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Facilitating skills transfer: a collaborative writing centre intervention for undergraduate Law students

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ABSTRACT

Despite the ability to write being central to success in the legal profession, there is general consensus concerning the poor writing skills of law graduates. In an attempt to address these concerns, this paper reports on the joint effort of subject experts and writing centre practitioners to address law students' legal writing skills early on in their law degree. The objective of the study was to evaluate the potential impact of a blended, subject-specific writing intervention designed to address first-year Law students' academic essay writing skills in terms of structure, organisation and argumentation. A multistage evaluation design was adopted to measure the potential impact of the intervention by collecting qualitative and quantitative data at various stages to triangulate the findings of the study.

The results showed a statistically significant improvement in the submissions of students who engaged fully in the various stages of the writing intervention. This study contributes to research that shows that by embedding writing development initiatives in disciplines which form part of disciplinary course assessment, higher education institutions might begin to make headway in meeting their obligation to ensure that students possess the key graduate attributes that are required to make a contribution to the workplace.

Keywords: blended learning, discipline-specific, legal skills, graduate attributes, undergraduate writing development, writing centres.

1. Introduction

The ability to write is central to the legal profession, as it infiltrates the daily life of practicing lawyers. Lawyers cannot exercise their profession without having to produce different forms of legal documents. Writing skills are considered key to success in this field, and foundational for effective communication via legal texts, given that lawyers "make their living through the effective use of words" (Vinson, 2005: 508). Writing furthermore features significantly in the job application process, where lawyers' writing skills are carefully examined, as well as in terms of job retention and promotion (Vinson, 2005). In terms of legal education, legal writing courses are increasingly regarded as a core component of undergraduate law studies. Snyman-Van Deventer and Swanepoel (2013: 511) recognise the importance of legal writing exercises not only to develop law graduates' writing skills, but also their intellectual independence and research abilities.

Despite the importance of writing, the general consensus is that lawyers' writing skills are poor (Campbell, 2014; Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003; Louw & Broodryk, 2016), and that they produce "incomprehensible and confusing legal writing" (Vinson, 2005: 508). This is concerning, since practicing professionals deem clarity, concision, appropriate language, form and style as vital in legal practice (Clarence et al. 2014; Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003). Common problems pertaining to the writing skills of new law graduates include lack of focus, failure to develop overall theme or case theory, inappropriate use of composition rules, and difficulty in writing persuasively (Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003). Crocker's (2018) research highlights challenges such as poor critical thinking, weak and illogical argumentation, and a lack of a general frame of reference within which to address legal problems. There is therefore a need for joint efforts between writing and legal experts to address graduates' legal writing skills if improvements are to be made in the practice of law.

In order to produce graduates that possess the qualities that will promote their ability to thrive within legal organisations, schools of law are obligated to address their students' writing development by providing more writing opportunities and instruction. For this reason, the Law Faculty at the University of the Free State (UFS) approached the Write Site (UFS writing centre) to address the academic essay-writing skills of first-year Legal Skills students. A blended (combination of face-to-face and online learning experiences), subject-specific approach was taken to the design of the writing intervention, which was done in collaboration with a subject expert. The ultimate objective of the writing intervention was to get students to (1) evaluate their initial drafts in light of what they had learned from the writing intervention and (2) adapt their drafts accordingly before making a final submission to their content lecturer. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the potential impact of the intervention on first-year law students' academic essay writing skills in terms of structure, organisation and argumentation.

2. Developing graduate attributes

The issue of poor writing skills amongst graduates stems from the potentially inappropriate or ineffective writing instruction at undergraduate level. Ineffective writing training for law students is particularly problematic, as the ability to write is defined as a critical skill in the legal profession: "... every legal practitioner needs to be able to carry out legal writing in some form; it is simply a critical skill for legal practice" (Snyman-Van Deventer & Swanepoel, 2013: 510).

Despite its importance, the general feeling among academics is that the writing skills of law students and practitioners leave much to be desired (Campbell, 2014; Crocker 2018; Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003; Louw & Broodryk, 2016; Snyman-Van Deventer & Swanepoel, 2013). This state of affairs is worrying, given the fact that effective writing in law involves the ability to communicate clearly, precisely and fully (Broodryk, 2014: 454). Even though most institutions in South Africa do offer writing support for students in the form of writing centres or academic literacy modules, it is clear that input also needs to come in the form of discipline-specific support, specifically in collaboration with the lecturer. There is thus a clear need for effective interventions that can help improve law students' writing skills in order to increase their employability. Campbell (in Louw and Broodryk, 2016: 535) notes in this regard that "[t]he legal profession [...] needs better educated, higher quality law graduates who are able to read, write and speak well, and who meet … important graduate attributes such as a capacity for critical analysis".

The development of graduate attributes, such as critical thinking, problem-solving and written communication skills, has been prioritised in terms of the objectives of higher education institutions. These constitute qualities that are attained through the completion of a university degree that aims to produce graduates capable of contributing to the workplace. Higher education institutions are thus moving toward clarifying and enhancing the education they provide to meet the rapidly changing employability demands of the world of work (Butler-Adam, 2018; World Economic Forum (WEF), 2016).

Graduate attributes are best developed by integrating them into assessments in the disciplines, which allows for the enrichment of the quality of undergraduate education (Jankowski & Marshall, 2017). Various learning outcomes have been identified for inclusion in the assessment of learning in undergraduate education, which are evaluated to "determine whether and how well students are meeting graduation level achievement in learning outcomes that both employers and faculty consider essential" (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2015). The graduate attributes identified for development in this study include academic competence, critical thinking and written communication, which are intertwined. The acquisition of the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with academic competence requires that students engage in critical thinking and the concomitant exploration of issues and

ideas in support of a particular option or conclusion. These skills culminate in the articulation or 'expression' of clear, logical and persuasive written communication, the latter still serving as the primary means of assessing students' mastery of disciplinary knowledge, conventions and norms in higher education. It follows then that interventions geared to developing these skills, writing in particular, be couched in the disciplines where they are needed.

