Crucial Connections: an Exploration of Critical Thinking and Scholarly Writing

Roisin Donnelly
Technological University Dublin, roisin.donnelly@tudublin.ie

Marian Fitzmaurice
Technological University Dublin, marian.fitzmaurice@tudublin.ie

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Roisin Donnelly and Marian Fitzmaurice

Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre
Dublin Institute of Technology

Abstract

Academic writing in the context of producing quality research articles is something which all academics engage in and there is evidence of increased attention to supporting the development of the writing and subsequent output of academics and research students. However, while scholarly writing is learnt in complex ways, critical thinking is an intrinsic part of such writing, and is highly valued across all the academic disciplines and indeed is a high priority on both employability and citizenship agendas. However, in practice the teaching of critical thinking is difficult and there is a lack of discussion about what it means within the context of the writing process. This study describes a pedagogic intervention with a group of academic staff to support the participants not only to explore critical thinking in their own writing, but also to consider in depth how they would apply this learning to their work with students in higher education. Within the context of an academic writing module on a postgraduate programme for academic staff in higher education, an action research approach was used with participants to improve their understanding of the role of critical thinking in the academic writing process. The data suggests that the pedagogic intervention resulted in greater confidence in terms of participants' critical writing skills and also supported them to help their own students in the academic writing process. An exploratory model is proposed for critical academic writing encompassing a series of scaffolded in-class activities, virtual peer learning, and tutor feedback – culminating in the publication and dissemination of individual practice-based educational research.

Keywords

Advanced academic literacy; Academic writing; Collaborative dialogue; Critical thinking; Peer review

Introduction

Over the last few decades, critical thinking has been defined in a number of different ways. Elder & Paul (1994) suggest that critical thinking is best understood as the ability of thinkers to take charge of their own thinking. More recently, Duron, Limbach, & Waugh (2006) define critical thinking as the ability to analyse and evaluate information and conclude that "critical thinkers are considered to be able to raise vital questions and problems, formulate them clearly and gather and assess relevant information, use abstract ideas, think open-mindedly, and communicate effectively with others" (p. 160).

Teachers in all disciplines agree that critical thinking is an important educational outcome for their students, and indeed there is general consensus that ccritical thinking concepts and tools are the essential core of all well-conceived instruction. However, although teachers are able to articulate the critical thinking skills that they would like their students to exhibit, the cognitive steps between actual student performance and desirable student performance often remain unarticulated and vague. Taken further, there is an implicit assumption that academics have an agreed understanding of the concept of critical thinking but this tacit understanding is seldom articulated or discussed. As academics working with postgraduate students we were interested in ways of supporting students to be critical in their academic writing. Academic writing can be seen as a continuum of increasing complexity developing from undergraduate to postgraduate writing and beyond (Stacey & Granville, 2009). The term advanced academic literacy (AAL) has been used to refer to the writing expected of participants in higher levels of a discipline and this is a cumulative process of which enculturation into the disciplinary norms is central. Badley (2009) reminds us that good academic writing should always be a problematic and tentative exercise in critical reflective thinking. Clearly, there are key elements of academic writing of which critical thinking is paramount that need to be developed and the pedagogic challenge is to devise relevant supports for postgraduate students so that they can develop as academic writers.

While the social and ideological underpinnings of academic writing have been investigated (Canagarajah, 2002; Casanave, 2002; Johns, 1997), the relationship between critical thinking and academic writing is an under researched area.

Context

There is increasing pressure on academics to undertake research and to publish in higher education and indeed their practice offers rich and interesting fields for investigation but there are few opportunities provided within an increasingly busy and pressurised academic environment for developing their academic writing. In recognition of this, a 10 ECTS module entitled 'Writing and Disseminating Research' was developed and had shared delivery as part of two masters programme in Applied eLearning and Higher Education, which are accredited professional development programmes for academic staff. Ultimately there was dual purpose to the module, to enhance academics own writing as well as supporting their own students in the same endeavour.

