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Learning from contrasts: first-year students writing themselves into academic literacy

Gunhild Marie Roald, Patric Wallin, Ingunn Dahler Hybertsen and Jorun M. Stenøien

Department of Education and Life-Long Learning, Norwegian University of Technology and Science, Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT

The contribution of this article is to highlight how exploring various writing genres in the beginning of higher education can contribute to academic literacy. While many studies have addressed the transition into academia by focusing on academic writing, the use of various writing genres has scarcely been researched. Based on the thematic analysis of focus-group interviews that explore first-year students' experience of writing in academia, we present and discuss three emerging themes: 1) academic writing as a dull and constricted world, 2) playing with and playing out identities through writing in various genres, and 3) learning academic writing from contrasts. Our research indicates that starting with other writing genres than the academic genre might foster an experience of mastery that could enhance self-efficacy when it comes to academic writing. Moreover, discovering contrasts to academic writing can help students to understand the boundaries and characteristics of academic writing.

Introduction

Writing is an essential part of being a university student: students primarily show their understanding of theories, concepts, and perspectives in various courses through written assignments (Badenhorst 2012; Borg and Deane 2011). Different approaches have been used, researched, and discussed in relation to how one might support students in their process of learning to write within an academic context (Coffin et al. 2003; Itua et al. 2014).

The focus of the present study is a writing module where we have challenged first-year students to start writing within writing genres that are not normally associated with academic writing: blogposts, debate articles, and utopian texts. To our knowledge little is known about how the integration of these genres can support first-year students' learning and development, as will be elaborated on below. Our aim has been to investigate this through the following research question: *How do first-year students experience writing within untraditional writing genres in the university context?* In this exploratory qualitative study, we approach this question through a thematic analysis of focus-group interviews.

Background and previous research

One way to conceptualise the process of learning to write in academia is through the lens of *academic literacy* (Wingate and Tribble 2012). This concept refers to a student's 'ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community' and involves 'reading, evaluating

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information, as well as presenting, debating, and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing' (Wingate 2018, 2). In this way, academic literacy encompasses more than academic writing and goes beyond merely learning technical skills. It involves an experience of understanding and being able to live by the norms, codes, and discourses of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 2000). According to Badenhorst (2012, 228, author's quotation marks), 'writing is part of a complex network of social practices conducted within different academic discourses and not a discrete and separate "skill"'. Therefore, acquiring academic literacy involves a process of academic socialisation that is highly context dependent (Wingate and Tribble 2012). Because of the situated nature of academic writing, learning to write becomes inseparable from the socio-cultural context in which it takes place, including the specific discourse and use of language, artefacts, and the possibility to interact with other people who are engaged in similar tasks (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989).

Bearing this in mind, academic writing must be seen in relation to the academic community. However, this community includes a wide range of sub-communities, each with their specific norms, discourses, and writing ideals (Arneback, Englund, and Solbrekke 2016; Ask 2007). Nevertheless, it might be argued that a number of general norms of academic writing are shared both *within* academic communities and *between* different academic sub-genres (e.g. textbooks, research articles, theses), such as 'linguistic clarity, scientific transparency, objectivity, critical-analytical competence, analysis, rigour, and adaptation of prevailing norms of written language' (Ask 2007, 16, our translation). Although these norms might be interpreted and operationalised differently in the social practices within various disciplines (Carter 1990), they serve as guiding principles that are often associated with *academic writing*.

The transition into higher education with a focus on the learning process related to academic writing has been addressed from different research perspectives. It has been shown that students do not feel prepared for academic writing and express frustration and anxiety because the standards of academic writing seem difficult to understand and live up to (Ask 2007; Elliott et al. 2019; Itua et al. 2014). Moreover, research shows that writing standards and writing experiences differ to a great extent, both *between* disciplines and *within* disciplines (Becher and Trowler 2001; Blåsjö 2004). This supports the idea of academic literacy elaborated on above, claiming that writing is a situated activity related to community-specific ways of speaking and acting. On this point, the research of Lea and Street (1998) has shown that students experience difficulties in understanding the varying requirements while moving between courses and disciplines. In this respect it has also been found that students and teachers have different perceptions as to what academic writing is and that students experience a lack of time, confidence, and understanding when it comes to academic reading and writing (Itua et al. 2014).