3. Discipline-specific literacy interventions

There has been a debate for some time about generic versus discipline-specific literacy interventions (Butler, 2013; Drennan, 2019; Flowerdew, 2016). Although both types of approaches have certain advantages and disadvantages (Flowerdew, 2016), it seems that there is an increasing tendency to situate literacy interventions, especially at South African tertiary institutions, within the context of the discourses of specific academic disciplines (Boughey, 2002; Butler, 2013: 71; Clarence, 2012; Goodier and Parkinson, 2005; Parkinson, 2000; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2009). Regarding law student training in particular, Crocker (2018) confirms the potential inadequacy of generic writing instruction and interventions. In a study where first-year law students at the University of Kwazulu-Natal were initially only exposed to a generic writing intervention, it was indeed found that they "not only lacked the motivation to learn generic English writing skills, but that they also did not find it is easy to transfer these skills to the more specific legal writing environment" (Crocker, 2018: 1). The present study therefore adds to the growing corpus of studies in South African higher education that support a discipline-specific approach to the design of academic language interventions (Carstens & Fletcher, 2009; Drennan, 2019; Goodier & Parkinson, 2005; Granville & Dison, 2005; Kapp & Bangeni, 2005; Parkinson, 2000; Van Dyk et al., 2009; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2009). In addition, this investigation also provides evidence of the impact that a discipline-specific writing intervention has on the academic literacy development of students. Butler (2013: 80) rightly notes in this regard that:

> The crux is that, although a theoretical justification [of a discipline-specific approach] is an essential part of our proposals for intervention, the ultimate success of such interventions is determined by the impact they have on student learning.

Drennan (2019: 36-44) provides an overview of some important theoretical arguments in support of a discipline-specific approach to literacy, specifically writing instruction. The first argument is based on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994) in its claim that specific subject areas are characterised by particular linguistic characteristics and communicative practices. For students to be accepted as members of particular discourse communities, they should be familiar with these characteristics. The second argument is underpinned by cognitive linguistics and focuses on how people use schemata or "hypothetical mental structures for

concepts stored in memory" (Carstens, 2009: 53) to make sense of the world around them. Students need knowledge of both content-based schemata (i.e., knowledge of a particular topic or field) and text-based schemata (i.e., knowledge of particular text genres) in order to successfully deal with the text genres used in specific discourse communities for specific communicative purposes. A third argument is based on critical discourse analysis that investigates how social power relations are established and maintained through language use. According to this view, the ability of students unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourses to be accepted as members of specific discourse communities will be hampered (Butler, 2006). A final argument, which is especially important for this investigation, is the argument of relevance. Language support based on the disciplines in which students study enables them to develop skills that are specific to the language requirements of the discourses involved.

Regarding the latter point, Butler (2013: 80) points out that learning material that is relevant and interesting to students contributes to student motivation. Students are more motivated to engage in tasks and texts related to their disciplines, as opposed to generic alternatives that do not necessarily facilitate skills transfer to the disciplines effectively (Flowerdew, 2016; Drennan, 2019). Parkinson's (2000) and Goodier and Parkinson's (2005) studies place particular emphasis on the aspect of relevance and student involvement. According to Butler (2013: 78), this means that "irrelevant content not grounded in the discipline is demotivating to students and generic skills are not transferred to the disciplines where the skills are necessary".

The argument is therefore that interventions which are embedded in students' disciplines, and that aim to equip them with skills directly related to the tasks they need to perform in their subject areas, are more likely to facilitate students' motivation to engage during the learning experience.

4. A combination of learning approaches

Although there are several interpretations of the term "blended learning" (Graham, 2004; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005), it is best described as "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004: 95). The purpose of blended learning is ultimately to combine the best of both learning approaches to maximise educational possibilities (Graham, 2004; Nel & Wilkinson, 2008: 145). Vaughan (2007: 82) is of the opinion that, when face-to-face and computer-mediated elements are successfully combined, an educational environment is created that is highly conducive to learning.

There are, in fact, a variety of reasons why educators choose to make use of blended learning. Graham et al. (2005: 253) list three benefits that have emerged in particular from their research,

namely (a) more efficient pedagogy, (b) increased convenience and access, and (c) better cost-effectiveness. More efficient pedagogy is, according to Graham et al. (2005: 253), "one of the most commonly cited reasons for blending". Traditional pedagogical practices seem to be less at home in the digital and online world of students, and are increasingly criticized for the inability to achieve student engagement, good learning outcomes, and student satisfaction (Fisher, Perényi & Birdthistle, 2018: 98; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Blended learning, on the other hand, takes root in students' affinity and preference for technology, and it incorporates more active learning experiences that shift the focus from information transfer to interactive teaching.

Van Wyk et al. (2017) point out that the positive effect of blended learning on teaching and learning is reported by several researchers. Studies show that these learning environments contribute significantly to, among others, better exam results and assessment results, a deeper and better understanding of learning materials, increased motivation, interaction and involvement, as well as the development of critical thinking (Bawaneh, 2011; Delaney, McManus & Chew, 2010; Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal, 2004; Hiralaal, 2012; Sucaromana, 2013). Based on research by Aycock et al. (2002), Vaughan (2007: 85) believes that students learn more in blended learning environments: "students wrote better papers, performed better on exams, produced higher quality projects [...]". Aycock et al. (in Vaughan, 2007: 87) report that "[...] students do a better job of writing, learning course material, mastering concepts, and applying what they have learned [...] ". These improvements are mainly attributed to the fact that students, through blended learning, are more involved in the learning process (Vaughan, 2007: 87). Because of its student-centred approach, blended learning has also enabled higher education institutions around the world to continue their teaching and learning activities effectively, despite the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Dahmash, 2020; Dhawan, 2020).

