

From University Writing to Workplace Writing: The Case of Social Work Undergraduate Students at the University of Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study of social work students' initial experiences with professional writing at the workplace. The paper addresses the issue of academic writing with special attention to the types of documents written by social work students on their fieldwork placements using twelve students who volunteered to be interviewed. Their views are that their academic writing differs according to the preferences of their individual lecturers rather than the requirement of the work situation. We recommend that in these difficult times when graduates globally are faced with employability challenges, university writing courses be aligned to the demands of their prospective employer.

Keywords: *social work; employability, graduate attributes, professional writing, academic writing, feedback.*

1. INTRODUCTION

University education is challenged to equip graduates with employability attributes that suit the needs and expectations of the workplace. These attributes include both discipline-specific (e.g. social work) and generic (e.g. critical thinking, teamwork, time management) attributes, and universities are adjusting their teaching, learning, and assessment programmes to include matters pertaining to employability. Thus for example in 2008 the University of Botswana developed the Teaching and Learning Policy which articulated twelve graduate attributes which every programme of study had to incorporate in the teaching (University of Botswana, 2008). Consequently, a number of papers have been published focusing on the university's efforts in this regard. Kasule (2010), for example, developed a model for using the academic essay as a vehicle for developing employability attributes. More recently, a study by Moalosi, Oladiran and Uziak (2012) showed how project assignments developed employability attributes of engineering students. Brown (2012) investigated

first-year students' awareness of employability attributes. However, these studies do not tell us how students' initial workplace experiences actually benefit from such university courses. Using interviews, we investigate the initial workplace writing experiences of twelve BA (Social Work) students and the contribution of genre-based pedagogies to their professional writing development.

2. BACKGROUND

At the University of Botswana a core objective of the social work syllabus as expressed in the department's manual is to help students to 'be proficient in oral and *written communication with people in different contexts, communities and organisations*'. From May to September, second and third-year students are placed in different agencies in the country and assigned professional supervisors in the workplace. Thus students transit to the professional discourse community and enter the community of practice. Woodward-Kron (2004) refers to this type of learning as 'apprenticeship' which involves students working 'together with an experienced member of the discourse community in order to learn the specialist disciplinary ways of meaning' (p. 141). Apprentices are teamed with a supervisor who is a professional and usually a veteran worker (Paré, 2000) or, an 'old timer' (Lave & Wenger, 1999 p. 147).

For social work students, the transition from the lecture room to the field places many demands on students' writing. This happens because of two reasons. Firstly, a single text may be read and evaluated for academic and/or professional audiences, because it may serve both academic and professional purposes. Secondly, each day involves different writing tasks: they write their daily activities in the log books; they record each day's client in the case registers; and they write case reports and community project reports. At the end of their internship they submit a log book, a case study report and a community project report to the university's Department of Social Work. The case report, which forms the focus of this paper, is particularly important because in it, students make recommendations about clients. Even after the student has left, the reports continue to serve a professional role because, as Healy and Mulholland (2007) note, they 'provide an information base for social work intervention' (p. 69). Supervisors expect the students to use language that is appropriate to the professional community and ensure that students write effective workplace reports. Workplace writing differs from writing in the academic community students are coming from. Each community may criticize the text as not belonging to the genre they are interested in. This paper reports students' initial experiences with workplace writing in view of these demands.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The significance of effective writing in the lives of both social work professionals and clients is underpinned to the fact that when professionals clearly express their professional judgements, others can understand and implement them appropriately. Alter and Adkins (2001) say argue that understanding professional judgement is important in advocating for clients; in crafting appeals to foundations and governmental departments; and in writing successful funding proposals for appropriate programmes. These authors also caution that the lives of clients can be significantly diminished by social workers' inability to write well, or significantly enhanced by strong writing proficiency in social workers (p. 497). These observations also imply the need for social work students to undergo rigorous professional writing instruction as part of their training. Waller (2000) stresses the need for educators to recognize the importance of teaching writing both as a mode of learning and as an element of social work practice.