Research has addressed different ways of assisting students in their learning process related to academic writing. Several studies indicate that individual support is more effective than classroom teaching in helping students master the transition to academic writing (Bloom 1984; Graesser, Person, and Magliano 1995; Leibowitz et al. 1997). Furthermore, research into feedback practices related to students' writing shows that receiving feedback from other students on one's own texts might be effective. Bharuthram and McKenna (2012) found that feedback from other students and teachers on students' drafts in several stages of the writing process helped students to develop academic literacy. Moreover, Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014) found that when students give feedback on other students' texts, it helps them to develop their understanding and ideas related to their own writing.

When it comes to assisting students in their process of learning academic writing, one dichotomy in the literature discriminates between approaches that focus on general support provided *outside* the disciplines, writing workshops and generic writing training, referred to as *writing across the curriculum* (WAC), and approaches that situate support *within* the disciplines, referred to as *writing in the disciplines* (WID) (Russel et al. 2009). While WAC approaches focus on general aspects of composition and writing, WID approaches conceptualise writing as an ongoing process that is integrated into the curriculum of the disciplinary learning (Mitchell and Evison

2006), where the teachers support the students in a specific course (Wingate 2010). It has been shown that support given by experts in academic writing who are not subject experts (WAC) is experienced as less effective than writing support that is integrated into the various courses (WID) (Elliott et al. 2019).

When it comes to integrating other writing genres into academic courses, Badenhorst (2012) studied a fourth-year course in which a blog was established so the students and teachers could discuss ideas and views on issues raised in the course. Her study shows that including a blog as a space for discussing and expressing ideas invites students to become involved with literacy practices in ways that facilitate the transition into academic writing. Other studies have focused on how blogs might be used as a resource in language education. While Murray, Hourigan, and Jeanneau (2007) found that second-year university students might benefit from writing blogs in the form of a reflective tool, Kung's (2018) study points to the use of blogs as an instructional tool in language teaching, concluding that although they report positive experiences related to BALL (Blog Assisted Language Learning), students' motivation and confidence are not increased by the use of this tool. Seneviratne (2018) found, on the other hand, that students' self-efficacy for academic writing increased through a programme where blogs and other digital social media platforms were used as a means of communication for assisting students in their academic writing process.

Several studies show negative effects from the increase in technological communication on language writing skills (Omar and Miah 2012). Research by Cingel and Sundar (2012) indicates that the growing use of social media has led to a decrease in accuracy with respect to punctuation and spelling. Furthermore, DeJonge and Kemp (2012) found a negative connection between the amount of text messages sent by students and their skill level in spelling and reading. Similarly, the research of Rosen et al. (2010) established a negative correlation between the amount of 'textisms' (a blend of spoken and written language including slang, abbreviations, and acronyms) that students used in their electronic communication and their skills in formal writing.

On this background there is reason to fear, according to several studies, that there could be a degree of risk in including more informal writing assignments in higher education as it might confuse students and make it more difficult for them to distinguish between formal and informal writing. Little is known about the relationship between such a systematic integration of more informal writing genres and the development of academic literacy as a part of the process of fostering academic writing skills, which forms an important motivation for the present study.

Context and research design

The context of this study is a Norwegian university where we look at two bachelor programmes (hereafter referred to as Bachelor programmes 1 and 2). The main focus in this study is on Bachelor programme 1 where a new writing module has been designed and facilitated by the second and third authors. The data from the students in Bachelor programme 2 is used to shed light on the main data in cases where this is considered relevant.

The writing module in Bachelor programme 1 consisted of a series of writing assignments that were integrated into an introductory course on educational and developmental psychology for around 200 students in their first semester. First, the students analysed an academic text. Next, they chose to submit a text related to a given theme from the curriculum within either the blog, debate article, or utopian writing genre. They were then divided into groups that submitted shared texts based on their individual texts, again within one of the three writing genres. The shared group texts were graded pass/re-work/fail and the students were given feedback on the submitted versions.

