Four activities to promote student engagement with referencing skills

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Teaching academic writing skills in a way that engages students in deep learning is difficult and there is a risk of encouraging surface learning approaches. Moreover, linking the experience of the research process to understanding the provenance of research studies is difficult for students as they tend to experience research, referencing, citing, and related areas in disparate and unconnected ways. We report our initial experiences of designing a series of four mutually supportive tutorial activities that are based on the principles of scaffolding, social interaction, and experiential learning. The aim was to help students identify suitable research material that could be used as evidence in assignments and to promote their understanding of how evidence can be used effectively, through referencing, when writing reports and essays
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ACADEMIC WRITING is a study skill that first-year students often find difficult to develop yet is critical to their ability to achieve a comprehensive understanding of their field during their time in higher education. Amongst these skills, the very precise way that academics expect students to cite and reference other authors' material is often new territory (Brown et al., 2008). Typically students receive direct instruction about these requirements or guidance is provided as written material. Both methods risk promoting a surface level of engagement with citation and referencing issues if their learning is not supported by opportunities for structured discussion. This paper explores the potential for small group teaching, with social interaction in mind, to facilitate academic skill development in students and uses the teaching of referencing skills as a case study to illustrate the typical learning and teaching difficulties encountered. Moreover we suggest a series of activities, drawn from a first year tutorial module, that aim to encourage greater engagement with the subject.

It is our contention that teaching the underpinning principles and relevance of referencing will promote deeper understanding. The intention is to provide a scaffold (Bruner, 1977) for students to organise the new information they encounter about referencing that is subsequently provided in handbooks, online, or as part of other modules. In consideration of this approach a series of tutorial activities were designed to discuss the nature of sources and to explore how primary and secondary sources are created. These activities encouraged students to explore the issues surrounding referencing so that they would know when to use conventions such as 'cited in', why primary sources are important, and how references are structured.

The issues surrounding teaching referencing

Teaching undergraduate students how to reference can be relatively time intensive, it is not always successful, and it is difficult to find ways of making the subject engaging. Students arrive with less understanding of the principles of referencing than we often anticipate. In the study carried out by Brown et al. (2008), their survey of first-year students at a UK university found three-quarters reported no prior experience of being taught about referencing. Typically, students are expected to follow very specific referencing conventions from early assignments

and yet translating the rules of referencing from the guidance provided by staff to an essay can be difficult. Kendall (2005) found errors in almost two-thirds of book references in an analysis of undergraduate assignments. Given the difficulties students experience around referencing, Hartley (2009) proposed leaving the specific conventions of referencing to modules in the second year and to focus on academic writing more generally in the first year. However, early assessments provide the foundation for work in later years and so ensuring that these concepts are embedded early can then help with refining citation and referencing skills over time.

One possibility is to provide interactive online materials. Mages and Garson (2010) found general support and, in their evaluation, positive feedback for their online approach tailored to postgraduate courses. Kendall (2005) also found her online virtual learning environment tutorial for undergraduates and postgraduates gained positive responses from students. However, there are limitations to providing only online or e-learning approaches. Brown et al. (2008) cautioned against relying solely on online support outside of taught sessions. They found limited uptake of their referencing and plagiarism support materials that were designed for undergraduates. Limited uptake was also a problem in Kendall's (2005) study. With regard to direct instruction, Froese et al. (1995) focused specifically on secondary referencing and ran a session with 27 students that involved an instructor-led presentation and class activities that were focused on identifying errors and exploring the implications of mistakes in interpreting materials when relying only on secondary references. Compared with a group who had not taken part, the researchers found improvements in the way the students used referencing conventions correctly. Another option is to promote the use of reference management software. Although this can help with the layout of a reference, in our experiences as tutors it has been the broader concepts of referencing that are difficult for students to understand.

An alternative approach is to consider referencing from the point of view of an author writing a research paper and use this experience as a platform for small group discussion with students about the concepts that underpin referencing. First-year student work rarely generates a reference, in that it does not tend to get published, instead students tend to receive references that they then incorporate into their own work. The idea was to devise the experience of having work 'published' but for this to take place within the timescale of a tutorial instead of months or years as typically happens with journal articles. As first-year students also tend to work with textbooks, the tutorial activity also included the production of a textbook, or at least part of the textbook with the work the student had published. Moreover, the role of textbooks can then be discussed in a different way. For example, tutors are then able to discuss how primary accounts of phenomena tend to be written as reports and these accounts are summarised in textbooks as secondary sources that offer an introduction to a topic area. By designing activities that encourage depth of learning about the concepts of referencing instead of surface learning about the layout of a reference, we aimed to encourage students to employ citations and references in a more thoughtful way when completing subsequent assignments.