In the context of language teaching, similar findings regarding the use of blended learning are reported. Its implementation in ESP training (English for Specific Purposes) "has been described to be more effective than the classical face-to-face or purely online learning instruction" (Mulyadi et al., 2020: 206). Studies show that intertwined learning has a positive effect on the quality of language teaching and leads to increased student motivation, engagement and participation in ESP teaching (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Arifani et al., 2019; Dringus & Seagull, 2013; Graham & Robison, 2007; Kurucova et al., 2018; Manwaring et al., 2017; Napier et al., 2011; Ravenscroft & Luhanga, 2018; Sahni, 2019; Vaughan, 2014). Student engagement is therefore considered the "holy grail of learning" (Sinatra, Heddy & Lombardi, 2015:1) and is causally linked to the "effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes".

5. Intervention design and implementation

The writing centre collaborated with the subject-area specialist regarding an academic essay that students were required to complete as part of their Legal Skills course assessment. The needs analysis constituted the following: an informal discussion and further correspondence with the content expert, and document analyses of assignment instructions, prescribed legal texts, and the law study guide to determine the writing needs of first-year Law students. The required entry-level competence of prospective law students, in terms of writing needs, include "basic legal analysis and problem-solving, including analysis and judicial opinions; application of law to new facts and predicting outcomes; basic skills of legal research and writing; written and oral advocacy skills; and basic interpretation and analysis of statutes and regulations" (Snyman-Van Deventer & Van Niekerk, 2018: 4). The needs analysis informed the refinement of an existing writing intervention. The student cohort exposed to the writing intervention comprised 291 first-year Legal Skills students of mixed ethnicity, gender and background.

Due to the benefits associated with blended learning and the large student cohort involved in this study, the decision to adopt a blended, hybrid process-genre approach to writing instruction was taken. The intervention comprised two main sections – an online, activities-based writing workshop, followed by face-to-face, individual consultation sessions at the writing centre. The online component constituted a range of activities designed to satisfy students' affinity for technology and facilitate students' engagement with the learning materials. The fact that the writing workshop materials were presented online allowed the researchers to work around issues concerning venues, staffing and time available for writing development on the academic calendar. Students were thus able to complete the online intervention in their own time, as the materials were open to them for a full week. Thereafter, they were encouraged to attend a minimum of two individual writing consultation sessions at the institution's writing centre before submitting their final drafts for assessment. The face-to-face sessions served to expand on the concepts addressed in the online learning materials and evaluate the extent to which students applied these in their written drafts, thereby fostering a deeper and better understanding of the learning materials. Students had two and half weeks to attend individual sessions, but because of the size of the cohort, the writing centre did not have the capacity to assist students with more than two sessions before the submission date. In total, the intervention spanned 5 weeks.

The online writing intervention was integrated into the assessment requirements of the Legal Skills course. Essentially, students were required to draft an essay discussing the reporting duties of practicing doctors regarding the abuse of patients. Students had to write at least two drafts of the assignment – a pre- and post-workshop submission. The pre-submission was intended to get students to commit to a response based on their existing knowledge of the purpose, structure/organisation, and content of the legal essay. This was a key step in the

intervention because it required students to engage with the assignment instructions and prescribed texts to attempt a first draft before they engaged with the online component of the intervention. In doing so, students reflected on whether they understood and approached the essay prompt correctly, the extent to which they were familiar with the conventions of the required text type, and their synthesis of information from relevant sources in the content of their essays. It furthermore made students aware of the recursive nature of writing and the need to produce multiple drafts.

The online learning materials, designed to familiarise them with the conventions of this particular text type, only became available to students once they had made a pre-submission. Given lecturers' concerns about law students' lack of basic academic writing proficiency that negatively impact their law-writing skills, the request was that we start with basic essay writing skills as a precursor to argumentative essay writing later on in the year – argumentation and negotiation being central to legal writing. The idea was to work towards building students' writing skills at first-year level and build on these skills by means of more complex, target assistance right throughout their undergraduate studies. The argumentative essay writing was addressed in another writing intervention later on in students' first year, but the focus of this study was only on the results of the basic essay writing intervention.

The online workshop materials constituted a series of activities geared towards analysing excerpts from sample legal essays on a similar topic to the one assigned to students for the target essay. As part of the needs analysis, the assessment rubric (provided by the lecturer) was used to inform the focus of the online workshop materials. This was to ensure that the materials addressed the aspects that featured in the lecturer's assessment of students' final essays. These aspects included: introductory paragraph formulation, with a specific focus on thesis statement formulation; body paragraph formulation, with emphasis on developing a logical and coherent argument using applicable legislation and prescribed articles and texts; the use of discourse markers to link ideas within and across paragraphs to facilitate the flow of argumentation; and the acknowledgment of sources.

Once students had completed the online workshop, for which they received a score, the post-submission link became available to them. Students were encouraged to book two individual face-to-face consultation sessions at the writing centre before submitting their revised/final drafts in order to qualify for bonus marks. Both pre- and post-submissions were submitted via the institution's Learning Management System, Blackboard. The writing centre coordinators then emailed these submissions to the subject-area lecturer who did the final assessment.