In Bachelor programme 2, the students attended a writing workshop organised by authors one and four. During this mandatory one-day intensive seminar with around 40 students, an introduction was given to general aspects of academic writing, such as structure, discussion and argumentation, referencing, and language (Rienecker and Jørgensen 2013). Here, the students were challenged to solve practical tasks on the various themes that were presented.

To explore students' writing experiences within these two settings we held two focus-group interviews about three months after the end of the course. While this gap is partially due to practical consideration, we argue that it strengthens the study. The gap in time allows us to explore how students see the writing module and the writing seminar within the larger context of being a university student. At the same time we acknowledge that interviews held during the semester or immediately after the exams of the courses in question might have given different responses.

Using focus-group interviews allowed us to approach the unclear and ambiguous theme of academic writing in an open and exploratory way (Tjora 2012). The participants were encouraged to share their experiences in response to a small number of questions, as well as to associate with and relate to their own experience while listening to the other participants (Kress and Schoffner 2007; Morgan 1997). The questions revolved around the experience of writing in academia and of the writing modules in the two bachelor programmes, and were similar for both groups.

The sample students were recruited from the entire student group that participated in the two writing modules and written and oral information was provided in the learning management system and during lectures. For Bachelor programme 1, seven students (five females and two males) participated in the first focus-group interview. This group will be referred to as the *focus group*. For Bachelor programme 2, three students (all female) participated in the second focus-group interview, but it is important to note that two of these had been through a bachelor programme before. This group will be referred to as the *comparison group*.

We acknowledge that there is a self-selection bias in that the participating students might have been the most devoted students in the programme, thereby showing more general interest and engagement in the writing modules than what might be the case in the student group as a whole. We do not claim that the experiences highlighted in this study can be generalised, neither to the entire student population in the programme, nor to first-year students in general. Rather, the student accounts show what students might potentially experience. Furthermore, the three-month delay between the end of the semester containing the writing modules and the focus-group interviews might have influenced how students reinterpreted and talked about their experience.

The focus-group interviews, lasting 80 minutes (the focus group) and 100 minutes (the comparison group), were both conducted in the students' mother tongue (Norwegian), audio-recorded, and transcribed soon after the interview. Only the chosen excerpts from the interviews have been translated into English. Superfluous words such as 'eh' and 'm', as well as repetitions that are not seen as reinforcements of ideas or arguments, but rather, occur as a result of the oral situation, have been omitted in the process to enhance the reading experience (Kvale and Brinkmann 2010). All participants gave their informed consent as participants in this study, and the project was reviewed and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). All the data material was processed according to the NSD's procedures for maintaining information security, and all participants have been given pseudonyms.

The data material was analysed using a thematic approach (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2011), meaning that we looked for themes that were conspicuous in the data although they could be expressed in different ways by the participants. Although not phenomenological in its analytical aims and scope, we have also drawn on Lindseth and Nordberg (2004) analytical procedure, alternating between a 'naïve' reading and 'structural analyses'. In the former, we read through all the data material as open-mindedly as possible while trying to 'bracket' (Dowling 2004) or 'bridle' (Dahlberg 2006) our expectations and prejudices in relation to the data so we can make a preliminary, summarised statement of the results (Lindseth and Nordberg 2004). In the 'structural analyses', the aim is to identify units of meaning and condense the data into themes (Lindseth and Nordberg 2004). Here, the NVivo program (Bazeley 2007) has been used to support the analysis.

Through an iterative process of reading, identifying, condensing, and writing, we have built upon a triangulation of perspectives (Krefting 1991) from all four authors. Moreover, we have had discussions with researchers outside the group. As a result of this process, three

themes have emerged: 1) academic writing as a dull and constricted world, 2) playing with and playing out identities through writing in other genres, and 3) learning academic writing from contrasts.

Findings

Theme 1: Academic writing as a dull and constricted world

The students describe academic writing as a restricted, rule-governed, and dull world with little opportunity to personalise their texts and little room for engagement and creativity. When asked: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'academic writing'?, the participants in the focus group spontaneously respond as follows:

> Nancy: Writing size 12 and line spacing (laughter) 1.5, that's my association ….
>
> Elisabeth: Times New Roman
>
> Nancy: Yes, it is a bit like that.