A social-interactive approach to learning about references

One of the modules we run for first-year combined honours students in the Division of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University, Introduction to Psychology, has weekly one-hour tutorials with a student to staff ratio of around seven-to-one. The tutorials have a role in providing academic skills support and it was during these tutorials that the referencing activities were run. The assessments for the module include three graded essays, with feedback from tutors,

and so students have the opportunity to practice referencing. In addition to the tutorials, the module also has lectures that cover a range of topics including biological, cognitive, developmental, and social psychology. This mixture of lectures and tutorials is part of a view that when students learn academic skills alongside learning content both will become better integrated and embedded (Biggs, 1996).

A tutorial programme offers an opportunity for the expression and exchange of ideas. This builds on the idea that individuals learn best when they interact with other people: 'Small-group teaching can provide excellent opportunities for participants to… come to grips with their subject and learn actively.' (Race, 2006, p.138). Vygotsky (1978) theorised that attempting to solve a problem in a socially interactive way helps both parties to learn as the more able person clarifies their ideas when they explain them to help someone else. He envisaged social and cognitive development forming and working together (Pound, 2005). 'In our view, internalization is simultaneously an individual and a social process. In working with, through, and beyond what they have appropriated in social participation and then internalized, individuals co-construct new knowledge.' (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p.197).

Although staff and student feedback about tutorials has generally been positive, the teaching team often return to the challenge of how to teach referencing. From our observations of running tutorials in past years, there is a tendency for students to continue to make citation and referencing errors in the final essay of their first year. These errors are despite tutorial time being given over to addressing how references should be structured. With the tutorial team's experiences in mind, we devised a new series of activities that were centred on discussing how to evaluate different sources and the concepts around citation and referencing first, and then we introduced referencing conventions.

Activities

Several activities were designed to run as part of the regular series of tutorials, sometimes the activities formed part of the tutorial and in other cases they formed most of the tutorial. Underpinning the design of these activities were four principles. That the activities would scaffold to organise students' learning, be about the concepts as well as the conventions around sources and referencing, be engaging, and offer a platform for informed discussion between the students and the tutor.

In an initial tutorial we highlighted the importance of identifying and reading appropriate sources, particularly in relation to what would constitute appropriate evidence in psychology assessments at higher education level. In preparation for the next tutorial, students were asked to bring in several examples of written material from newspapers or magazines. In the following tutorial the students shared these articles and they were directed to consider the strength of the evidence for each assertion made by the writers. Following this discussion about evidence, tutors were directed to discuss how evidence was recorded. This discussion served two purposes, the first was to encourage students to explore how to report where information had come from in their own assessments, by contrasting how student essays are expected to cite and reference information with the way newspapers and magazines report sources. Secondly, to introduce peer-reviewed journal articles. These articles being offered as a potential form of evidence that was more appropriate to assessments for psychology in higher education. Students have often informed tutors that peer-reviewed journals are not a form of publication that they have encountered before attending university. With this in mind, the peer-review process was briefly explained to students in order to explain the difference between the process of publishing a journal article and the process that might have taken place to publish other forms of written work.

The second activity integrated the ideas about tracking sources, considering evidence, and the peer review process. The aim was to carry out and report research during the tutorial itself. So that the research could be carried out quickly, we invented 'Objectology', a field about reporting the characteristics of an object that was unfamiliar and difficult to name. The object we used was a blue, squeezy, children's toy that was hidden in a bag. A student volunteered to be the researcher who was engaged in this field and could conduct the original research study by looking at the object in the bag. This researcher was the only person to have direct experience of the object, all other students would have to rely on the researcher's account. They were asked to provide a brief description of the object and these were the researcher's findings. This account, a few key words written on a sheet of flipchart paper, was then 'published' in the 'Journal of Objectology' and the students constructed the reference, thst is, author's name, a year, a title, a volume, an issue number, and a page number. A second student volunteered to be a textbook writer who would be looking to include this recently published article. This also allowed the tutor to discuss issues around direct quotations and paraphrasing. The tutorial group were asked how the textbook writer would cite and reference this article. This was discussed briefly and the 'textbook' was given an author (the student's name), a title, a year, a publisher, and a publisher's location. This information was recorded on a second sheet of flipchart paper. The final student volunteer played the role of a student of 'Objectology' who needed to write an essay. From this point the tutor engaged the tutorial group in a discussion about what reference and citation a student would use if they had studied the journal article compared with if they had studied the textbook. The issue of the reliability of sources was also revisited as students were aware that there could have been changes in the information from the original source. When the object was revealed students saw that the textbook summary differed and was often a distortion of the original observation. This offered an opportunity for the tutor to discuss what advantages there were in consulting primary sources and some of the disadvantages of exclusively relying on textbook material. Moreover, the activity allowed the tutor to highlight several key points related to both research and reporting sources. The first was the distance from the essay written by the student of 'Objectology' to the initial research carried out. The second was that most researchers only have access to first-hand accounts of phenomena that are being studied. This also meant that the tutor could link the experiences the students had in the tutorial to examples of where the students themselves were in the role of a researcher producing first-hand accounts, in the context of the module this was with reference to a research methods module that ran in parallel. Finally, the activity offered an opportunity to discuss the principle behind secondary referencing. The tutor was able to demonstrate how a student writing the essay who only had access to the textbook as required to cite the journal article in a different way compared to an author who had read the original paper.

