# Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

**0395**

**M5** | Conwy 2
Chaired by Rosalyn Collings

Thu 12 Dec 2019

15:00 - 15:30

Supporting a diverse body of student writers by opening academic literacy 'windows' in undergraduate arts courses

Steven White[1]

[1]*Arts University Bournemouth, Bournemouth, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

**Abstract:** The diverse student population in UK university arts courses often requires support in written assignments, especially given the distinctive writing conventions across art and design disciplines. Assignments often consist of argument essays in which demonstration of critical thinking is required, yet research shows that expectations regarding the nature of analytical or critical thinking in particular disciplines are not always specified. Combining insights from academic literacies and genre analysis, this paper reports on how learning developers can collaborate with a subject lecturers to create discipline specific writing interventions in content lectures. The paper focuses on expressions of 'critical stance' in authentic student essays from a Visual Effects and Design and Production course, using genre analysis to reveal common linguistic structures used in high quality essays. These simple structures can be highlighted to subject lecturers, who can include spontaneous work on them as "academic literacy windows" in courses with minimal preparation.

Wingate, U. (2016) 'Academic literacy across the curriculum: Towards a collaborative instructional approach', *Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press, 51(3), pp. 349–364

**Paper:** Many courses in UK universities assess students via written tasks, but the social and educational backgrounds of diverse student populations mean that learners frequently need support in approaching such tasks. Distinct disciplinary writing conventions provide a further challenge, making generic 'study skills' support far less effective than more nuanced 'academic literacies' perspectives which are embedded in the teaching and discourse of particular academic communities (Wingate, 2015, p.5). Demonstrating critical thinking or "critical stance" (Bruce, 2016, p.14) is crucial in essay tasks, but interpretations of what constitutes analysis and argumentation vary across disciplines (Moore, 2013), including arts and humanities (Chanock, 2000). Answering Wingate and Tribble's call for "systematic research […] to obtain a more nuanced account of texts produced by learners and expert writers" in particular disciplines (2012, p.491), this study proposes collaboration between learning developers and subject lecturers to intertwine teaching of argumentation language

with disciplinary content.

This paper reports the findings of a study into how learners express a critical stance in essays in a Visual Effects Design and Production (VFX) course at a UK arts university, and proposes a way for learning designers and lecturers to collaboratively support development of discipline-specific student writing skills. The study combines an underlying academic literacies perspective with genre-informed text analysis and teaching approaches (Bruce, 2016; Feez, 1998).

**Method**

A learning developer (also known as academic support / study skills tutor) analysed undergraduate essays from the second year theory and context unit of a VFX course in a UK art and design university, as lecturers on the course had reported that students found producing high-quality written work challenging. The study used a purposive sample of 10 high-quality student essays which had achieved either the highest (n=1) or second highest (n=9) grade classification. This provided a corpus of approximately 30,000 words of authentic student work.

Analysis drew on the social/cognitive genre model, previously used by Bruce (2016) to extract examples of critical stance from sociology and English literature essays. This approach combines a concern with the writer's "social purpose", and "cognitive orientation and internal organization" of the text. The social genre element identifies linguistic "metadiscourse devices" such as hedging language (*might, perhaps, possible*), attitude markers (*surprisingly, unfortunately*) and boosters (*in fact, certainly, clearly*). The cognitive genre element highlights "interpropositional relations" (Crombie, 1985) which show how statements in a writer's argument relate to one another, often via overt linking terms (*as a result, therefore, because, however*) or simply by sequencing statements. The researcher analysed the essays in the following stages:

1. Identify overarching argument and text structure.
2. Highlight extracts expressing critical stance in relation to essay question.
3. Code extracts for (a) metadiscourse markers (b) coherence relations relating to writer's critical stance.
4. Summarise and compare elements of critical stance across sample.

Instances of language signalling critical stance in essays were then proposed as ways to inform teaching interventions by subject lecturers. Removing the genre metalanguage, interventions take the form of discipline specific "academic literacy windows" within content lectures.

**Findings:**

Of the five kinds of metadiscourse devices (examples <u>underlined</u>) in the social genre model, attitude markers / boosters and hedges were most commonly used, with an average of 7.8 and 3.8 instances used per essay respectively. Hedges were mainly in the form of modal verbs (<u>*can, could, might*</u>). Analysis identified authentic examples of common Meta discourse markers from student work, in contexts familiar and relevant to students on future courses.