The students' immediate associations seem to be to the formalities, rules, and conventions that they have been given as a framework for their writing by someone else, but which they feel obliged to comply with as closely as possible. For the students, this rule-governed regime appears dull and disengaging. As expressed by Laura:

> I find it so incredibly boring to write academic texts because it's not … to me there's no heart in it if you don't have an opinion about it, you know.

A similar experience is expressed by the participants in the comparison group. However, these students show a stronger degree of frustration, confusion, and fear of doing something wrong. Jemma says:

> I found it stressful! I was so afraid of doing something wrong all the time! (…) It was really demanding to start doing this when you haven't done it before. (…) …. because I've always liked to write, I've always succeeded in Norwegian and stuff. But exactly this academic writing thing, that was completely new, because there are so many rules!

It seems that in facing all the 'rules', Jemma feels overwhelmed and frustrated, experiencing fear of 'doing something wrong'. From having had an experience of enjoyment and mastery related to writing, she now feels like a beginner who is flustered and stressed by all the rules that are new to her. Jemma and the other students in the comparison group seem to position themselves as inferior to the academic staff: The rules are defined by the teacher and upheld by an academic community that the students would like to be a part of, but that they do not really see themselves as a part of yet. As expressed by Rachel:

> The professor is the expert, sort of. (….) The student needs to work harder to do it well because we don't have that much experience and, yeah, it *doesn't come naturally* as it might do for someone who has written a lot.

Here we can see an opposition, a contrast, between the students, in other words the new beginners, and the professor. She or he is the 'expert' who has the experience and the internalised knowledge and competence regarding the rules of academic writing, an internalisation and integration that can be read from the idea of writing as being 'natural' to the professor who has the know-how. This contrast is further illustrated by the following comment from Tamanna:

> We want to get *up there* as soon as possible, as quickly as possible!

Getting 'up there' can be understood as acquiring the knowledge that the professor or teacher has: understanding the rules and regulations of academic writing. There is a gap between the student

and the professor, and the students express an eagerness and sense of urgency to get to where the 'professor is as soon as possible'.

All in all, academic writing is seen by the students in this study as a domain full of restrictions, rules, standards, and regulations. However, whereas the students in the focus group experience the world of academic writing as dull and boring, the students in the comparison group rather express an experience of frustration, stress, and a sense of urgency to learn the 'how-to' of academic writing as soon as possible.

Theme 2: Playing with and playing out identities through writing in other genres

In contrast to theme 1, where the students experience either boredom and dullness or frustration and confusion related to academic writing, this theme reflects a feeling of mastery, belonging, and identity related to the writing experience. The students in the focus group, who have had the opportunity to experiment with writing in the blog, debate article, or utopian writing genres, point out that this allowed them to express their own thoughts and opinions freely without being preoccupied with formalities, rules, and conventions. They also describe that this experience in an early phase of their bachelor studies created a feeling of mastery, joy, and freedom within the academic context, and this allowed them to experiment not only with various writing genres, but also with different identities. Laura, who chose to write a blog, says:

> It was like: 'yes, at last! I'm gonna be a blogger now!' (laughter in the group) (…) It was a lot like, 'now I get to try that'.

This excerpt might indicate that the students see the assignment as an opportunity to explore different identities. In this setting, Laura can finally experiment with what it might be like to be a blogger because the assignment challenges her to do so. The laughter in the group following the comment, and Laura's tone that can be heard in the recording hint at there being an ironic twist to what she says, indicating that she does not really want to become 'a blogger'. However, she is now able to test what it might be like to 'be a blogger' in a setting where there are no real consequences if she fails. In saying that there are 'incredibly, incredibly few restrictions to what you can do', Laura seems to express a sense of freedom, mastery, and playfulness. Unlike the strict academic writing genre, she is now in the position to set the rules, regulations, and standards herself.

