Academic writing in social work education: reflections from an international classroom

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ABSTRACT
The affordances of processing subject knowledge through academic writing are rarely explicitly realised in social work education. In this article, we highlight the link between instructors’ efforts to facilitate students’ academic writing and students’ perceived increase of knowledge in the subject of social work in an international context. Based on instructors’ and students’ reflections collected before, during, and after a course, we aimed to answer the following questions: in what way can academic writing support students’ learning in social work? What are students’ reflections on the pedagogical model involving academic writing? The theoretical framework for the analysis was based on learning theories focusing on collaborative learning. The main conclusion is that the instructors’ awareness of how to scaffold students’ ability to write in an academic context and to develop the students’ understanding of social work in a local and global context is an important factor in student learning.

Introduction
How can the process of academic writing support student learning in an international course at Malmö University? What are student reflections on this pedagogical approach? This paper highlights the link between instructor efforts to integrate academic writing tasks into an undergraduate course in social work, the students’ writing, the students’ reported acquisition of new knowledge within the subject, and the process of internationalisation. In the autumn of 2015, the course HS163E, ‘Social Work in a Local and Global Context’, was offered at the Department of Social Work at Malmö University. Eighteen students from eight countries in Europe (Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden) and beyond (Australia, Ghana, Kenya, South Korea and Tanzania) were enrolled. The students represented their countries from various universities and are at different levels of their social work education. The teachers in the course and also the instructors of the academic writing process are both PhDs, one in Social Work and one in Pedagogy. The teachers also have a broad background of teaching in Social Work education.

The course was designed to help the students develop knowledge and understanding of social policy, social challenges and individuals’ different life situations in relation to multicultural social work, locally and globally. A particular pedagogical model was developed in the course integrating academic writing tasks with the course subject content. This work was supported by consulting with a writing specialist. As a result, we have used interactive scaffolding of students’ writing to facilitate their acquisition of the course content; through continuous oral and written feedback, the students have been given the opportunity to develop their writing skills. Weekly individual written reflections as input for subsequent seminar, 1 two minor individual papers, and a scientific article on some of the issues relevant to the course were essential components of this model; through academic writing, the instructors supported students both in their acquisition of the course content and in their production of new knowledge in the discipline. Three categories of learning outcomes, which are central for the social work profession, were achieved in this pedagogical approach where academic writing constituted an important part: (a) the professional – comparing, (b) professional – individual, and (c) professional – cultural. As course instructors, we have received a continuous help from the use of an assessment template from a writing specialist as a part of achieving constructive alignment between the learning outcomes for the course (mentioned above), course activities, tasks, and formative and summative feedback (Biggs 2003).

Because social work is a profession, this educational model aimed to foster meta-knowledge of the relationship between the academic knowledge and understanding of the practical skills involved in executing the profession. Academic writing tasks in this course were thus used to stimulate students’ reflections. These reflections were grounded in the students’ own social background and cultural knowledge in the international forum that the course...
provided. Based on our experiences in the course, this article, therefore, aims to illuminate the use of academic writing in the subject of social work to promote subject knowledge acquisition and production in an international classroom.

**Social work and academic writing**

Social work as an academic subject is relatively new in Sweden: it became an academic discipline first in 1979. Therefore, writing in academia has, historically, no long tradition in social work. In order to understand social work from the student’s perspective, we need to relate the subject to a relevant context on which it is dependent and which it affects. Lorenz describes this as follows (Lorenz 1994, 155, our interpretation):

> Social work could be described as contextual, meaning it is bound to national traditions, laws, and local culture, and the content of Social Work Education in Sweden is, to a large extent, governed by national guidelines due to the field of profession of social workers.

In its endeavour to explicate human problem areas, social work as an academic discipline includes influences mainly from sociology and psychology. For students, researchers and professionals, social work is largely based on the understanding of the complex relationship between personal and situational factors, as well as culture and time dimensions.