Each year, participants are drawn from a variety of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland and from a range of disciplines and course participants range from newly appointed staff to their institutions, to those that have been teaching for anywhere between 5-25 years. Our experience of working with the participants is that this multi disciplinary setting provides for interesting and critical discourse about academic writing. In terms of their subject disciplines, there is an eclectic mix, with many subject disciplines being represented ranging across apprentice education, undergraduate and postgraduate education. The study had a number of objectives:

1. To focus on how critical thinking informs the practice of academic writing; this involved exploring the definitional debates surrounding critical thinking and arriving at a definition that could be adapted within different disciplines.
2. To support academics in improving their own writing through an increased awareness of the concept and practice of critical thinking.

Setting the discussion in the literature

For many years, academic writing has been a distinct teaching and research subject in US higher education and is strongly emerging as a subject in UK higher education, but in Ireland there are few initiatives in this area. Findings from research carried out in the UK with academic and support staff shows that 90% of respondents believe it is necessary to support students in their writing (Ganobscik, 2004). Initially, there were two models in the UK for teaching academic writing. The first is a skills approach, which seeks to teach writing as a set of discrete techniques without relation to a discipline and the second is an academic socialization model, which views academic writing proficiency as something that students absorb through immersion in disciplinary practices. However, Lea & Street (1998) argue for an academic literacies approach, which challenges the assumption implicit in the skills and academic socialization approach that it is the students who are in deficit and need to learn to adapt to the university. Academic literacies theorists make the case that 'writing is not a student problem only, but a challenge for all members of the university as they attempt to adjust to new forms and technologies of writing and studying, as well as a variety of student backgrounds and experiences' (Ganobscik-Williams, 2006, p. 4). In working with academic staff we became aware of a real challenge because as subject specialists they often do not feel that they can work effectively with students on their writing. The authors began to consider how this new theoretical framework might inform the practice of academic staff and decided to put into practice an initiative to support lectures in terms of their writing skills, whilst examining the role of critical thinking in this process and supporting the academic staff to work more effectively with their students on their writing. The work seeks to contribute to the discussion about the role of writing in the university and draw lessons for readers from our experience of implementing an initiative with academic staff drawn from a variety of higher education institutions in Ireland and from a diverse range of disciplines.

Teaching Critical Academic Writing

The recognition that academic writing needs to be taught is growing and the call for teaching writing has come from outside and from inside the university (Bergstrom, 2004; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006). Prior to the 1990's, there was very limited provision of

writing support in the UK tertiary education sector and this can be contrasted with the situation in US universities, where dedicated writing support has been a feature of first year programmes since the late nineteenth century (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). However in the UK there is now an emerging body of work on student writing and three models are evident, study skill, academic socialization and academic literacies. Indeed, there is a now a growing body of research in the field of academic literacies and despite the variety of contexts, the findings in regard to students' struggle with writing and the gaps between tutors' and students' expectations and understanding are remarkably consistent (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). Research findings from very different institutional contexts and student groups all indicate 'a complex relationship between the acquisition and development of subject-based knowledge and writing in higher education' (Lea, 2004. p. 740). She argues that as subject specialists, academics often overlook the ways in which writing and textual practices are central to the process of learning (Lea, 2004).

It is very frequent in higher education for the teaching or support for writing to be separated from mainstream study but a successful programme developed in the USA 'Writing in the Disciplines' approaches the development of academic writing through the disciplines. However, it does not take account of the increasing number of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary contexts where students are undertaking courses, which are becoming more common at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Jacobs (2005) reports on an initiative at a tertiary institution in South Africa on integrating academic literacies into the disciplines of study and argues for the importance of creating discursive spaces for the collaboration of academic literacies practitioners and disciplinary specialists. Attention to student writing must be integrated in mainstream contexts and it seemed to us that working with academic staff on their writing could offer the potential for opening up such discursive spaces.

Stierer (1997) writes about removing some of the guesswork from the process of meeting the writing requirements of courses and calls for a more systematic and explicit approach for helping students to identify and critique the kinds of expectations they are expected to fulfill in relation to written assignments. Students are always expected to be critical in

their writing but while lecturers are able to articulate the critical thinking skills that they would like their students to exhibit in terms of their writing, the cognitive steps between actual student performance and desirable student performance often remain unarticulated and vague. In the module there was an attempt to implement strategies to support students to develop their critical thinking skills in order to bring a criticality to their writing. Some of these students are expert writers in their own disciplines, while others may not have considerable experience and find academic writing really difficult. However, each member of the group is encountering a new area of study with its own particular discourse and supporting the writing process gave them the opportunity to develop new skills.