Interestingly, the openness and freedom to take on different identities also leads some students to integrate certain elements from the academic genre into their blog, debate article, or utopian writing, as expressed by Sarah:

> The freedom gave a lot of space to be academic, actually (…) I think it was a bit more motivating to want some facts that kind of support your opinion, like, you agreed a bit with the academic style. It was a bit cool to be able to, like, put things into one's own perspective.

When Sarah uses the phrase 'be academic', she is pointing in the direction of an academic identity that she wants to take on, but on her own terms. She now 'agreed' with the academic style, she did not only accept it, but also chose herself to integrate some academic elements – which might be understood as, for instance, referring to research or bringing in theory to support arguments – and this even felt 'a bit cool'. This suggests that she felt an intrinsic motivation to support her own opinions and strengthen them through, for instance, literature references.

All in all, we see here that when given a 'free space' in the genre writing tasks, the students experience the possibility to play with and play out various identities.

Theme 3: Learning academic writing from contrasts

This theme reflects an experience of learning how to write within an academic context based on contrasts, both between academic writing and other writing genres, and between one's own texts

and those of other students. In the focus group, the students talk about how working within different writing genres than the academic genre influences their understanding of academic writing. The contrast provided from writing in other genres seems to help students realise what academic writing is and what it is not, as expressed by Joseph:

> Then you kind of know what absolutely not to do, because *here* you are allowed to, but you can't do it *there*, and like that, you manage to discriminate quite easily, sort of. You don't ask yourself: Can I write my own ideas or reflect a bit extra on this?

It seems like the experience of writing within different genres than the academic genre has helped Joseph to quite easily and intuitively understand the norms and standards of academic writing. It might look as though he has entered the world of academic writing without the difficulties, the frustration, or the stress that was described by the students in the comparison group in theme 1. However, this world is still perceived as constricted and rule-governed, something that might be seen in Joseph's words 'allowed' and 'can't do'. The contrast between the other writing genres and the academic genre is what helps him to understand what is allowed, acceptable, and suitable in academic texts.

For Laura, this transition seems more confusing; switching to academic writing becomes more like a 'wake-up call' than an intuitive and smooth transition:

> You know, I wrote exactly whatever I thought in that utopian text. And then I wrote a text now that I've submitted in a different course and then it wasn't approved because I let my opinions shine through. And then I thought like: 'damn!', or – if one is allowed to use such words here – you know (laughter), but then I was like 'darn!'.

It seems from this excerpt that for Laura, the contrast between the other writing genres and the academic genre were visible and understandable as a result of the fact that her text was not approved. When she uses the exclamations 'damn!' and 'darn!' it does not seem like this disapproval was difficult to understand, rather, she understood it immediately: It was disapproved because she had let her 'opinions shine through'. Interestingly, she does not blame this learning-the-hard-way experience on the writing module. On the contrary, Laura expresses later on in the focus-group interview:

> I thought it was a really – to brag a little bit – a good writing module, I think, I learned a lot from it!

Furthermore, the students express that being challenged to share their own texts with other students in order to combine the texts into one group text was helpful in learning how to write academic texts. The texts in the other writing genres might have been experienced as more personal in terms of the possibility to express subjective opinions and ideas more freely. By reading each other's texts the students realise that people have different perspectives and opinions on the same themes:

> Sarah: I think I'm more attentive now to seeing more perspectives on the same thing, sort of, and think like: Do I mean *this* or do I mean *that* or maybe both? Kind of getting more discussion perspectives included.

Reading other students' texts has helped Sarah to be more attentive to her own perspectives and standpoints. This is supported by Hannah, who has been inspired to more actively look for others who do not necessarily agree with her rather than 'just read stuff or talk with people who agree with me'. She has come to realise, through this particular assignment, that *'not everyone comes from Nesna (the name of her hometown has been changed)'*. Earlier, she has been used to only spending time with people who agreed with her and saw things the way she did, whereas by reading other students' texts, she has seen different ways of viewing the world, and this has in turn inspired her to actively seek opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives that differ from her own.