Because social work can be understood as both an academic discipline and profession (Borjesson and Borjesson 2015), it is important to capture the relationship between research and practice in social work and the rhetoric that surrounds both the discipline and the profession. This may be achieved partly through investigating how social work students develop their academic writing skills to demonstrate their learning and to produce new knowledge within the discipline; in other words, studying students’ written production may help arrive at a description of what characterises the rhetoric of research and practical work in the discipline. Academic writing for social workers is naturally influenced by this duality, as the texts that are being produced and examined can be both academic and practical at the same time. The writing produced in university courses may thus both support student learning according to the academic requirements in the discipline and also support student professional development as social workers.

This traditional dichotomy between academic and professional contexts and texts is further enhanced in a globalised world, which has increasingly become the professional arena for social workers. It is, therefore, not only the differences between academic and professional texts that are to be negotiated, but also the different cultural, academic, and textual traditions in the world that must be considered (Rai and Lillis 2013). Thus, the key task for social workers is to find strategies to meet the challenges of a global society. Because globalisation effects the social policy debate on human cross-border mobility, migration, and other issues in several ways (Cousins 2005), it also affects both the practice of and education in social work. The need for international education in social work is obvious, but achieving this is a complex task (Merrill and Frost 2011); students may have different views on the meaning of and the role of social work. In addition, social work is seen as contextually bound, which means that it is tied to national traditions, laws, and local cultures (Borjesson and Borjesson 2015). Rai and Lillis (2013) further argue that in this dual context of global social work as an academic discipline and as a profession, academic writing should be seen as an integral part of student acquisition and production of subject knowledge to further facilitate the ability to self-reflect, which is a crucial competency for social workers’ professional involvement with clients.

**Scaffolding through academic writing tasks**

Academic writing is, as we perceive it, a central part of the expression of critical reflection: being able to evaluate information and take an informed perspective on the sources. Being able to adopt such a critical attitude and to shift perspectives to analyse situations and phenomena from different angles (Chu, Basgier, and Weber 2015) is, in other words, crucial for the production of new knowledge in social work. Being able to read and understand academic texts, to understand why and how texts are constructed within one’s discipline, and being able to relate a text to other texts and arguments is also important for students’ effective engagement in academic writing tasks (Parkinson and Adendorff 2004). Social work may also be seen as a profession of writing (Healy and Mulholland 2012). Therefore, the integration of the writing tasks into a course in social work is highly intentional. The reason we incorporated academic writing tasks to scaffold student learning was to provide an equalising factor to the students’ significant diversity of educational traditions and experience, including what kind of examinations the students were subjected to prior to our course and what kind of requirements were stipulated for their learning. Our approach was, therefore, to consider academic writing as the common denominator for the course: the texts produced in the writing tasks constituted the *lingua franca* of the course. Through standardised task instructions and assessment criteria for writing, the students were scaffolded to develop shared skills and were socialised into the subject of social work and its rhetoric. The academic lesson plan in the course due to the formalised study guide contain the following basic steps: (1) Brainstorming in groups (to get thoughts out of the mind and generate ideas) (2) Outline to further organise the thoughts and make them concrete (3) Presentation of an outline (4) Supervised feed-back in which the instructor provides a list of questions such as; sources, material, ability to implement and potential outcome (5) Final draft in which the instructor’s suggestions are considered and evaluated according to the learning outcomes. Throughout this collaborative teaching, the academic writing
process by scaffolding instructions is reached both individually and in group efforts. There are, of course, various purposes to academic writing in higher education, but in our course, writing was employed to help students process and internalise new information from local and global perspectives to increase their knowledge of the subject and their future ability to work in international contexts. We specifically drew the students’ attention to particular characteristics of academic writing in relation to other text types or genres. Bailey (2015, 6), for example, formulates this as follows:

Although there is no fixed standard of academic writing, it is clearly different from the written style of newspapers or novels, for example it is generally agreed that academic writing attempts to be accurate and objective.

As course coordinators, we have, from the start, had the idea of integrating academic writing as a scaffold for student knowledge acquisition and production. The students’ shared understanding and reproduction of the scientific language and the key terms in social work, as well as their ability to process sources and referencing based on the disciplinary norms, were also considered important in the international context of the course. We developed our instructions for various writing tasks to enable students to formulate and build logically stringent and argumentative texts because in social work, writing as such is central, not least documentation techniques, which are fundamental to the profession (Rai and Lillis 2013). Therefore, we have focused on the students’ development of academic writing skills by offering the students a variety of opportunities to demonstrate their learning of the course content and to produce new knowledge relevant to their future execution of the profession in an international context through various writing tasks.