Despite this recognition of the need for writing instruction, there is a general concern that students in social work programmes are not being sufficiently prepared to write effectively. Writing about American students, Alter and Adkins (2001) admit that the most serious deficiency has been in students' declining ability to write. Horton and Diaz (2011) identified language issues such as problems with grammar, punctuation and usage errors in the writing of social work students who speak English as a second or third language such as those in this study; a problem which impairs the meaning of students' written communication. This concern with language issues is also raised by Engstrom, Min and Gamble (2009) who reviewed literature and found that very few studies address language issues in social work field education; and recommend that instruction should balance between highlighting the students' language strengths and socializing them into professional social work practice. To our knowledge, there are no previous studies in Botswana of what students who are recipients of genre-based pedagogies are saying about the contribution of these courses to their professional writing development.

Several studies (Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Dias & Paré 2000; Freedman, Adam & Smart, 1994; Adam, 2000) question students' ability to transfer university classroom genres to the workplace and so they doubt the value of professional communication classrooms. Freedman and Smart (1994) rightly argue that if it were not for immersion in school contexts, students would not acquire school genres and therefore 'it is only through immersion in workplace contexts that writers can develop the practical knowledge' (p. 222). Dias and Paré (2000) argue that 'school-based simulations, no matter how detailed, cannot replace the workplace context, because what is learned in context is the context' (p. 3). Such arguments regard fieldwork placements as vital training components that expose students to the real world of work. In business and education, Anson and Forsberg (1990) examined the transitions that writers

make from university to workplace and how they adapt to the new and unfamiliar professional culture and reported frustrations as students adapted to their new working communities. As newcomers to the workplace during fieldwork placements students learn the particular genres of that workplace through participation in its activities.

Studies have also identified a key challenge with teaching professional writing relating to the writer's intended audience and purpose for writing. In the university the intended audience is the students' lecturers who demand what they have taught students in order to assess learning. However, in the workplace both the audience and purpose for writing are very complex. As articulated by Alter and Adkins (2001), social workers' professional writing may be addressed to non-specific others and for a range of purposes. That is why there are several writers (e.g. Freedman & Smart, 1994; Nesi & Gardner, 2012; Adam, 2000) who insist that academic writing must remain distinct from workplace writing. Their argument for taking this position is that only situated learning, not simulations, can provide exposure to relevant contexts that enable learners to acquire the appropriate genres since texts in schools and work respond to and operate within quite different constraints. A further distinction is that, unlike workplace writing which is not based on prior utterances, university students write what they have learnt during lectures and discussions and refer to lecture notes and other text materials while writing. Students in workplace settings have to work out solutions of what they are writing about without assistance or reference to previous lectures. Workplace writing links policies and practices of the organization.

Where do the above arguments leave the need to prepare social science graduates for the workplace? Blakeslee (2001) and Schneider & Andre (2005) argue that universities play a significant role in helping students to acquire research and analytical skills they need to become better writers in the workplace. In a qualitative investigation on social worker students' writing, Rai (2004) identified three types of writing: essays, documents that students write during placement, and hybrid writing. The latter, like the internship reports, is the writing that draws together academic theories and reflections on their own practice. She concludes that for students to participate fully in both 'communities', it is crucial to access writing skills for both the university and the workplace. One way is by social work students tackling assignments that are provided by actual clients. If we accept Anson's (1998, p. 4) argument that all writing that is taught in the university is academic, whether the content is academic or professional, then the university teaching is capable of exposing social work students to the culture of the workplace and a chance to address different audiences because the academic and professional settings are similar on the textual level despite the different settings.