All in all, by expressing themselves in other writing genres than the academic genre in the beginning of the bachelor programme the students have become more aware of the boundaries of academic text work. Furthermore, by being exposed to other students' texts they have become

more attentive to their own standpoints, and they have also learned how to integrate more perspectives into their own writing. The contrast between 'my' text and the 'other person's text' becomes an entry point for students to write themselves into academic literacy.

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that students oftentimes experience academic writing as dull and constricted, that expressing themselves in other writing genres than the academic genre allows students to play with and play out various identities, and that academic writing might be learned from contrasts – both between other writing genres and the academic genre, and between one's own text and other students' texts.

Based on the interviews with both the focus group and the comparison group, academic writing emerges as a dull and constricted world for students. This is in line with the study conducted by Itua et al. (2014, 320) reporting that students find academic content both 'boring' and 'hard' to read. For the students in the comparison group who have been challenged to write within the academic genre from the start and who have been through a workshop about academic writing, it seems difficult to understand, grasp, and comply with the norms and regulations that the students associate with academic writing. This might appear paradoxical: one might have believed that the more training the students were given at the start of their studies, the more comfortable they would be about academic writing.

Interestingly, from the students' discussions in the interview, it becomes clear that they struggle in their transition into academia, which resonates with other research findings in this field. While Ask (2007) found that first-year students expressed anxiety and stress in relation to not understanding the norms and rules of academic writing, the study by Arneback, Englund, and Solbrekke (2016, 281) showed that students experienced the first phase in the university setting as a 'shock' because the 'ideals and demands of writing and reading' were new to them. Similarly, in their research, Elliott et al. (2019, 1173) point to 'the vulnerability felt by all students as they attempted to manage university expectations for academic writing'.

From the interview with the comparison group, it appears that students experience the rules and norms of academic writing as fixed and immutable and they position themselves as inferior to academic staff when it comes to understanding and applying these rules and norms. The boundary conditions for academic writing are experienced as defined by an academic community that they need to understand and respect, but that they are not part of yet. One might say that the students feel like 'novices' (Dreyfus 2004) whereas the teachers are seen as experts who have the intuitive knowledge of academic writing that the students long to have.

As we have seen above, the experience expressed in the comparison group confirms previous research which pinpoints the difficulties that students experience in the transition into academia, particularly related to academic writing. In the focus group, on the other hand, the students show a playful approach to writing within the different non-academic genres. While writing within these genres they experience freedom to experiment with identities and express their voice – their engagement and ideas – as illustrated in theme 2.

Furthermore, it appears that the norms and rules for writing within these genres do not feel external or out of reach for them, but rather they experience the freedom to explore and negotiate the boundary conditions by, for instance, including references to the degree that they want to, as expressed by Sarah in theme 2. We argue that the writing module described here creates a space for first-year students to play with and play out different identities by expressing themselves in other writing genres than the academic genre. Within this space, the teachers no longer appear as experts who define the rules and norms. Rather, the students feel that they can explore the boundary conditions freely and approach the writing in a more playful manner without the fear of failing. From a teaching point of view, the focus is shifted from superimposing rules and norms onto students towards a more dialogic approach (Shor and Freire 1987) where students and teachers explore

writing within the academic context together. Through such an approach the students can develop their own voice (hooks 1994).[1]

The space that is created by the writing module in this study is further expanded by students sharing their texts with each other and developing a shared final text. Through this process students are able to see various perspectives on the same task and learn from each other. In their study of feedback practices among students, Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014) found that evaluating and giving feedback on peer students' texts was just as helpful for the students as receiving feedback on their own texts. Reading peers' texts activated a parallel process in which they automatically judged and evaluated their own text. In our study a similar experience is described: while reading other students' texts the students open up to other perspectives and even feel inspired to actively seek settings where they are exposed to different opinions, standpoints, and worldviews than their own.

The ability to see a theme or phenomenon from different perspectives can be seen as a part of the 'critical-analytical competence' suggested by Ask (2007, 16) that is considered a crucial quality in academic writing and can also be understood as an important aspect of academic literacy. The students' eagerness and willingness to actively search for alternative perspectives as a result of being exposed to other students' texts concurs with the findings of Bharuthram and McKenna (2012) who found that receiving feedback on one's own drafts, both from other students and from teachers, helped students to develop academic literacy.