Research Design

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) argue that action research is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level and this approach was used in this study because it offered the potential to bridge the gap between research and practice by potentially delivering useable solutions to real-world problems. Different action researchers have described the process in different ways, some as cycles of reflective action, some as flow diagrams, some as spirals of action (Mc Niff et al., 1996). Also, in action research there are different types of studies ranging from small-scale evaluative case studies which have a defined start and end point to studies which are cyclical in nature and more long term (Tight, 2003). This research study had a defined start and end point and an approach outlined by Coughlan & Brannick (2001), comprising of a series of steps, diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating was followed, as it was the most suited to the context. Figure 1 illustrates the data collection cycle undertaken in the study.

PLANNING for
Data Collection
(Sept - Oct 2009)

- Arrange access
- Prepare ethics

Data Collection
ACTION
(Oct 2009 - May 2010)

- Academic writing Tutorials over 2 semesters
- Researcher's Diaries
-    Initial qualitative questionnaires

RECOMMENDATIONS
(October 2010)

- Conclusions and recommendations
- Implications for Critical Academic Writing Practice

DATA ANALYSIS
(June-Sept 2010)

- Classify raw data, begin interpretations
- Review raw data under various interpretations
- Search for patterns of data
- Seek linkages between module structure, activities and outcomes
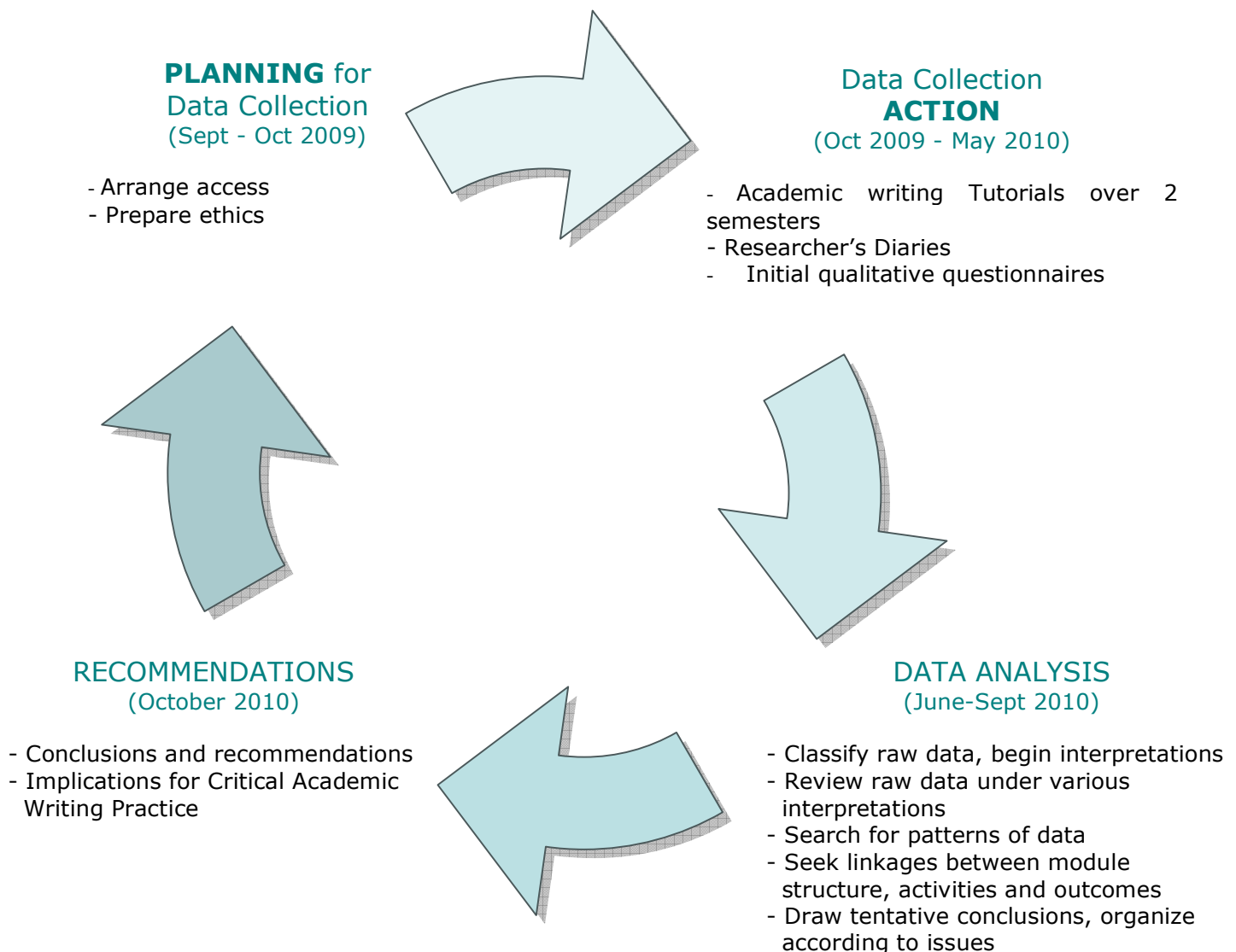- Draw tentative conclusions, organize according to issues

