible these findings were.

Metadiscourse is only one feature of academic writing; other features of academic writing identified by Butler (2007:35) are conciseness and exactness. While the groups' ability to express their ideas more concisely and in more precise scientific language did improve, some of the words in the final research report were used incorrectly. For instance, Group D (2016) said that they had to test the '*portability*' of the questionnaires instead of their reliability and validity. All the students spoke English as an additional language, and during an Academic Literacies tutorial several of the students admitted that they wanted their texts to sound impressive.

Another marker of academic texts is tone, as academic texts are generally written in an "objective tone" (Canagarajah & Lee 2015:90). In the discussion and conclusion chapter, Group D (2016) strayed from the expected tone in the following sentence: "This is a stern warning to business [sic] that they should prevent psychological contract breach at all cost." The tone of the sentence makes Group D seem more like advocates than postgraduate students, because researchers generally do not use

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emotive language to argue their point. Instead, researchers urge the reader to adopt a particular position based on the evidence that they have found.

While the supervisor is most able to give students feedback on the subject matter, and how well their writing meets the expected criteria, students also received feedback from the Academic Literacies tutors and the Postgraduate Writing Fellows (PGWFs). The PGWFs, like many consultants working at Writing Centres, are trained to ask the students questions to help them reflect on their writing and decide for themselves what they should do to improve it (Leibowitz 2016:83). Past research has shown that postgraduate students often appreciate the perspectives that writing centre staff have to offer on written texts (Leibowitz 2016:89-90). However, in this study, students and supervisors felt that some of the feedback from the PGWFs did not align with the feedback given to the students by the supervisors. Students from Group D said that a PGWF had encouraged them to make changes to their research report that their supervisor felt went beyond the scope of an Honours-level research report. Other students from Group B, and the supervisor of Group C, said that a PGWF had provided the group with research design and methodology advice aligned to quantitative research that was incompatible with their qualitative research projects.

Though one of the PGWFs may have given Group C (2016) unsuitable advice on their methodology, the students from the group valued some of the other feedback that they had received from the PGWF: "I think we already realised what our problem was when we went to the Writing Centre. That's where they actually unpacked it and then it actually made sense." This was a very valuable contribution, because postgraduate students need to understand what they are researching to be able to argue why their research is needed and how their findings have contributed to the field.

Many of the students who appreciated the feedback from the PGWFs worked full-time and found that it was a struggle to arrange consultations with the PGWFs during office hours. Though several PGWFs offered feedback to students via email, the supervisor of Group C (2016) commented that the email feedback was "very generic". Email feedback was generated without the usual dialogue between the PGWF and the student, and it is possible that without this dialogue the feedback was less rich. Presently, part-time students at the university, who must already balance their work and studies, are further disadvantaged because they are unable to meet with writing consultants after hours.

Implications

The findings suggests that developmental assignments included in a research preparation module can help postgraduate students to acquire the academic literacies required to produce research writing that meets more of the stated criteria. Since these criteria were aligned to the expected conventions of a HRM research report, when students rewrote these assignments as chapters of the report, these chapters conformed more to the genre of a social sciences research report. The students indicated that they also benefited from the support tutorials, and input from both supervisors and Academic Literacy Practitioners (ALPs). Hence, supervisors who want their postgraduate students to submit developmental assignments prior to the submission of a larger research text may want to ensure that the assignment criteria adequately reflects the disciplinary conventions that students are expected to reproduce. Staff involved in the WID programme could also ensure that students are provided with

enough support in order to apply what they have learned while writing the developmental assignments to the larger research text.

While providing students with input from supervisors and ALPs can assist students with their writing (Leibowitz 2016:89-90), the students in this module found that advice from the ALPs did not always align with the feedback from their supervisor. This lack of alignment occurred because some of the ALPs did not understand the methods of inquiry valued in the discipline, and the requirements of an Honours-level research project. Support staff can provide better feedback to students if they understand what meaning-making practices postgraduate students are meant to acquire at a particular level within a specific discipline. Research has shown that supervisors can help ALPs to gain a better understanding of the discipline (Jacobs 2007:873). Supervisors can introduce ALPs to meaning-making practices valued in their disciplines through a combination of overt instruction and the induction into particular communities of practice. Writing centres and other spaces where ALPs operate from can also capacitate ALPs by teaching them how to align their feedback to practices in specific disciplines.

Supervisors as Disciplinary Specialists (DSs) can also learn a great deal from ALPs. For example, ALPs can help supervisors to articulate, first for themselves, and later on for their students, how language is used to convey meaning in their disciplines (Jacobs 2007:873). This can assist supervisors, like some of the supervisors in this module, to rediscover the conventions that they have internalised and to find ways of conveying these conventions to their students. The findings from this research suggest that metadiscourse is an area that ALPs could help supervisors to uncover for themselves and impart to their students.