We further argue that the space created through the writing module generates opportunities for students to experience mastery and belonging within the academic context. This does not mean that they necessarily experience mastery related to academic writing per se, but rather, mastery in writing in academia. From the students' accounts, it appears that they feel accepted in their writing: They experience that they have a voice that someone wants to listen to and that can be expressed on their own terms. We argue that through this experience students might feel more 'at home' in the academic community since they contribute to creating the standards and norms of ways of talking and acting in this community (Lave and Wenger 2000).

Our data material does not allow us to comment on the students' actual competence when it comes to academic writing, however, the findings point to a sense of identification, belonging, and mastery that students develop through the writing module. This can be seen as an important element in the development of academic literacy in the sense that the students feel enabled to 'communicate competently in an academic discourse community' (Wingate 2018, 2). We argue, in line with Wingate (2018) and Wingate and Tribble (2012), that academic literacy involves more than merely being able to write academic texts according to given standards and rules.

Furthermore, the experience of mastery can be connected to the concept of self-efficacy which implies that the belief in one's capacities to solve a specific task influences one's actual performance in a given domain (Bandura 2012). It seems from our study that the experience of mastery when writing in the academic context, in terms of having succeeded in performing the blogpost/utopia/debate article writing tasks, helps students to build self-efficacy when it comes to writing in academia, which might then influence the actual performance in academic writing. Seneviratne (2018, 19) argues that 'researchers have paid little attention to ways that could improve learners' academic writing self-efficacy rather than the actual performance'. Just as the participants in her doctoral study reported an increase in self-efficacy as a consequence of an individualised digital social-media based writing assistance program, our study indicates that including more informal genres in an early phase of higher education might help students to gain self-efficacy when it comes to writing in academia. Moreover, similarly to the way that Badenhorst (2012) illustrated how integrating blog writing into the teaching helped students to develop academic literacy, we argue that providing students with opportunities to experience contrasts, both between different writing genres and between different perspectives, as well as developing self-efficacy with respect to writing in an academic context, has impact on students' development of academic literacy.

The question arises, however, as to whether writing modules similar to the one examined in this research might aggravate the academic writing skills of students. As shown in the introduction, research indicates that the use of social media has negative impact on academic writing skills (Cingel and Sundar 2012; DeJonge and Kemp 2012; Omar and Miah 2012; Rosen et al. 2010). Bearing this in mind, one might believe that the use of more informal writing genres, such as blogposts, might also contribute to, for instance, poor spelling and grammar. Again, the data material in this study does not make it possible for us to evaluate the students' actual skills in academic writing, but we argue that the experience of self-efficacy and belonging that we see in the findings might be an important part of the process of developing academic writing skills, even if the first results prove to be poor in terms of low grades or poor writing qualities. Feeling at home, at ease, and accepted might be a way of easing the 'shock' (Arneback, Englund, and Solbrekke 2016) or the 'vulnerability' (Elliott et al. 2019) that students experience in their transition into academia, and thereby give a different starting point for learning than if one starts by highlighting the rules and regulations of academic writing. One might ask, however, whether or not this would be a way of postponing the shock or experience of vulnerability that will inevitably occur when the students face the reality of academic writing and need to produce results according to given standards.

In the third theme, 'learning academic writing from contrasts', we see that the students in the focus group express an understanding of what to do and what not to do while writing academic texts, pointing to the contrasts to the more informal genres as the source of this understanding. By experimenting with other writing genres, they understand more easily the possibilities and limitations of academic writing. Thus, it does not seem like writing in other genres creates confusion for the students, as one might have expected, neither does it seem to have a directly detrimental effect on their academic writing skills, as they experience it themselves. Rather, in our data the participants express that although the contrast between other writing genres and academic writing had to be learned the 'hard way' for some, this contrast helped them to see the boundaries between the academic genre and the more informal genres. When Laura tells us that the academic text that she submitted in a subsequent course was not approved 'because I let my opinions shine through', this could be seen as a shock similar to the one described in the study conducted by Arneback, Englund, and Solbrekke (2016). However, in spite of the shock she still sees the writing module as a 'good writing module' that she 'learned a lot from', and she does not seem to share the frustration and confusion about academic writing that is expressed in the comparison group where the students have been through a more traditional writing seminar focusing on repeating the norms of academic writing. One might even argue that the self-efficacy that the students seem to have acquired when it comes to writing in academia might be a buffer that makes any potential shock more manageable.