Figure 1 Action Research Cycle for Critical Academic Writing

The action research cycle began with a review of the situation, drawing on informal conversations with participants, colleagues, a review of the literature and a process of values clarification for ourselves with regards to the relationship between critical thinking and academic writing. Following on from this, the 'Critical Academic Writing Module' was designed to develop academic writing through the application of critical thinking

skills. It is arguable that using the traditional lecture format may not adequately foster active learning or critical thinking skills in these participants, as it is based on a teacher-centred approach. As a result, it was important to adjust the structure of class delivery to promote such skills. Not only would this make the module work more enjoyable for both participants and tutors, it could equip participants with the skills necessary in their future practice. During a class session, the tutor needed to consider the kinds of active learning that could encourage critical thinking. To enhance the overall learning experience, it was necessary have a broad understanding of what active learning constituted for these participants. In-class strategies included requesting participants to be involved in the learning experience by, for example, giving information and ideas, sharing experiences, and offering opinions. Table 1 shows a variety of the short activities used to help progress the participants through the process of critical academic writing.

Students asked first to read an article and:	
Individually	**In pairs/small groups**
Produce a drawing/visual summary of the text	One group highlights key points, another 'blacks out' everything that is NOT necessary
Everyone selects one sentence from the text that they have found meaningful (a main point or an idea with which to argue)	In pairs, analyse a passage in the article for 'voice'
Produce one question that you would ask the author	In groups, discuss the textual features of the discipline that are evident
Produce a 'bare bones' summary (25 words)	In pairs, examine the main argument/s that the author/s are making
Write a Critical Synopsis of the Text (See Appendix 1)	In groups of 4, discuss how convincing the arguments made by the author/s are and present to entire group

Table 1 List of In-class activities

Towards the end of the first semester, once the participants had experienced the range of in-class activities, a virtual peer learning set entitled 'online journal club' was established in the virtual learning environment, webcourses. This was envisaged as a way to share insights and conversation themes with the participants. In the first instance, articles on the process of critical academic writing were distributed by the tutors to the group, but

thereafter, they were encouraged to select relevant articles themselves. In the asynchronous discussion board in the VLE, directed commentary on each article was posted by participants who were divided into small groups of four; contribution is regular and periodic (weekly). Discussion questions posed by the tutors are used to stimulate reflection and conversation. In particular, these questions are designed to help the online journal club participants:

- identify key points addressed by the article, and put them in context;
- discuss the validity of the findings, and;
- consider how the findings apply to practice with regard to critical thinking and academic writing.