Of the nine kinds of interpropositional relations (examples in **bold**) in the cognitive genre model, four were most common: statement exemplification, amplification, grounds/conclusion, and concession/contraexpectation. These findings mirrored the most common types, though not the frequency order, of such statements in Bruce's study of sociology and English essays (2016). Instances of statement exemplification and amplification are likely familiar to students, using commonplace phrases (*for instance, such as*) or adding details to statements using an explanatory clause, for example:

*[Film X] employs a number of different styles of VFX, **which** <u>clearly</u> contribute to the narrative in terms of … . **For example,** …*[Essay 7].

The third most common interpropositional relation, grounds conclusion, expresses a deduction from an observation:

*Spectacle <u>can enhance</u> the visual storytelling in a film … **Therefore,** [film genre X] uses VFX to support and expand upon …* [Essay 6]*.*

Finally, in the use of concession / contraexpectation constructions, students present a commonly held assumption or idea, then challenge its appropriateness or accuracy in a particular context:

*Many films were seen as science fiction purely for utilising effects. **However,** we have learnt that …* [Essay 3].

These findings provide an evidence base, albeit from a limited sample, for constructing teaching interventions which respond to the need for discipline-specific argumentation skills, and relevant and authentic examples of high quality student work.

**Discussion:**

This study acknowledges that argument is a key aspect of effective essay writing (Hewings, 2010). Importantly, it address the need for systematic accounts of learner texts in a particular discipline (Wingate and Tribble, 2012), focusing on how successful student writing actually makes an argument in VFX. The findings were shared with the subject lecturer, who valued the insights, but was concerned about how to incorporate these insights into an already crowded teaching program. In response, I proposed the use of Wingate's (2016, p.360) "academic literacy windows" in which "time is set aside to focus on academic literacy conventions and requirements …[including] how knowledge is presented and debated" using a genre-informed teaching approach (from Feez, 1998). Such an approach would allow the subject teacher to use evidence-based exemplars of critical stance (without technical genre metalanguage), and apply them to 'live' classroom examples. Feez's teaching-learning cycle involves five steps, which are listed below, with illustrative examples of how the findings of this study could inform the activities:

1. **Set the context**: teacher highlights debates or arguments on points of VFX theory or practice
2. **Model a text:** teacher (spontaneously) writes and displays a concession/contraexpectation sentence construction, expressing a point from the current lecture in an 'essay-like' written style
3. **Construct texts jointly**: student groups generate examples (from VFX theory or practice) which illustrate the given point. They then articulate their original subject content into a written concession/contraexpectation statement
4. (Construct text independently): (could omit if time is limited)
5. **Compare texts:** students share and comment on texts produced by other groups, perhaps considering whether metadiscourse markers such as hedging are required to nuance the points made

Using genre-informed analysis and teaching,  learning developers and subject teachers can therefore collaborate to identify key written functions such as critical stance in authentic samples of student writing. Practical classroom activities can then be designed (stripping away technical genre metalanguage) in which subject teachers model and support students in developing their own writing. Crucially, lecturers can do so by drawing on familiar, relevant examples from relevant theory or practice under discussion 'live' in classes, with minimal preparation.

## References

Bruce, I. (2016) 'Constructing critical stance in University essays in English literature and sociology', *English for Specific Purposes*. Pergamon, 42, pp. 13–25.

Chanock, K. (2000). Comments on Essays: Do students understand what tutors write? *Teaching in Higher Education*, *5*(1), 95–105.

Crombie, W. (1985) *Process and relation in discourse and language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Feez, S. (1998). *Text-based syllabus design*. Sydney: Macquarie University/AMES.

Hewings, M. (2010) 'Materials for university essay writing', in Harwood, N. (ed.) *English language teaching materials*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 251–278.

Maldoni, A. and Lear, E. (2016) 'A decade of embedding: Where are we now?', *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 13(3).

Moore, T. (2013) 'Critical thinking: seven definitions in search of a concept', *Studies in Higher Education*. Routledge, 38(4), pp. 506–522.

Wingate, U. (2015) *Academic literacy and student diversity : the case for inclusive practice*. Bristol: Multi-lingual Matters.

Wingate, U. (2016) 'Academic literacy across the curriculum: Towards a collaborative instructional approach', *Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press, 51(3), pp. 349–364.

Wingate, U. and Tribble, C. (2012) 'The best of both worlds? Towards an English for Academic Purposes/Academic Literacies writing pedagogy', *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(4), pp. 481–495.