6. Methodology

The study received ethical approval. The participants were made aware of, and consented to, their information being used for research purposes, and that all qualitative information would

be anonymised. The study aimed to evaluate the potential impact of a blended, discipline-specific writing intervention on first-year Law students' academic essay writing skills in terms of structure, organisation and argumentation. For the purpose of this study, impact (or effect) is defined as "1) the observable improvement in academic literacy abilities between the onset and the completion of an academic literacy intervention and 2) the extent to which these abilities are necessary and applied in students' content subjects" (Fouché, 2016: 14). Related subthemes of the study relevant to measuring impact are (1) the effect of online materials on the development of students' academic writing (law); (2) the effect of individual consultations on the development of students' academic writing (law); and (3) students' perceptions of their learning.

As part of the utilitarian programme evaluation research paradigm (Greene, 2000), which underpins the impact assessments of other interventions run by the institution's Academic Language and Literacy Development team, the study employed a multistage evaluation design to measure the potential impact of the intervention on students' ability to produce a particular text type (Ivankova et al., 2016). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected at various stages to triangulate the findings of the study; thus, a convergent parallel mixed methodology applies. Figure 1 below illustrates the various stages of the research design.

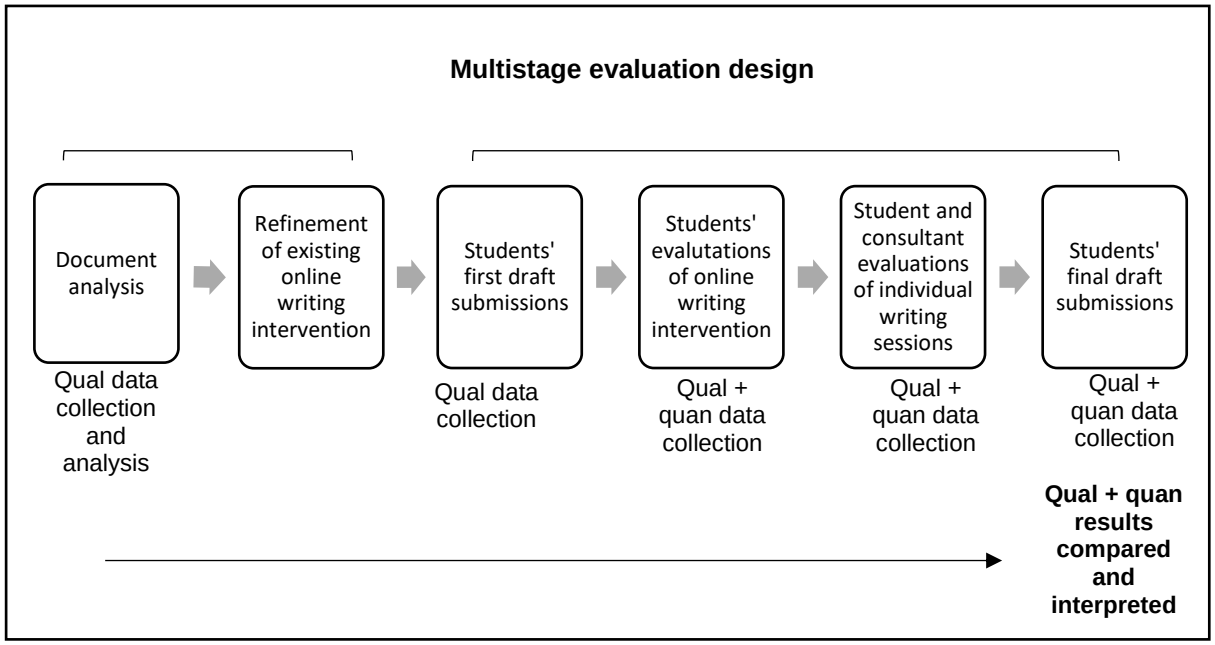

Figure 1: Advanced Mixed Methods notation system design

7. Data collection procedures

Students were required to write a legal essay in which they had to critically discuss medical practitioners' duty to report child abuse, with reference to a specific problem/scenario and the applicable legislation. Students submitted two drafts of their essays – a first draft that served as a pre-intervention submission, and a second (final) draft that served as a post-intervention submission. The content lecturer marked only the second (final) essay and sent through a marks list to the writing centre. The writing centre consultants marked both the first and second (final) essays, according to a set of criteria (see Table 1) that were aligned with the rubric used by the lecturer to assess students' essays, to measure the extent to which the writing intervention impacted students' legal essay writing skills. The consultants attended a marking session where they all marked one first and one second (final) essay according to the criteria to ensure interrater reliability. The consultants who were involved in marking students' essay were not involved in any subject-specific teaching thereby preventing content knowledge from interfering with the marking brief/process. Although the consultants at the Write Site are recruited across faculties and disciplines and did not, in this case, necessarily have a Law background, they have to, at least, hold an undergraduate degree and are subjected to a strict selection process and consultant training programme.

Students' perceptions of the online writing intervention were captured using an online survey, and individual student evaluation forms were used to gather students' feedback after individual sessions at the writing centre. The consultants also completed post-session evaluation forms to report on the writing aspects that were addressed during individual sessions. Table 2 provides an overview of the data-collection procedures.

Table 1: Assessment criteria for pre- and post-submission of legal essay

Essay structure
Introduction-body-conclusion structure is present. No headings/sub-headings are used.
Introduction
The background information is relevant. The background information is sufficient. The thesis statement contains an arguable point. The thesis statement is clearly linked to the topic. The direction/road map outlines the main ideas that will be addressed in support of the thesis statement. The main ideas outlined in the direction/road map are relevant to the thesis statement.
Body paragraphs
Each paragraph makes one clear point related to the thesis. Each paragraph has a proper topic sentence. Topic sentences are supported by relevant evidence.