One of the reasons why the supervisors and ALPs did not learn as much from each other as possible may have been because both parties failed to understand their roles in this partnership. ALPs and DSs who understand their roles would find it easier to work together more productively (Leibowitz 2013:36). However, the fact that ALPs often work with DSs informally and have less power and status in the university hierarchy makes it more difficult for them to ensure that their expertise is fully utilised (Leibowitz 2016:83; McKay & Simpson 2013:30). Leibowitz (2011:223-224) argues that institutions should formalise partnerships between ALPs and DSs. This approach may help ALPs and DSs to understand their roles better, but many DSs might still feel that ALPs who work with their postgraduate students are intruding into the private relationship between supervisors and their students (Manathunga 2005). Perhaps a combination of education on the role of the ALP for supervisors, and an exploration into ways of working for ALPs that are not as intrusive, would help supervisors to be more accepting of ALP input. By understanding their roles and how to interact with each other, ALPs and DSs in WID programmes will be better able to jointly develop the students' writing.

Neither the academic staff from the HRM department nor the support staff from the Writing Centre formally monitored how successful the input from supervisors and ALPs was. Without this research, neither party would have been able to say how much the module prepared students to submit their research reports. This suggests that research on WID programmes needs to be ongoing so that the writing support offered through these programmes can be improved. While the support offered to postgraduate students through WID programmes is important, postgraduate students must also be

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aided by their institutions to write in their disciplines. The focus of this particular university, like many others in South Africa, is to provide support to younger full-time students, which means that a range of support services that are offered mainly or exclusively during working hours (Walters 2006:86). This arrangement makes it difficult for part-time students who are working full-time to access important support services. In this study, students' access to Writing Centre staff was restricted. Better access to the PGWFs may have helped the students to acquire additional academic literacies that could have further improved their research reports. Staff who teach on WID programmes need to encourage university management to provide support services that are easily accessible for part-time students.

Conclusion

This research sought to discover how writing a series of developmental assignments supported HRM Honours students to submit their final research report. The findings from the study show that the opportunity to use supervisor feedback to redraft multiple versions of the same text, marked according to rubrics, helped a group of EAL Honours students to write their final research reports. The redrafted texts, which were written as chapters in the research report, generally became less verbose as ideas were expressed in simpler and shorter sentences. By redrafting the assignments according to marking rubrics with explicit criteria, students were able to write clearer and better-structured problem statements and literature review chapters in their final research reports. This finding supports previous research, which has found that scaffolded support helps students to improve their academic reading and writing (Parkinson *et al.* 2007:459). The improvement in the students' writing suggests that the time spent designing, teaching and providing feedback on developmental assignments as part of a WID programme for postgraduate students is worthwhile.

While the students' writing became clearer and met more of the criteria in the marking rubrics, some groups did not understand the purpose of the two pre-writing tasks, the literature survey and the literature review questions. One way of helping students to understand the purpose of these tasks would be to emphasise that writing is a process and that certain tasks are completed before any actual writing takes place (Murray 1972). Another reason why students may have been unable to read the literature in enough depth to create a summary of the literature surveyed was the amount of time allocated to the task. If students had more time to read these articles it is possible that they would have read them with more understanding and produced more comprehensive literature survey assignments.

Unlike the groups who completed the module in 2015, the groups in 2016 completed three additional assignments prior to the submission of the research report. Students completed these assignments as preparation before they wrote the final abstract, the results chapter, and the discussion and conclusion chapter of the research report. After analysing the assignments, it was clear that the abstract and final two chapters of the research reports submitted in 2016 met more of the criteria in the rubric than the comparative sections of the research reports submitted in 2015. Thus, WID programmes can support students to complete larger research texts by providing them with the opportunity to write assignments that prepare them to submit each subsection of the main text.

The group who learned to argue the most effectively had a supervisor who gave his students a great deal of feedback on how they could use language to express their ideas in writing. The fact that the

other groups did not learn to argue as effectively shows that this module may have relied too heavily on part-time tutors and PGWFs to provide the students with advice on how to write in the discipline. Since support staff are rarely experts in the discipline, supervisors are more able to teach students how to argue in the discipline. One way to give supervisors the tools to teach their students how to write in their discipline is to partner them with Academic Literacy Practitioners, or support staff who specialise in the field of academic literacies. An ALP can help supervisors draw on their tacit knowledge to rediscover how meaning is created in the discipline, and find ways to teach their students how to harness disciplinary conventions. This research suggests that one area that ALPs can help supervisors to clarify for their students is the use of metadiscourse, or the use of language for persuasive effect.

In summary, this study has found that writing developmental assignments, as part of a research preparation module, supported Human Resource Management Honours students to produce research reports that met more of the criteria in the marking rubric. Staff who design and teach on WID programmes could utilise the findings from this study by considering whether programmes that include developmental assignments offer postgraduate students sufficient support to write larger research texts. This study suggests that staff teaching on WID programmes need to ensure that each aspect of the main text is sufficiently scaffolded, and that students have enough time to complete each text. This study confirmed research by Jacobs (2005; 2007), which shows that when Academic Literacy Practitioners and Disciplinary Specialists learn from each other they are better able to support students to write in their discipline. These findings are particularly relevant for supervisors and support staff working with English-as-an-additional-language students conducting a limited-scope project, such as an Honours project, or a minor-dissertation Master's degree.

