

## **Student perceptions of referencing**

The aim of this workshop is to present and discuss the findings of a 2008/9 research study supported by the LearnHigher and WriteNow Centres of Excellence in Higher Education.

The aim of this study was to identify how students perceive the roles of referencing in academic writing; to identify the main referencing problems for students; and to consider the implications of the findings for higher education institutions, and in particular for staff development.

It is an expected current academic practice that students will cite and reference in a bibliographic list the sources of their ideas, data and other evidence in written assignments. But it seems, from the evidence available, that a significant number of students find referencing a difficult process to understand and manage. A study, for example, by Gourlay and Greig (2007), found that 30 per cent of the 600 students surveyed at Napier University on the challenges of academic writing reported difficulties when using references and quotes in assignments.

Why this is so was at the core of this enquiry and drew extensively on the views of students to reach its conclusions.

A total of 278 UK/HE students were involved, and the perceptions of students gathered at individual guidance sessions and referencing workshops at two HE institutions, and via a 'Have Your Say' facility on the LearnHigher website that opened the discussion to students at twelve other institutions.

The findings suggested that the main technical issues for students are related to understanding when they should reference, and the referencing detail required by a particular referencing system. However, these practical difficulties were compounded by the range of referencing styles they encountered; inconsistent advice and feedback from tutors; and a lack of clarity as to understanding when and how they could integrate their own experiences into assignments.

For many students in the survey, a fear of being accused of plagiarism was at the core of their difficulties and resulted in referencing being perceived as a form of defence against such accusations, rather than as a tool for the development of their own

arguments. The survey suggested that there was a tension for students between the demands and conventions of academic writing and the need to develop their own perspectives on presented ideas, theories, models and practices. The workshop leader will argue that one of the challenges for institutions is how they might encourage students to select and manage evidence and to use referencing as a tool to develop their own sense of authorial identity in assignments.

The workshop will be organised in three parts:

First, delegates will be invited to present their own interpretations and experiences of the referencing issues and difficulties encountered by students, and why they think these occur (10 minutes).

Second, the workshop leader will present a PowerPoint summary of the study findings and delegates given a written copy of these (30 minutes).

Third, the research approach and findings can be challenged and discussed by delegates (20 minutes).

(495 words)

Keywords: Referencing, citation, authorship, authorial identity.

Equipment: PowerPoint.

Reference:

Gourlay, L. and J. Greig (2007). '*Silent' academic literacies: interpreting student perceptions of academic writing*. Paper delivered at 'Hearing the Student Voice' seminar, 9 May 2007. Glasgow: Napier University.