Case Study

Developing students as writers

Project summary

Integrated writing development/content module run by the School of English, following a review first year curriculum.

Background and rationale

The School of English worked with Student Learning Development to revise its first year curriculum - in particular, the ways in which it supports students’ transitions to HE-level writing. The new curriculum was designed to firmly embed and integrate support for students’ writing development into the mainstream curriculum. In order to help ‘scaffold’ support for adjusting to the demands of writing about prose and poetry at degree level, a content-based module was redesigned to include a series of three shorter writing tasks. The aim was to provide students with manageable experiences of writing at degree level. Although these tasks are formally assessed, the students only have to put forward their best mark for summative assessment. The tasks therefore combine both formative and summative assessment functions. These shorter pieces of writing are also the basis for reflection and discussion in workshops which run alongside the module. Students discuss their approaches to, and experiences of, writing - drawing on feedback received from tutors. All such discussions are based on concrete experiences of writing produced and writing in progress. The workshops also ‘unpack’ the assessment criteria. Students produce a brief reflective journal charting their experiences of writing at degree level and the ways in which their approaches to writing have changed and developed. Overall feedback for the module has been positive and this compares favourably with more conventional ‘skills modules’ which are often perceived by students (with much justification) as being of limited relevance.

Some comments from students’ reflective journals

‘If I had been given the same task at A-Level, I would have done a brief analysis and plan and then launched into a highly descriptive analysis, for which I would have received a low
mark. As a result of the techniques I had developed during the course, I was able to use my knowledge from lectures and seminars, discuss the piece with my peers and use feedback from my previous piece in order to devise a far more analytical, structured response to the prose. I believe that this example, as well as the fact that my marks have improved steadily over the course of the term, are proof that while I still have much to improve on, the course has definitely caused a dramatic improvement in my analysis of prose and poetry’

‘...has pointed me in the right direction when it comes to close reading a text. It has taught me not to describe what is on the page but to really analyse the deeper meaning taking everything into account (language, words, punctuation, length of the lines). Things that, before studying English at degree level, I never would have thought important to analyse.’