Graduate employability has stimulated genre-based pedagogies as a way to preparing graduates adequately. In that way students get to understand that people write to accomplish different purposes in different contexts. Many of the

studies (Hyland, 2003; and Paltridge, 2001) are grappling with how writing instruction can be made to contribute to students' smooth transition from university to the workplace. The outcome of all these studies has been mixed views about how students can be helped to write in ways that will prepare them for the professional field. The controversy identified in the studies is the extent to which it is possible to teach professional communication outside of the contexts in which it occurs; and particularly, the extent to which it is possible to teach it within the university. We investigate the workplace writing experiences of the recipients of genre-based pedagogies.

4. METHODOLOGY

Using interpretive research strategies we explore social work students' initial experiences of workplace writing during their fieldwork placement. The data came from 12 students who volunteered to be interviewed one by one. Five open-ended questions were prepared in a semi-structured format. The questions focused on (i) the pressure on students to start producing workplace reports (ii) the workplace guidance provided, if any (iii) the specific challenges faced in writing the reports (iv) what the content of the report should be, and (v) the in/adequacy of the support course offered by the university as a general education course. The semi-structured format enabled the use of probes, follow-ups and the flexibility to change the questions depending on how the interviewees responded to the questions. Participants were therefore allowed greater freedom to express themselves. The face-to-face interviews lasted between 20 and 25 minutes and were recorded on condition that pseudonyms were to be used when transcribed.

The interview sample fell into two groups: those who had worked as social workers before enrolling into the university degree programme and had taken the academic support course in their final year; and those enrolled into the programme straight after completing secondary school. The interviews yielded long extracts which were subjected to interpretive analysis. The main advantage of the interviews, as shown by earlier studies (e.g. Rai, 2004), was that they allowed participants' voices to be heard. A key component of interpretive research is establishing that participants' voices are heard clearly and reflect accurately the views they hold (James & Busher, 2006 p. 412). To deepen the understanding of students' fieldwork placement experiences, and to avoid misrepresenting what was said, we reported some of the responses verbatim as transcribed from electronic recording.

5. FINDINGS

To understand the strain interviewees endured with workplace writing, we sought to know if the transition from university to the workplace was abrupt or gradual. Interviewees indicated that two phases occurred in the first two weeks before they were expected to work independently and to produce reports. Students reported being phased-in by watching their supervisors and before doing the work on their own as full-time social workers. These sample responses from Derby, Kelly, and Lucky (not the real names; and all the other names that appear later in the paper) sum up the phasing-in processes students received:

Derby: At first, during the orientation week, the first week at our fieldwork practice, we work with our supervisors like how do they do it. From there the other weeks, I have to do it on my own without anybody's help.

Kelly: Yeah. We were assisted, we had like our supervisor. Most of the time she is the one who helped us but we did most of the work. What we did was just to ask for assistance where we were stuck.

Lucky: The first time, I went with my supervisor, she was the one who showed me how to do it and then the other times I went with her but she was....maybe if it's there are homesteads, she was in one homestead and I was in another home. So I learnt from her the first time and later on I did it on my own.

Similar phasing-in periods were also reported by Freedman and Adam (cited in Paré, 2000). We wanted to know if this phasing-in process extended to the writing and found evidence that after students attend to cases on their own they have to work collaboratively with their fieldwork supervisors who will work on the case reports with the students and show them how they are written. For example, Vero reports that:

Vero: I report back to my supervisor, we had some supervisors we were assigned to. So whenever I have a case, I have to report back to her and I have done. Then looks at my report, what I have written.

Other students also confirmed that they each write a report that is seen by their fieldwork supervisors but also that their lecturers have to approve it. The report produced at this stage is a unique genre which bears hallmarks of university writing and workplace writing. Such a report is what Spafford et al (2006) describe as a hybrid genre which 'operates as both a school genre and a workplace genre' (p. 122) and that these apprenticeship genres are not easy to write and are 'not without some unintended consequences' (p. 122). It was clear from the above responses that the students had not been shown how to write the workplace reports but were learning to gradually write them in the course of the

internship. And since the hosting institution did not have a stipulated format on how to report cases, the students were challenged as Dolly admits:

Dolly: Sometimes it's very difficult to write a report if you haven't... like in school we were not taught to write those kinds of reports that we encountered in the field...