Topic sentences are supported by sufficient evidence. Source information has been integrated as evidence in supporting sentences (e.g., evidence from prescribed readings, legislation, etc.). Source information has been explained/analysed/elaborated on in supporting sentences.
Conclusion
There is a clear indication that it is the final/concluding paragraph. There is a clear link back to the thesis statement. The major points/main ideas are summarised or revisited.
Logic/Coherence
There is a logical flow of information. Linking words are used within paragraphs. Linking words are used across paragraphs. Linking words are used correctly to facilitate flow of information.
Referencing
Sources have been cited in the text. Referenced sources have been included in a reference list.
Vocabulary, usage and mechanics
Errors regarding word/idiom choice and use obscure/confuse meaning. Errors regarding usage obscure/confuse meaning (e.g., word order, run-ons, fragments, etc.). Errors regarding capitalisation, punctuation and spelling obscure/confuse meaning.

Table 2: Overview of data collection procedures

Instrument	Data type	Information collected	Purpose
Document analysis	Qualitative data	Notes taken during information consultation with lecturer	Provide background on the writing task, writing needs of students, and writing aspects to be addressed
		Assignment instructions and prescribed reading materials	
		Existing writing intervention materials	Adapted to meet the specified needs
	Qualitative and quantitative data	Students' first and final essay drafts	Marked according to a set of criteria to determine potential impact
Survey	Qualitative and quantitative data	Student evaluation of online writing materials	Provide insight into students' perceptions of their learning
Evaluation forms	Qualitative and quantitative data	Student evaluation form	Provide feedback on students' perceptions of individual assistance at writing centre
		Consultant evaluation form	Provide information on writing aspects addressed during sessions

The total registered student cohort consisted of 342 first-year Legal Skills students who were required to engage with the writing intervention as part of a foundational Legal Skills course assessment. However, those students who failed to submit both a pre- and post-submission, or who did not engage at all, were excluded from the analysis. All students were required to complete the compulsory online writing workshop, and those who attended at least two individual sessions at the writing centre were awarded bonus marks by the content lecturer. Given the objective of the research was to determine the extent to which the writing intervention impacted students' ability to write an academic essay, purposive sampling (Nieuwenhuis, 2016) was employed to select a representative sample (40%) of students. Students were sampled according to whether they (1) engaged fully with all the interventions (workshop + at least two individual sessions), and (2) if they did not engage fully (workshop only). Of the sample scripts selected for analysis, two were excluded from the 'fully engaged' cohort, and three from the 'not fully engaged' cohort due to submission errors.

The final essay marks (provided by the lecturer) were further used to sample students according to performance so that a representative sample could be selected for analysis from each performance bracket. Table 3 below illustrates the number of students' submissions randomly selected for analysis.

Table 3: Participants sampled for analysis

Performance brackets	**Fully engaged (N=145)**	**Sample for analysis (n=56)**	**Partially engaged (N=105)**	**Sample for analysis (n=39)**
<50%	2	1	7	3
50-62%	41	14	43	15
63-74%	95	38	53	20
75%	7	3	2	1

8. Analysis and findings

Students' pre- and post-submission essays were assessed according to a checklist pertaining to the conventions of academic essay writing. The checklist constituted 26 criteria that were organized according to seven areas: the introduction; body (paragraphs); conclusion; logic and coherence (of argument); referencing; and vocabulary, usage and mechanics. Each criterion was rated according to a Likert scale, and marks (ranging from 0 to 3) were assigned accordingly (see appendix A for the checklist). Students' total pre- and post-submission scores were calculated and converted to percentages, and their final essay percentages (assigned by the content lecturer) also formed part of the quantitative data analysis.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the two sample groups – those that engaged fully with all interventions, and those that engaged partially and only completed the online workshop. The scores used for comparison were those assigned by the writing consultants for the pre- and post-submissions, and did not include the score assigned by the lecturer. For the former, students obtained a mean score of 39% for their pre-submissions (first drafts), and a mean score of 71% for their post-submissions (final drafts), indicating a mean improvement of 32% from pre- to post-submission. For the students who only completed the online workshop, students' results improved from 46% to 54%, indicating a comparatively smaller improvement of 8%. Practically, this can be interpreted as meaning that students who fully engaged with all interventions performed better in the post-submission than students who completed the online workshop only.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for both groups

	Variable	**n**	**Minimum**	**Maximum**	**Median**	**Mean**	**Mode**	**Std Dev**
All interventions group	Pre-submission	56	17	71	35.3	38.6	35	13.68
	Post-submission		23	96	70.5	70.9	79	15.84
	Improvement		-1	62	30.8	32.3	26	15.26
Workshop only group	Pre-submission	39	21	74	46.2	46.2	44	13.57
	Post-submission		27	94	53.8	54.2	54	14.95
	Improvement		-4	44	3.8	8.1	6	11.25

Table 5 gives the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistic, which measures the normality of the distribution of scores. The sig values (>0.05) for both groups' pre- and post-submission scores indicate the data is normally distributed and parametric tests (example a paired t-test) are applicable.

Table 5: Tests of normality for both groups

		Statistic	**df**	**Sig.**	**Statistic**	**df**	**Sig.**
All interventions	Pre %	.115	56	.062	.969	56	.156
	Post %	.081	56	.200*	.963	56	.086
Workshop only	Pre%	.074	39	.200*	.980	39	.700
	Post%	.101	39	.200*	.978	39	.638

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The next step was to run a paired t-test to determine whether the post-submission scores showed a significant improvement from the pre-submission scores. From tables 6 and 7, it can be seen that the improvement in scores for both groups was statistically significant (Sig. <0.001). This can be interpreted as the intervention having achieved one of its primary objectives by enabling students to perform better by transferring the applicable literacy skills to a disciplinary writing task.

