Background

For the many international students who study at the college, writing well-structured argument in clear, accurate language that meets the expectations of an academic audience is a key challenge even to those with a good standard of English. Informal evidence as well as the findings of a recent report by the Royal Literary Fund also suggest that a number of home students face real difficulties in presenting ideas coherently on the page. With this in mind, the setting up of a corpus of example student writing is proposed. We see this corpus as an important way in which the university can make ‘the systems of belief, expectations and practices’ of an unfamiliar academic culture more visible, more explicit.

The Proposed Corpus

In order to provide a clear picture of ‘discipline-specific discourse communities and … their writing requirements’, this corpus will contain a range of example writing from across the curriculum at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and be made available to all RHUL students via the college VLE, Moodle. Example work will clarify issues related to e.g. text structure, argument, cohesion, language register as well as appropriate and effective use of supporting sources.

Resources permitting, each example of writing could be accompanied by:

- a short outline of what is expected in a given piece of work
- in-line comments about the writing from an academic tutor and/or EAP tutor
- a selection of linked interactive learning activities
- a personal reflection from the student writer on what they have learnt.

For a good example of what can be done through just such an approach, please see the ‘Language and Learning Online’ website at Monash University. This is a major project that received considerable funding, but the approach is very sound and could be achievable in a smaller scale project.

Possible Caveats

It is very unlikely that work from such a visible corpus will be plagiarised, but in order to deter those who are tempted, all work will be accompanied by relevant warnings. Another possible caveat is that example work will be treated in an unthinking way as ‘templates’ for particular assignments but this is also unlikely if the work is clearly contextualised and accompanied by material designed to provoke a critical understanding of the writing skill.

Benefits

The benefits of such a corpus are considerable.

*The corpus will provide example writing that is both authentic and relevant*

- The aspiring student writer can learn much from the published work of professional academics, but the ‘shape’ and scope of such work often differs from what is expected in student work. Students also look to models given in study skills textbooks but these can be inauthentic (written by textbook writers not students) or are designed to be broadly applicable across the curriculum and so fail to provide a clear idea of what is expected in particular disciplines. The corpus, on the other hand, will provide a body of work that most closely matches the writing requirements students are expected to meet, shedding light on particular genres in particular disciplines.
The corpus will make an excellent resource for independent learning

- Students will be able to access the corpus very easily at anytime on or off campus via Moodle. This increases students’ choices of place, time and style of learning support.

- For many hard-pressed members of the academic staff, there is not always time to address issues related to writing skills. As the corpus will provide important help in this area, students in need can be routinely referred to this resource.

The corpus will also make an excellent resource for the teacher of writing

- Such a rich vein of material can be readily exploited in courses which teach writing e.g. the Dissertation Writing for International Postgraduates course offered by the Language Centre. Analysis of example work can form the basis for guided exercises in a ‘blended’ learning environment, either in a suitably equipped classroom or as a follow-up activity after class.

For Discussion

First Steps

Would it be a good idea to pilot the creation of small corpus (just a handful of examples) with one or two willing departments where the need is greatest? If successful, the corpus could then be ‘rolled out’ across the college. Certainly, the development of the corpus could be staged in steps, starting with something fairly modest but achievable.

Project Management and Resources

Clearly such an undertaking, even if small-scale in the first instance, raises a number of questions. Who will manage the project? What is the involvement of the Language Centre, the Library and EDC? What resources are available to carry out such a project?

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