With the concept of referencing research papers and textbooks established, a third activity, on a later week, revisited the task of referencing conventions. The aim was to engage students in both the way in which references are constructed and to explore what happens when information is missing from a reference. We produced correctly formatted reference examples, in large print, on an A3 sheet with the substantive text of the reference missing but the punctuation in the correct places. This produced a form of referencing frame. There were different frames for a range of references such as books, journal articles, and presentations. The author names, article titles, journal titles, volumes and issues, and page numbers were cut up and provided in a separate pile. Students, as groups, filled the templates with the correct information.

In order to complete the task they needed to work out which parts of the references would relate to a book and which to a journal article by paying attention to aspects such as the use of italics.

The fourth activity in the series involved students practicing writing different reference examples as a way of consolidating the previous three activities.

Reflection

The activities were embedded as part of the tutorials that ran through the first year and so no formal evaluation of these specific activities took place. However, students were surveyed about their experiences of the module as a whole. In this survey, some questions were devoted to asking students about the tutorials.

Overall, the tutorials were seen in a very positive light with 78 per cent of students agreeing with the statement 'Tutorials helped me develop my essay writing and presentation skills' and 81 per cent agreeing with 'Tutorials have given me a clear idea of what is expected of my written work at University'. In the end of module qualitative feedback, several students commented that they both enjoyed and were helped by this approach to teaching referencing: 'Particularly enjoyed activities such as describing what was in the bag to help with paraphrasing and looking at newspaper articles such as gossip columns to help with critical writing'; 'Referencing was the strangest thing I had to learn as I never did it at A-levels'; 'I have enjoyed my tutorial sessions greatly and feel I have learnt both useful academic skills but have been pleasantly surprised that the material has been of such an engaging, interesting nature'. Discussions with the tutors who took part in these new tutorial activities indicated that they felt that the quality of referencing and the way in which students had discussed referencing and evidence was more sophisticated than in previous years and tutors were keen to embed and develop these tutorials.

These tutorial activities might offer a way of addressing Hartley's (2009) concern about how to discuss referencing early in a student's academic career in that the initial activities are less about specific conventions. The tutorials can also signpost to online materials, such as those developed by Mages and Garson (2008) and Brown et al. (2008). Moreover, once the concepts are embedded the later discussions around conventions can provide an opportunity for students to explore using reference management software.

One unresolved question is whether these tutorial activities improved the quality of citations and references in subsequent essays, whether any improvement persisted over time, and whether students adopted appropriate citation and reference conventions outside of the module, for example in writing research methods reports. Many evaluations rely on asking students if they thought the information had helped them in their understanding (e.g. Mages & Garson, 2008); however, this does not necessarily mean that the students have taken on board the lessons learned and translated them into practice. Froese et al. (1995), in their secondary citation tutorial, found, although there was an overall improvement, problems persisted in the writing of some students even after they had received their intervention. Kendall (2005) found few improvements to the accuracy of references post intervention but an overall increase in the number of references that students used.

Our aim was to design activities that used our small group tutorials so that a more in depth discussion of the concepts underpinning referencing would take place. In line with the idea that we needed to scaffold a student's learning about references, we devised activities that explored different types of sources, engaged students to create their own references for a paper and a textbook, and then we discussed referencing conventions themselves. We saw some evidence that students appreciated these

activities and that the activities encouraged students to develop appropriate referencing skills and this offers the tutorial team the opportunity to explore these ideas in future revisions of the module.

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