Participants are encouraged to take a RADICAL approach to evaluating these articles online: Read, Ask, Discuss, Inquire, Collaborate, Act and Learn. To support the participants further in this, a set of guidelines are used, shown in Table 2:

Read	the article critically
Ask	the key questions for yourself
Discuss	the meaning and shared interpretation
Inquire	into other sources of knowledge and insight
Collaborate	with others who know or care about the issues
Act	by sharing their postings and working to change practice
Learn	from what others share online and from your actions and collaborations and re-start the cycle

Table 2 RADICAL Approach to Critical Academic Writing

Finally, the tutors highlight commonalities or uniquely important ideas from the online collaborative dialogue. The peer learning sets have the potential to improve communication and mutual support between participants and also to encourage them to make links between taught sessions on critical acadmic writing and foster and advance their understanding of classroom writing practices. This also leads into a crucial aspect of the module – the role of formative feedback to students by tutors. By providing formative feedback that seeks to discover and clarify intended meanings, the tutors tap into the developing writers' basic desire to communicate their ideas. The process-oriented writing instructional approach favoured by the module tutors ensured that deep-level revision was most productive in terms of writing skills development. The tutor formative feedback

underpinned with an inquiring stance engaged the participants in negotiation over the emerging meaning of their texts. Sample draft compositions were used to explore the assumptions and implications of this instructional stance to the participant writing.

At the mid way point and at the end of the module, participants were invited to complete questionnaires with eight open-ended questions designed to evaluate the module, but with a specific focus on the experience of the critical writing process; the data from these questionnaires were then analyzed. In looking for patterns and trends in the responses, the following steps were undertaken: reading through the responses and developing categories for the different themes emerging; as we read through the comments, we assigned at least one category to each response. Once the data had been studied and categories determined, the next step was to pinpoint categories that were related and identify the main themes. Four themes emerged from the data: becoming critical; perception of the peer review process; and challenges of critical academic writing; perceived impact of critical academic writing on practice.

Discussion of Findings

Becoming critical

To engage critically with a written text, the reader ideally needs to have an understanding of what the authors are doing and reasonable knowledge of the field of enquiry and this can only be achieved by critical reading of relevant texts.

> *I will be getting my students to read more critically, through approaching their reading with a clear sense of the importance of focusing on the evidence provided in the account and whether the reasoning follows logically to the conclusion that has been drawn.*
>
> (design lecturer)

Attention is drawn here to the importance of approaching a text as something that demands a response from you as a reader and to see your reading as an active process that requires you to be critical. The critical reading of a text is mostly about assessing the quality of the case that has been made and so the critical reader is interested in whether there is sufficient evidence to support a claim and whether other possible interpretations have been considered. Thus, the participants recognized the importance of working with

students to develop the skill of critical reading as an important step to becoming critical in writing. Most of the participants reported that the strategies used in class and outlined in Table 1 were useful in terms of the development of their own academic writing and would be used by them with their own students.

Teaching my students how to construct an argument and focus their work is the most challenging but I have now some strategies that I can employ with them.

(business lecturer)

One of the most important things I will be sharing with my students is the importance of developing a logical line of reasoning

(social work lecturer)

Allied to this, the importance of being able to critically select the texts that are most central and relevant to your study purposes was also seen as important.

Engaging my students with the process of researching the literature in my discipline and accessing relevant journals is key.

(architecture lecturer)

There is a clear need to select what to read and what not to read and it could be argues that making critical choices about what to read is in fact the first step and so the importance of focusing with students on techniques for deciding what to read. In terms of the writing process, the issue of attention to planning also emerged as important.

I will be emphasizing to them the need for planning to ensure steady progress.

(ecology lecturer)

In addition, it was felt by a number of the lecturers that there was a real need to support students in terms of the development of their academic writing through facilitated sessions focusing on the key elements of academic writing, and the module had been enabling for them in that regard.

I will now be facilitating sessions on academic writing with my own students and enabling structured peer feedback to occur in these. I would also like to have optional 'dip-in' sessions for those with different levels of experience.

(law lecturer)

It has become clear to me that supported, dedicated academic writing sessions must be included at least at MA level. The process should be considered a journey towards excellence.

(business lecturer)

Clearly, the importance of structured sessions on academic writing and the confidence to support students in terms of becoming critical in the academic writing process grew through participation in the module and through the range of different activities that were developed and the peer review process emerged as of particular significance.

Perception of the Peer Review Process

In the module, peer review was the process of making judgments about the quality of critical academic writing which involved a peer reading and examining the draft journal papers in various stages of completion and providing feedback. This feedback led to reflection and discussion, with the ultimate aim of improving participant learning. The greatest value of peer review here was the influence that different disciplinary peers had on improving individual's critical academic writing practice:

I got the most interesting and constructive comments back from the peers who were from various different backgrounds and disciplines to myself.