Limitations

I had planned to analyse assignments that had been written under the guidance of a single supervisor in both 2015 and 2016. Unfortunately, the person who supervised the two groups in 2015 did not lecture the students in 2016. This meant that I had to compare the assignments of groups who were supervised by different supervisors. The fact that the supervisors of the groups were different did add some interesting variety to the study. However, it was impossible to tell how much of the variation in the students' writing had occurred because the groups in 2015 and 2016 had been supervised differently. Future studies on similar phenomena should try to ensure that all the texts are produced under the direction of a single supervisor.

I did not collect the marked rubrics or the written feedback that supervisors gave to their students. It would have been interesting to note how the students had used their supervisor's feedback to rewrite a text. Of particular interest to me would be the possible reasons why supervisor feedback was misunderstood.

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Appendix A: Comparison of the assignments in 2015 and 2016

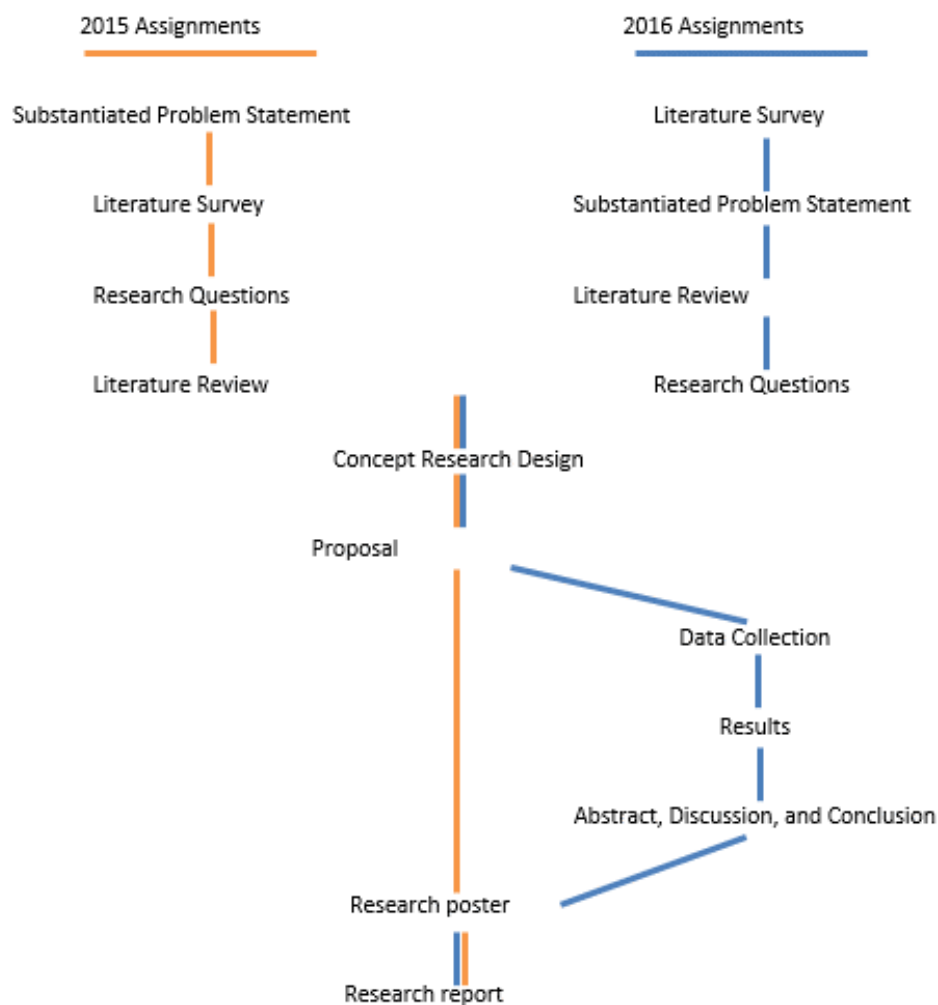| 2015 Assignments	2016 Assignments
Substantiated Problem Statement	Literature Survey
Literature Survey	Substantiated Problem Statement
Research Questions	Literature Review
Literature Review	Research Questions
Concept Research Design	
Proposal	Data Collection
	Results
	Abstract, Discussion, and Conclusion
Research poster	
Research report	

Figure 1: Comparison of the developmental assignments submitted in 2015 and 2016

The difference between the submitted assignments in 2015 and 2016 was that in 2016 students completed three additional assignments and submitted the first four assignments in a different order. Staff in the department made these changes to the curriculum, because they believed that they would better prepare students to submit their research reports.

Appendix B: Example of grid used to assess the students' assignments

Assignment: Substantiated Problem Statement					
2016 Criterion	An appropriate title is formulated	Proper introduction to the subject under investigation	Description of the context is clear	Clear evidence that research will lead to new knowledge	Evidence relevant to the problem is identified
2015 Criterion		Introduce the subject under investigation	Context clearly stated	Research problem is substantiated body of knowledge (gap in knowledge)	
Group A-Assignment	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Group A-Proposal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Group A-Research Report	No changes made				

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