Creating shared understanding in a heterogeneous international classroom through academic writing tasks

As mentioned above, what characterised our course was the physical but also the educational meeting of students from different cultures and educational traditions. The writing tasks developed in the course consisted of eight individual weekly written reflections as input for subsequent seminar discussions, two minor papers in preparation for the writing of a scientific article, and the article itself. The tasks were carefully constructed to build on each other and to allow students to recycle their already acquired knowledge of the course content and academic writing conventions (see Nunan 2004 on task-based learning). To facilitate knowledge acquisition and production, the students were given detailed instructions for the writing tasks in the course. The pedagogical model was supported by consulting a writing specialist, with whom we discussed how to make the instructions clear, what linguistic expressions to use, how to formulate and convey the assessment criteria, and what feedback to offer, among other things. As the purpose of the writing tasks was to analyse specific themes within the social welfare system and reflect on the implications for social work and social work practice, the instructions for the writing assignments included detailed descriptions of the required textual organisation and formatting conventions, including referencing style. The assessment criteria were included in the course documents and were discussed with students both at the beginning of the course and before each of the tasks. Individual written formative feedback was given on the drafts of the two minor papers and the article. After the students had familiarised themselves with the written feedback, they also received additional oral feedback on their drafts in an individual meeting with the instructor. The students’ reflections were also given formative feedback during the seminars. The feedback on student writing was thus communicated both orally and in writing and was aimed to further student understanding of the disciplinary conventions as well as to help the students to achieve shared understanding of the course content. All student work was also assessed in a summative way upon completion of the tasks guided by the syllabus of the course. In our experience, a combination of summative and formative feedback effectively supports student learning, as also noted by White and Weight (2000, 168).

Formative feedback potentially modifies a student’s thinking or behaviour for the purpose of learning, and summative feedback assesses how well a student accomplishes a task or achieves a result for the purpose of grading.

It is difficult to understand social work unless the understanding of the individual is related to an organisational or political context. The integration of written tasks in the course aimed to support this understanding in students. The writing tasks thus were designed to promote the analysis of social work on individual, organisational, and societal levels as per the three tiers of learning outcomes for the course (a, b, and c) described above.

The data

The data for this case study comes from two sources. First, we, the instructors, have documented our discussions before, during, and after the course. The documentation consists of the notes taken during these discussions. The content of the discussions was on how best to integrate academic writing tasks into the course, where and when in the course the tasks should be introduced, what instructions should be given to each task, what kind of feedback should be given for each task, etc. Second, at the end of the course, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire with open questions on the course content, structure, instructions and feedback on their writing (see Appendix). The purpose of several methods of our data collection in our study is to obtain a broad and well-established picture of academic writing. The students were given an hour in the classroom environment to answer the questions in depth. In total, 16 out of the 18 students completed the questionnaires. In this paper,
we have only addressed the issues related to our purpose: to highlight the link between academic writing tasks and student learning. Subsequently, the student answers were anonymised, checked for grammar, spelling, and punctuation to ascertain legibility, and were assigned letter labels (A–Q), used to introduce their voices in the next section. The student answers were analysed under the following categories: writing for knowledge, writing instructions and feedback, and prior experience of academic writing. The next section also contains some of the instructors’ reflections on the course.

The findings
Overall, the students found the pedagogical design of the course in which academic writing was included conducive to their learning. Some students, however, reported that they found extensive writing tasks strenuous.

Writing for knowledge
For their individual weekly reflections, two minor papers, and an article, the students chose their topics themselves (within the areas the course covered: for example, migration, child welfare, substance abuse and elderly care). The choice of their own topic allowed the students to search widely for information not only in the course literature but also in other scholarly sources; the students were also able to incorporate their own experiences of the different local and international contexts. When this knowledge was subsequently organised into the required text form (reflection, paper, or article), the majority of the students reported that writing helped them gain a deeper understanding of their topics and provided them with a more structured approach to dealing with the course content. Student C, for example, reported the following:

Throughout the writing about my subject, I understand it better and also think about the stuff for writing the weekly reflections.