We therefore argue that for first-year students, being exposed to different perspectives through reading and commenting on each other's texts, developing one's own voice and identity in relation to the themes in question, and developing a sense of self-efficacy in the academic context – which are all important findings from this study – might be just as important when it comes to developing academic literacy in the first year of one's studies as the value of developing actual academic writing skills. In the future, it will be interesting to further explore how these initial experiences influence students' development of academic writing skills and, in more general terms, their development of academic literacy in subsequent courses and contexts.

Summary and outlook

The focus on first-year students' writing experiences when experimenting with various writing genres provides interesting entry points to explore how students can 'write themselves into' academic literacy. The current study only touches upon a few aspects of the complex learning processes related to the transition into higher education. However, it illustrates how an educational space that allows students to play with and play out different identities can be created. Without making any claims as to causes and effects, our suggestion for practitioners, on the basis of the

findings from this study, is to allow first-year students to express their ideas and thoughts through other writing genres than the academic genre in an early phase of their university career to help them develop important aspects of academic literacy that are not directly related to academic writing. We suggest that a focus on cultivating competencies related to academic writing, by for instance training micro skills (Brown 2004), might be a next step in assisting the students' learning process related to writing academic texts.

The experience of learning from contrasts does not necessarily imply that students write better texts or receive better grades on the exams than students who have not been exposed to writing modules similar to the one explored in this study. As this research is based on the students' *experience* of academic writing and does not look into their *actual* academic writing skills, we cannot draw any conclusions about the quality of the writing, which might be seen as a clear limitation of this study, and which might be an area for further research. However, we argue that this experience might create opportunities for students to feel more 'at home' in the academic context, rather than feeling alienated and frustrated. We also see indications that the students experience self-efficacy in relation to academic writing, which might be an important aspect in their development of academic literacy.

Note

1. bell hooks does not use capital letters in her name, as a part of her resistance to standards and norms.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Gunhild Marie Roald is an Associate Professor at the counselling section of the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Her research interests revolve around helping relationships and collaborative relationships, such as the counsellor-client, the leader-employee, the teacher-student, or various forms of peer relationships. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, she has been looking into feedback experiences in interdisciplinary teams, the role of self-insight at the workplace, and the use of coaching within leadership. Her teaching engagement has led to a research interest in academic writing and how students can be assisted in their learning process related to this particular form of writing.

Patric Wallin is an Associate Professor at the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). In his research, he uses situated and transformative learning as entry points to explore personal development, meaningful assessment, and learning environments in the context of higher education. Patric is particularly interested in how to create educational spaces that enable students to make meaningful contributions to research and society, and how traditional student-teacher positions can be challenged through partnership. By re-considering the relationship between undergraduate teaching and academic research, he wants to re-establish the university as a place for collaboration between students and academics with the common purpose of co-creating knowledge and meaning.

Ingunn Dahler Hybertsen is an Associate Professor and Deputy Head of Education at the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Her research addresses themes such as educational leadership and quality, leadership learning in education and development programmes, and organisational change capacity. Using developmental and qualitative evaluation methodology, she has looked into reflective processes and identity work in educational programmes, organisations, and communities of practice. She teaches and supervises at all levels within the field of educational psychology and in executive leadership programmes for leaders across sectors.

Jorun M. Stenøien is a Professor at the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Her research is within the field of adult learning and touches upon learning processes in various contexts. She has looked into how non-formal learning and knowledge is formed through participation, interaction, and collaboration. Practical knowledge and interest-based learning are areas of particular interest for Jorun, as well as learning related to societal change and social movements.

ORCID

Gunhild Marie Roald 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1603-4497
Patric Wallin 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6222-8543

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