A collaborative approach to integrating the teaching of writing into the sciences in a New Zealand tertiary context.

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Abstract

The research question examined in this thesis is: "how can we effectively teach writing in the disciplines?" During the development of the research two subsidiary questions were included: "can writing in the disciplines be taught effectively through the combined expertise of writing specialists and subject specialists?" and "is action research an effective method of empowering academic staff as teachers of writing?" New Zealand universities, to date, have taken a very limited, generic approach to teaching or researching writing in the disciplines. This research makes a major innovation by bringing a writing teacher into collaboration with academic staff from the applied sciences to develop a programme whose objective was to teach the genres and styles of applied science writing to students in that discipline.

The thesis focuses upon three writing projects. All three took place in the Faculty of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences at Massey University between 1993 and 1996 and took their inspiration from the writing across the curriculum movement. Project one involved the development of a Communication in Applied Science paper for first year students. Project two was a departmental writing across the curriculum programme aimed at integrating the teaching of writing into content courses. Project three involved integrating writing into the fundamental pedagogy of a single paper in horticulture. The project teams used action research as a method of developing and evaluating their programme. Action research was chosen as an appropriate methodology because it combines research with practical action, takes place in a real rather than an ideal context, provides a process to implement and monitor change, and allows for effective collaboration and ownership of the project.

The projects have had the following key outcomes. Action research provides a successful methodology for integrating writing into the disciplines. Collaboration between academic staff and a writing consultant can offer a fully viable means of teaching writing in the disciplines. An institutional context of support and

rewards for innovative teaching can enable staff to gain confidence as teachers of writing and understanding of writing in the disciplines. Student attitudes to writing and communication skills become more positive when the genres taught are professionally relevant, the importance of communication is modelled by credible sources, and writing support facilities are available. Finally, writing should be integrated into the pedagogical schema of a course at its inception, rather than being superimposed upon existing courses.

Acknowledgements

To say that I couldn't have completed this work on my own is an understatement, as anyone reading this thesis will immediately appreciate. This was my first venture into conducting research with people and in groups – until now, my research had been largely confined to nineteenth century poetry. Working with groups required quite different skills than those I was used to employing, and the frustrations and the joys of this are, I'm sure, embedded in my text. It is with considerable depth of feeling, therefore, that I take this opportunity to thank those who either engaged in the process with me or supported me along the way.

My first debt is to my supervisors, Associate Professor Russell Poole, Professor John Codd and Associate Professor Robyn Munford. Their perceptiveness and thoughtful assessment of my work was invaluable, and I would especially like to thank Russell for listening to my excited descriptions of my experiences, for venturing his considered opinions whenever I stopped talking long enough for him to do so, and for his courage in stepping, with me, outside the safe bounds of English literature. I'm sure there were times when he wondered exactly what he had let himself in for – but if he did, he never showed it.

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Robert Neale and Professor Roly Frean were the earliest pioneers in this field at Massey University. In 1979 I was one of the bemused, hapless students enrolled in the first year of their writing course – it was an experience never to be

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