To understand the students' specific writing challenges, we asked the interviewees what information is included in a case report. We present two responses from Derby and Tracy that articulated the challenge this way:

Derby: Writing during internship? It was hard because we came with the way we know we should write but with the practitioners it was a different issue so they will tell you. "I have been in practice for so many years and this is how we are writing things" and then you say, "No this has to be included" "You are too young to correct me, to tell me what to do". It was hard but because we know we wanted marks we have to write the way we have to write. So we have to like produce 2 different things, the one for marking and then the one that has to be kept in the office. The one they want at the practitioners and the one the lecturers wanted it.

Tracy: If it's a lecturer who emphasizes on theories, they will tell you to explain the client's situation using a theory. So if it's somebody who doesn't teach theories or he is teaching social policy they would say if you are using a destitute policy, assess that policy and see if the client really is supposed to benefit from that theory.

Like these two responses, many of the other responses received seemed to suggest that students did not have a clear idea of what to include or emphasize in the report. There were some who said that they were guided by what other students in the past had done so as to avoid unintended consequences arising from writing an inadequate case report. Many responses mentioned personal details of the client as essential contents of case reports. Four students said that in a case report it is important to mention the intervention and what you did to intervene, but the majority of students were more inclined to go by what their lecturers told them to do, saying the content of the report depends on the interest of their academic supervisors.

However, the dilemma for the students seems to be that writing for the lecturer in mind is unlikely to satisfy the workplace supervisor because reliance on such classroom guidelines may clearly not be sufficient to produce a comprehensible report. Ames (1999) reported a reverse situation where there is no classroom introduction to recording, leaving students to adopt only the style of recording they learn in field placement; and rightly noted that this too may or may not be sufficient throughout their careers (p. 233). In the current study, Derby's response indicates that she had to strike a compromise by producing two different sets of reports – one for the workplace and another for the

university instead of producing a hybrid genre. Freedman and Adam (2000) state that ‘when students leave the university to enter the workplace, they not only need to learn new genres of discourse, they need to learn new ways to learn such genres’ (p. 56). The big dilemma is that Derby left the university expecting to write the classroom genres practiced but they were resisted by the professionals in the workplace. While Derby wants a future job as a social worker, she must first do what her lecturers taught her, get good grades at university and pass. This situation is also captured by Dannels (2000) who noted that ‘students’ communicative practices, audiences and objectives were fundamentally tied to the academic context even though they were explicitly connected with a real client in the workplace context’ (p. 10). While they have to transform in order to learn how professionals write in the field, their academic supervisors expect them to write in a certain way. So as not to disappoint either audience, they produce duplicate reports to achieve two communicative purposes, one being to advocate for clients and the other being to pass and get good grades. Derby’s experience is confirmed elsewhere by Schneider and Andre (2005) who also report that their sample reported ‘feeling frustrated when they entered the workplace without basic knowledge about how to structure and compose letters, memos, feature articles, survey research reports and software manuals’ (p. 210). Here is Kelly’s admission that as social work students they did not know how to write the case reports they were expected to write saying:

Kelly: Yes. Sometimes it’s very difficult to write a report if you haven’t... like in school we were not taught how to write those kinds of reports that we encountered in the field. So sometimes it’s very difficult to write something that you have got no clue about. You don’t know which sequence to follow and sometimes you might find that if you have written a report and then the panel may feel that your report is just too shallow; it doesn’t include some of the things.

Ames (1999) conveys the feeling of an outsider to the profession when students’ writing is not embraced: ‘if students encounter recording for the first time during field placement, they may not see the larger connection with the profession’s values and practices... they may also fail to see how recording links practice, theory and policy’ (p. 233). In our case students had to write two genres to please both parties, while in Dannels (2000) ‘the students chose to act in ways that grounded them more explicitly with the academic context...’ (p. 10).