Several students expressed the writing being a precondition for in-depth knowledge acquisition of the subject. Writing the papers gave the students the opportunity to focus more in detail on their topics, which in turn helped them gain insight and knowledge about social work. Student B synthesised this in the following way:

Writing about my subject has helped me understand it better in a sense that I did know of child welfare and migration, but I was never aware of some theories behind these phenomena. However, after writing and researching more on them, I can say that I have gained a deeper insight than ever.

Although the aim of the academic writing tasks was to scaffold student insight in their topics, the writing in itself was not enough to obtain this. It is the subsequent combination of academic writing and feedback from the instructors and peers that constituted a fundamental part of this educational model.

Writing instructions and feedback
The students’ knowledge acquisition and production were reportedly effectively scaffolded by the writing tasks, instructions and feedback. Engaging in structured writing was also beneficial for students’ metacognitive development and their understanding of academic writing in the discipline, as expressed by student M:

The papers were definitely useful; I learned a lot about academic writing and some structure through that.

However, some students called for even more explicit writing instructions for the different tasks; they also asked for even more detailed assessment criteria to be able to engage in the tasks successfully. Student L expressed this as follows:

For me, the writing instructions were not very clear. It took me a lot to understand what we exactly had to do.

The majority of the students, however, found the instructions provided for the various tasks clear and helpful. Students were satisfied with the instructions guiding their writing, which forced them to produce several drafts of structured texts. Further, the individual feedback received was generally appreciated. The feedback prepared the students to perform to meet the assessment criteria. It also reportedly informed their work on subsequent assignments. Student S, for example, highlighted the importance of the feedback for making the textual organisation clearer:

I think both feedback and instructions were very good to understand what and how we should write our paper because I had never written something like this before. It gave me a structure. The personal feedback was very good because through it I understood how I can write the next paper in another or better way.
Comments from the students highlighted the importance of clarity about what should be included in the task, what the instructors expected, how these expectations could be met, and that the feedback the students received should feed forward even better, guiding them in their future writing. Some students also stressed the importance of the instructors providing detailed and clear individual feedback, as expressed by student O:

"It was good that the teacher explained to us the points individually and that we not only had to read through them on our own because through the explanation I understood it better."

In particular, the students saw the feedback received as promoting their acquisition of subject knowledge as well as helping them enter disciplinary discussions with confidence and understanding of the disciplinary conventions for knowledge production. For example, student F expressed the following opinion:

"It was very helpful to get individual feedback, and, furthermore, a paper with feedback coming from the teacher."

The instructors' contribution to ascertaining the quality of the students' writing was significant. However, the students' previous experience of academic writing also affected their ability to produce texts in the course.

**Prior experience of academic writing**

Depending on the students' prior experience in academic writing tasks, we have discerned a clear difference in their perception of writing instructions and feedback. The students with English as their mother tongue and possibly also those who had had prior experience of academic writing courses in their curriculum (e.g. First Year Composition, FYC, courses typical for higher education in the US) were far more positive in describing the writing tasks than the students from non-English speaking countries, many of which have no tradition of teaching academic writing explicitly. To a certain degree, depending on the students' backgrounds, the writing instructions were either considered clear or in need of clarification, and the feedback was either considered helpful and formative or too general.

For the students, the integration of academic writing tasks into the course meant that to perform to the course requirements they had to balance both the textual conventions and the new content. Reportedly, however, both for students with prior knowledge of academic writing and for those students who lacked this knowledge, this resulted in a perceived increase both in their subject knowledge and in their confidence in their ability to produce disciplinary texts. This dual gain is possibly due to the careful scaffolding of the students' work with respect to the form as well as the content of their texts.