Table 6: Paired samples statistics for both groups

		Mean	**n**	**Std Dev**	**Std. Error Mean**
All interventions	Pre	38.6	56	13.68	1.828
	Post	70.9	56	15.85	2.117
Workshop only	Pre	46.2	39	13.57	2.173
	Post	54.2	39	14.76	2.363

Table 7: Paired t-test for differences in means between pre- and post-submissions (both groups)

		Paired Differences								
		Mean	**Std Dev**	**Std. error mean**	**95% Confidence Interval**		**t**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**ε^2**
					Lower	Upper				
All interventions	Pre-post submission %	32	15.258	2.039	60.0	68.2	15.842	55	.000	0.82
Workshop only	Pre-post submission %	8	11.25	1.801	12.5	19.8	4.471	38	.000	0.35

Since the t-statistic is sensitive to sample size, and the sample sizes for the two groups were different, the effect size ($\boldsymbol{\varepsilon^2}$) was also computed. Table 7 shows that the effect sizes for the increase for both groups were large ($\eta \geq 0.14$), indicating that in addition to being statistically significant, the results are considered practically significant.

A further test was conducted to determine the relationship between the post-submission scores and the final essay marks assigned by the content lecturer. Table 8 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients that were computed for the 'all interventions' group. The results showed a strong relationship between the post-submission and final essay scores (r = 0.71).

Table 8: Correlations between post-submission and essay scores (all interventions)

			Post %	**essay %**
All interventions	Post %	Pearson Correlation	1	.706**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		n	56	56
	essay %	Pearson Correlation	.706**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		n	56	56

Although the post-submission and final essay scores showed a strong correlation, a paired t-test was conducted to determine whether the difference between scores was significant. The results (see Tables 9 and 10) showed a mean difference of 4.7% between post-submissions and final essay scores, which was in fact significant (<0.01). A possible reason for this might be that students' pre- and post-submissions were carefully assessed in terms of improvement in academic writing skills, whereas the content lecturer's assessment was most likely more content-based than skills-based. Students' pre- and post-submissions were marked by the same people and markers were unaware which group's submissions they were marking. It is therefore unlikely that there were discrepancies or biases in terms of the assessment of students' submissions which could have accounted for the statistical difference in scores.

Table 9: Paired sample statistics

		Mean	**n**	**Std. Dev**	**Std. Error Mean**
Pair 1	Post %	70.9	56	15.91	2.126
	essay %	66.2	56	6.45	.861

Table 10: Paired t-test for differences between post-submission and final essay scores

		Paired Differences					**t**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
		Mean	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error Mean**	**95% Confidence Interval**				
					Lower	**Upper**			
Pair 1	Post % - essay %	4.7	12.247	1.67	1.4	7.9	2.865	55	.006

An analysis of the aspects in which students showed most improvement (see Figure 2) in their post-submissions revealed that those who engaged fully (all interventions) showed a greater average percentage improvement in all seven areas, particularly regarding their introductory (46%) and concluding paragraphs (45%), than those who did not engage fully (workshop only). Structure and referencing also improved notably for the 'all interventions' group. In comparison, the 'workshop only' group's average improvement was relatively small for the various writing aspects.

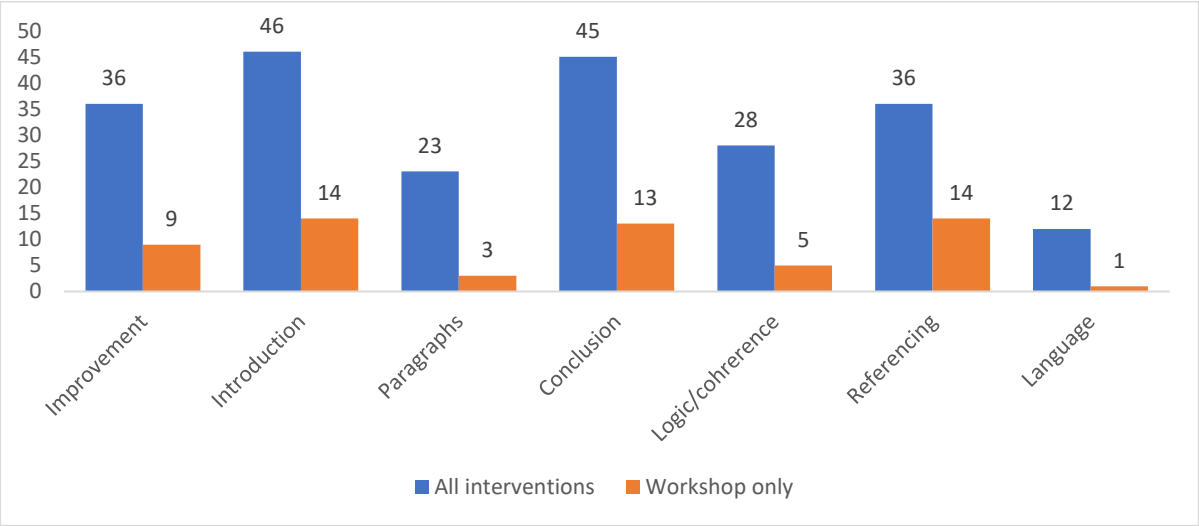

Figure 2: Average % improvement in writing aspects

The consultants' feedback (Figure 3) on individual sessions at the writing centre indicated that they assisted students predominantly with organisational[1], paragraph[2], sentence[3], and 'other' tutorials. In terms of 'other' issues addressed during sessions, the majority (70%) of these were related to referencing. This information correlates with the results concerning the aspects in which students showed most improvement (Figure 2), where students' post-submissions showed the most improvement in terms of organisation (structure), paragraphs (introductions and conclusions), as well as referencing.