We finally wanted to know what students thought about the adequacy of the university writing support course (coded GEC 111 in the university timetable) in assisting them overcome these challenges with writing specific workplace reports. The two responses below express the negative attitude of many first-year students towards support courses such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (see Fandrych, 2003).

Linda Sometimes I feel that as we are taught GEC it is a General Education Course in which a student from science, law or a different

department can do this [i.e. take the course] but sometimes I feel that for us social workers it is irrelevant because the material you find in there is too much grammar, the coherence of paragraphs, sentences and how to write introductions, conclusions. Most of the time it is different from what we are doing in the field (social work).

Kelly: I don't think so because most of the reports that we write in the field we were not taught in GEC.

Similarly four other interviewees indicated that the course was irrelevant. Two of them attributed this to the fact that they did not take the course seriously as they felt that it had no relevance to their needs as first year university students, and that they thought it was meant to teach them how to write correct English which is not what they do in their fieldwork. These interviewees, therefore, felt that they only learnt to write workplace documents for the first time during their fieldwork placement while their lecturers wanted them to write different things in their reports.

However, there were interviewees who expressed very positive views about the course. They reported that it had changed them from writing subjectively to writing objectively and also helped them to be more formal than before. Below are two interviewees who claim that the course met their specific needs in report writing and presentation skills:

Shato: I think I will produce reports that are of good quality in the field.

Ken: I believe this GEC112, it would really help. If I were to give an example, I've noticed that most of the time when we write our reports, we tend to be long and include a lot of things that at times, a reader may not really get what you are trying to present. But from the course, issues of like clarity and writing to be precise and to be clear, I believe that it would help, because generally people say social workers' reports are very long and ...yes. Although it may be our profession that dictates that we should write such long reports, it's also vital that we need to be clear.

We note that Shato and Kelly belong to the group that comprised of students who were older in age, and had prior work experience. Due to this they were able to relate well what they were learning to the demands of the workplace. So when asked how the course can be improved, they suggested that input from the department of social work was needed so that the course specifically addresses relevant professional writing skills including the types of reports that are written in the social work. These two responses are typically representative of this view:

Linda: I think the GEC department can collaborate with the social work department and then they look at the kind of reports that the social workers are working on, and the kind of reports the students are working

on. Maybe the GEC department could derive their syllabus looking on how the social workers write their reports.

Rose: In terms of social work reports? What I can recommend is that there should be some social work, maybe someone who is hired in the CSSU department who deals with the department of social work so that they teach social work students how to even write their assignments; like they focus on social work students, assignments and then the fieldwork reports that we had to produce. Because if you are focused on one area, you will be able to do it effectively unlike when you take students from different departments, but if you specialize in one area, you will be able to have more impact on the students that you will be working with.

As indicated above, opinion was thus sharply divided between those who took the support course in first year and those who took it in fourth year. However, all the respondents alluded to the mismatch between the linguistic demands of the workplace and the specific content of the university support course in which, according to one interviewee, *'there is too much grammar [English], the coherence of paragraphs, sentences and how to write introductions, conclusions'*.

In studies that employ self-report techniques such as this one, information is given voluntarily and can be quite surprising but pertinent. For instance, students introduced to the interview the debilitating circumstances of language: in the workplace they had to speak Setswana with the clients yet they had to write the reports in English. Having to write in English, frequently caused difficulties in translating specific terms from Setswana, and as shown in the response below, the author doubts if a report written in English accurately represented what was heard in Setswana:

Otis: At times it's hard to put the client's words that were said in Setswana into English, more so that when a person expresses himself or herself in Setswana, **ke gore** [that is] the expression **hela** [only], it differs from how I put it in English. The meaning of the expression becomes heavier when she expresses himself or herself in Setswana unlike when I put it to express it to the other third person who is going to read the report.