**The instructors' reflections**

The students in the study represented different educational traditions in which writing instructions, textual conventions and instructor and peer feedback may have played different roles in their education. The consequences of this variety of students and the impact of the result in this study can be further discussed in future studies. In this course, we noticed that the students who were not native English speakers but who had high ambitions for learning demanded very clear, detailed and individualised instructions. Through clear instructions on how to produce a reflection, a paper, or an article, structuring the content to produce new knowledge became easier. At the same time, writing in drafts prompted all students, irrespective of their educational backgrounds or prior skills in academic writing, to process both the content and the form of their texts several times to create a common disciplinary discourse in the international classroom. Producing texts in English also meant that the majority of the students had to work with their texts also on a more concrete level of words and formulations to participate in this shared discourse effectively.

Although outside of North America, courses corresponding to FYC are rare, nonetheless attending to students' writing skills in various ways is more and more prioritised in higher education globally (see Lima 2015). For the non-English speaking students on the course, particularly those without prior academic writing skills, it was more difficult than for the native speakers and those with prior writing skills to understand the instructions, utilize the feedback, and perform to meet the course requirements. However, using carefully constructed writing tasks has, to a certain degree, proven to even the odds between different groups of students. In other words, both inexperienced and experienced students were scaffolded to produce new disciplinary knowledge through writing. Because the feedback was individualised, we could target the students' particular areas of difficulty to the degree necessary to ascertain their learning. Academic writing appears to support forms of examination given a clear progression in the writing tasks and the feedback on these tasks. By requiring students to write down individual reflections in order to support their writing of the course papers, the students are also supported in their writing of the scientific article.

We find that there is a clear added value in utilising academic writing tasks as an educational tool, which also takes advantage of the students' diversity in an international course. One of our reflections upon the completion of the course is that academic writing in the international classroom places great demands on both students and
instructors. The close integration of the subject content and writing is essential for the students’ learning as well as their linguistic development. This collaborative approach to knowledge acquisition and production is crucial for the students’ development.

After having completed the course and investigated students’ experience of writing tasks, we have come to the conclusion that integrating academic writing into a course design is of benefit in our subject. We found academic writing a useful tool in helping students to achieve the learning goals in the international classroom, where the writing tasks scaffold the students’ acquisition of shared disciplinary discourse and production of new knowledge.

Implications for future practice
Our study suggests that if the starting point in the writing process is the same regardless of students’ previous experience in academic writing, a model can be developed where every student is given the same opportunities for academic self-reflection and processing of new knowledge through writing. There also seems to be a relationship between the development of the instructors’ awareness of how to strengthen students’ ability to write in an academic context and the quality of higher education. In the general spirit of constructive alignment (Biggs 2003), it is essential that the planning of a course starts with the planning of the examination tasks as well as the instructions to students and the assessment criteria. Academic writing should be an integral part of all university courses, and utilising expertise in academic writing outside one’s own subject when needed is strongly recommended. When there are a variety of students coming from abroad, having different traditions in academic writing, the consequences of this variety and the potential impact of the result in a study like this can be further discussed in future studies.

Academic writing as a contributing factor for cultivating the understanding of social work in the international classroom in a local and global context should not be underestimated for the development of professional skills. Skills in academic writing, in this case, constitute the glue that is needed to promote students’ learning of the subject content. By using academic writing in this way, we have reportedly developed an interdisciplinary way of increasing the students’ perceived academic knowledge and professional confidence. Academic writing can, therefore, be seen to play an essential role in developing global skills in social work.

Notes
1. We have here been inspired by the pedagogical model of a flipped classroom by Bergmann and Sams 2012.
2. Academic writing has clearly shown how students have developed their ability to reflect on their professional capacity/skills in comparison to others, as well as on personal development and knowledge of the common basis of differences in background, study habits, traditions, etc.
3. Covering criterion such as forecasting, developing, supporting, concluding and language use, and paper design.
4. These courses focus on improving students’ abilities to write in a university setting and introduce students to writing practices in the disciplines and professions (Lima 2015).

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References
Appendix

Academic writing – Questionnaire

Has writing about your subject helped you understand it better?
What did you think about the writing instructions you received? About the feedback you received?
You may very well suggest in what way the writing instructions could be improved, in what way could they be improved in your point of view?