[1] Organisational tutorial: using outlines to arrange ideas

[2] Paragraph tutorial: topic sentence, purpose, number of paragraphs, length of paragraphs to achieve proportion, one subject per paragraph

[3] Sentence tutorial: sentence-level (grammar, spelling, punctuation) errors

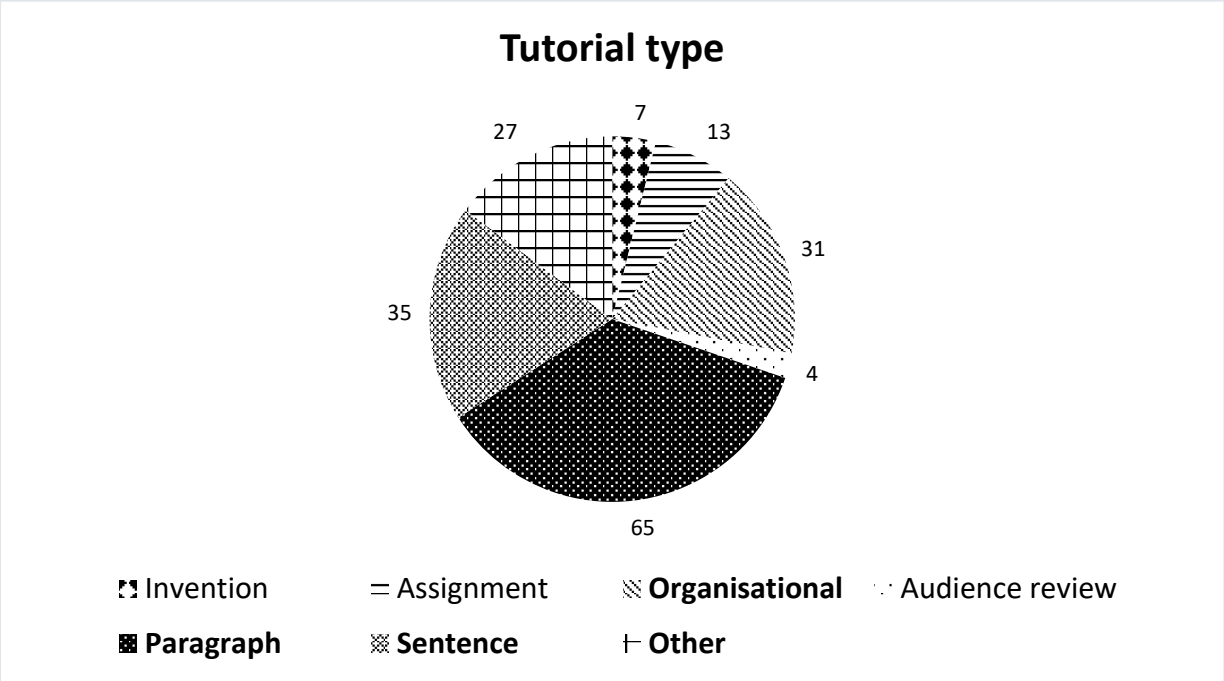

Figure 3: Consultant feedback on tutorial types covered in individual sessions

Students were required to provide feedback regarding their perceptions of the individual assistance they received at the writing centre. It should be noted that students were not aware that the consultants would be marking their pre-and post-interventions essay submission, so this was not a variable that could have biased their responses. Their responses (see Figures 4 and 5) revealed that the majority of students felt the sessions bolstered their confidence in their ability to write better (95%), and improved the quality of their written submissions (97%).

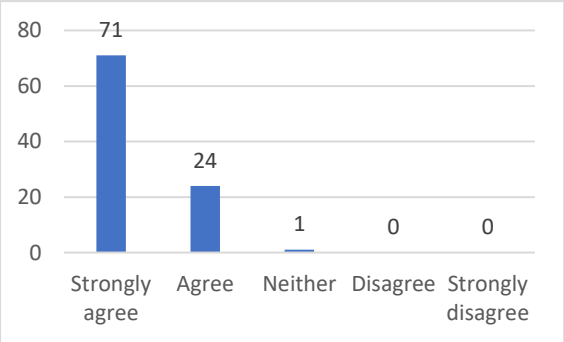

Figure 4: Confidence in ability to write better

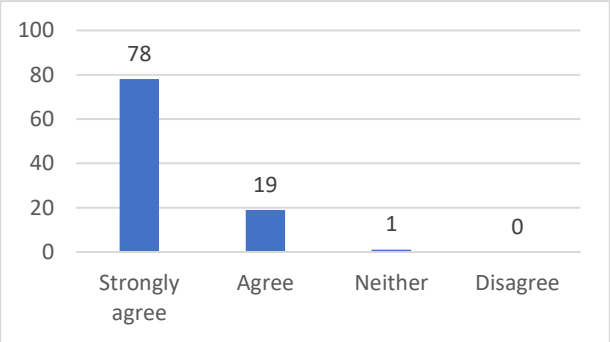

Figure 5: Perception of improvement on submission

Students' responses to the online workshop evaluation questionnaire (see Figures 6 and 7) showed that the majority of students felt they would be able to apply what they had learned from the online workshop materials (91%) and that such workshops are necessary to assist them to approach writing tasks more effectively (91%).