Notice also how this particular interviewee mixes bits of Setswana into English as an indication of the speaker's struggle to be clearly understood. This is more noticeable in the next respondent on the same subject of translation:

Faith: Yes, even translating. **Kana gongwe** [may be] I might take it literal but not meaning that the language is literal to the person. **Ga ke itse gore nka go raya ke reng** [I don't know how to explain it] When I try to explain words to a Motswana, at times I need to look for words that are polite but whereas the words need to be sensitive.

These responses show some of the translation challenges that novice social workers face in the field of work. Such language issues continue to challenge different professional practice in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa in ways too diverse to adequately cover in this paper. Suffice it to say that these students are pointing to a need for a writing course that would adequately equip them for the specific language demands for social workers in environments where translation is impossible to avoid.

Apart from language issues the students reported problems with judging the adequacy of the information to include in the report. Some admitted to having insufficiently reported information collected from the clients; or missed important concepts that had to be included conveyed in reports during assessment. And at such times, the students felt professionally uncomfortable that their omission of vital detail might negatively affect the client.

Kelly: At times you find that when you write a report you might not understand certain concepts that you are to follow in this report and sometimes you may miss some things you have to include in the report during assessment.

Another pertinent issue raised by the interviewees is the practice of submitting only one final draft of the report, referred to in writing research and instruction as the product approach to writing. Usually that single terminal submission is expected to be as error-free as possible for it to score well. Students lamented the lack of teacher feedback on the reports which ought to develop their writing. It also cast writing as a once-off endeavour with no chance to improve if errors of any kind were found by the lecturer after submission. Instead, they are only given grades without reference to the workplace writings they had produced. In the opinion of the respondent below, the problem of poorly written reports is a cycle year after year

Kelly: For the department, it's just for them to grade us on how we did during our fieldwork. Apart from that I don't think it serves anything because each and every time that the students go to fieldwork, they experience the same problems. You find that we; our group would ask the previous group what they did and the previous one they will ask us what we did but if the department had done something or they have seen that something is wrong when they marked our reports, they could have done something for the other group to improve. I don't think they are doing anything with the reports or reviewing them or doing something.

Their feelings about what they see as a problem overlooked by their lecturers are summed up in the question below:

Bessie: Writing this reports and logbooks, what purpose do these reports serve for the department?

The effect of teacher feedback on students' writing has received extensive investigation (Ferris, 1999; Guenette, 2007; Hedgecock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Ibrahim, 2002; Lee, 2008) but without providing a conclusive answer on the question whether teacher's error-feedback makes a difference to students' writing; and for the past fifteen years or so the controversy has been characterized as the Truscott–Ferris debate (see Truscot, 1999; Ferris, 1999). However, for this study, participants seem to feel that feedback is needed to improve their confidence in what they write in the reports. Williams (2003) reported that feedback is effective when it is coupled with individual conferencing to explain the teacher's feedback to each student. Such conferencing is possible during fieldwork placement visits by lecturers.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has shown that transition from university writing to workplace writing is not easy for social work students. The students cope by writing two reports, one for each discourse community they participate in. They also preferred a situation where academics graded the reports consistently as demanded by the workplace. Based on the above findings, we recommend that university programmes offering language support courses, such as those offered by our university's Communication and Study Skills Unit, collaborate with departments so as to develop graduates competent in appropriate workplace writing. This recommendation is based on responses from some students that indicated that currently the language support course is not teaching them reports that they actually write during their internship placements. We also propose that a course in translation would be very ideal for all social work students. Lastly, we note the adequacy of fieldwork placement as a way for social work students to interact with real workplace situations where they meet real clients. Under such conditions, students rightly felt that they should be taught to write professionally and receive feedback before they actually leave the university. We are confident that doing so would equip social work graduates with that important employability attribute of report writing.

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