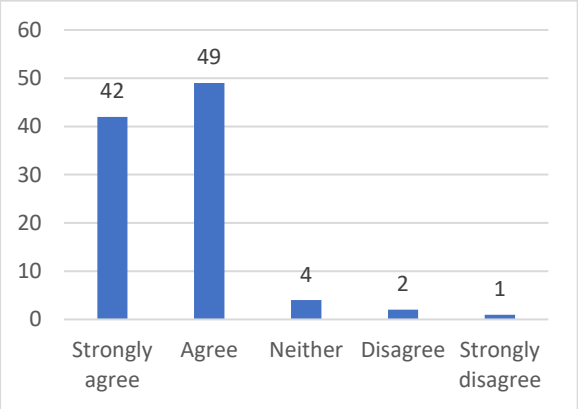

Figure 6: Perceived application of learning

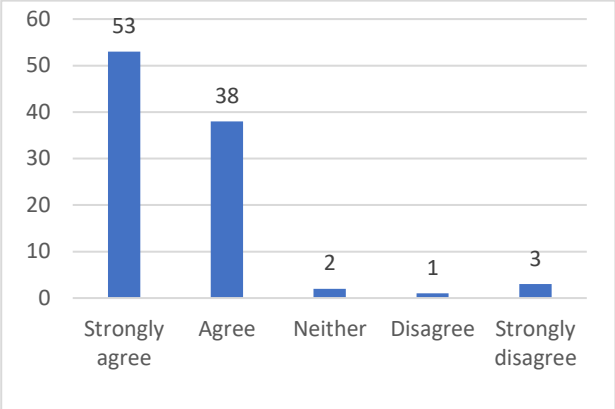

Figure 7: Perceived necessity of writing workshops

Further investigation into students' open-ended responses to the workshop evaluation questionnaire revealed that they found the online writing workshop materials valuable and informative. Students said that the workshop "helped me to understand … how to structure my essay" as they "explained the structure of the essay and [the] relevant examples [that were] provided were very easy [to] understand and relate [to]". Students also responded that "the workshop … helped me [to] understand … how to write a good essay and to have a logical order in my essay", and that they "did not know how to structure [a] thesis [statement] … [or] structure my paragraphs". One student mentioned that they "found that in order to have a good essay you must first break down the topic, answer it [and] then develop your introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion".

According to one student, "what [was most] positive about this workshop was that as I was busy doing it, I could already notice the mistakes I did in my first draft essay and [I] know how [I] will be able to rectify them to improve my final draft essay". This was affirmed by another student's remark that "the online videos were extremely educational and they helped me with the drafting and editing of my essay". Further evidence of students' application of learning included remarks such as "they [the workshop materials] give information that is specific and relevant to the assigned assessment", and that "the way [the workshop] gave me sources to interpret and apply to the questions … gave me … enhance[ed] knowledge and made me aware of some parts of the academic essay".

One student mentioned that "the information was really relevant to what [I] was writing about …". According to students, "the information that was provided is everything that I will need not just for this assignment but for other assignments as well".

9. Conclusions and recommendations

There is much concern amongst practicing professionals about law graduates' writing abilities, particularly with regard to clarity, concision, and argumentation. There is thus a need to address students' writing skills early on in their undergraduate studies to provide them with sufficient instructional opportunity to develop their writing proficiency in the subject area. Writing proficiency is most effectively developed when it is couched in the disciplines, which supports the argument for discipline-specific writing instruction. Support that is based in the discipline is relevant to the language requirements of specific discourses; learning materials that are relevant and interesting bolster student motivation and facilitate skills transfer. A blended learning approach furthermore promotes students' motivation to engage and participate in learning opportunities, resulting in a deeper understanding of learning materials and application in the discipline.

The Law faculty and the writing centre collaborated to generate a writing intervention that addressed first-year students' essay-writing skills for a foundational Legal Skills course. The study investigated the extent to which a discipline-specific, blended writing intervention facilitated students' transfer of academic writing skills in the discipline by assessing their pre- and post-intervention legal essay submissions, as well as their perceptions of what they learned. The results showed a marked improvement in the submissions of students who engaged fully in the various stages of the writing intervention in terms of the online workshop materials and individual sessions at the writing centre. On average, these students showed a statistically significant improvement in performance (32%) from pre- to post-submission. In comparison, the group of students that did not engage fully and only completed the online workshop showed a comparatively small improvement (8%), although this too proved to be statistically significant.

Thus, it appears that the writing intervention had a positive effect on students' ability to draft a legal essay, although the largest impact was evident for students who engaged fully with both the online workshop and the individual consultation sessions, demonstrating the positive effect of a blended approach to writing development. There was also a strong correlation between the post-submission scores and the marks assigned by the content lecturer, although the difference in marks proved statistically significant. A possible reason for the latter might be the emphasis on content in the discipline as opposed to academic writing skills (and the various aspects this encompasses) that inform assessment practices at the writing centre. Regarding the question pertaining to students' perceptions of their learning, they were generally positive and indicated that the intervention bolstered their confidence in their writing abilities. Students also remarked that they were able to apply what they learned to improve the quality of their final essay submissions.

It would be of value to further investigate the way in which content lecturers assess writing in the disciplines. An analysis of the rubrics that inform assessment of writing in the disciplines, as well as who does the assessment (in addition to content lecturers) might serve to shed light on the extent to which compliance with academic writing conventions features in subject-area mark allocation. If collaborative interventions between content-area experts and language practitioners are to be successful, it is necessary to ensure that the aspects being addressed in such writing interventions are acknowledged and assessed in the content areas. This involves buy-in from academic staff regarding the importance of developing students' writing skills from early on in their studies, and the provision of multiple opportunities to develop these skills in the disciplines. By means of an integrated approach, where writing forms a critical part of disciplinary course assessment and is taken seriously by staff and students alike, universities might begin to make headway in terms of ensuring that students possess key graduate attributes upon graduating.

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