I now realize the benefits of a critical friend.

(law lecturer)

A study by Mürau (1993) considered the effects of the peer review process on writing anxiety. By working together, although perhaps having an initial sense of apprehension about the process and what it entails, participants come to realize the similar problems and difficulties that their peers share and feel less isolated. There can be a fear of exposure of one's work to peers and also a sense of unease at having to give criticism:

It is lonely at times writing for publication whether in my own discipline or more broadly in education, so it was a positive thing to see how someone else feels about my writing.

(business lecturer)

I was a bit intimidated by this as I am now to it; however it was a good learning experience.

(social work lecturer)

Initially I had a fear of being wrong in offering my opinion but once I was honest about comments it felt good to have a judgment to offer.
(instrumentation lecturer)

By providing the participants with experience in writing collaboratively and critiquing one another's writing, it is argued here that collaborative writing promotes active learning and provides them with experience working as part of a team. Peer review gave the participants experience in critical thinking and promoted their editorial skills. These classroom techniques raised participants' comfort level at having their work evaluated by others in a professional setting. The module evaluation feedback confirmed that participants who completed the module were more likely to write collaboratively in future, and participants reported that they would seek collaborative writing opportunities in their workplace:

As well as the face-to-face reviews we conducted, I got sent texts and emails throughout that kept me going when I was going to give up. The group peer review sessions were very useful also and are something that I intend to use in my own practice.
(social care lecturer)

The collaborative peer review sessions facilitated the participants in learning how to read carefully, with attention to the details of a piece of writing (whether their own or another writer's). Academic writers have very little opportunity and few spaces to share their writing-in-progress (Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008) but the module provided a space for this and all agreed that their writing was strengthened by taking into account the responses of both the actual and anticipated readers. As a result, they were making the transition from writing primarily for themselves or for the tutors, to writing for a broader audience, which was a key transition for the participants as they developed their post-graduate work and learnt to write papers of publishable quality. Wrapped around these benefits were the development of participant skills in formulating and communicating constructive feedback on a peer's work, as well as knowing how to gather and respond to feedback on their own work. However, it is worth highlighting that there can be a downside to collaborative peer review, particularly if one of the peers is a stronger writer than the other in the first instance, as one participant noted:

This has the potential to place a burden on the more experienced writers in the process.
(law lecturer)

Challenges of critical academic writing

The two key challenges identified by the participants revolved around time management of the writing process and grappling with scholarship, particularly knowing when to stop reading and start writing; this symbiotic relationship between reading and writing is important to acknowledge:

> *It was difficult to transfer the chaos of my concepts and all the reading I was doing into a structured piece of work.*

> *Getting to grips with a new type of literature was the biggest issue for me.*
> (law lecturer)

> *The editing of my paper took much, much longer than I had allocated time for.*
> (architecture lecturer)

> *The synthesis of literature is complex and requires time and space to think.*
> (law lecturer)

Whilst the complexity of writing is not to be underestimated, discovering efficient writing skills does take time; it consists of lengthy procedures of conducting thorough research and the ability to write skillfully. Improving the efficiency of one's academic output is a valuable skill to acquire. The participants had to grapple with challenging discipline-specific subject matter and exacting logic; all whilst contending with the educational research field's rhetoric, accepted language and writing style, required format, and of course, critical thinking. There is a very clear sense form the data that building a repertoire of critical thinking and writing skills that enable the participants to enter the academic debates in their subject, and even to challenge accepted thinking, is worth the time investment as it can result in can result in changes to practice.

Perceived impact of critical academic writing on practice

From the 20 participants on the module, only five had previously published in disciplinary journals, and none in educational research outlets. However, participation in the module had some important results and all lecturers reported that there had been real

learning in terms of writing in an academic context and more specifically, writing for a journal.

> *One of the most useful aspects is that this was an opportunity to spend time learning and improving my writing abilities in an academic context.*

> (social work lecturer)

> *I have a much better sense of how to approach the whole area of writing for a journal.*
> (business lecturer)

They had also become more confident about their writing:

> *I now appreciate that no research idea, no matter how small could be of real interest to someone out there.*

> *This module has given me the confidence to pursue publishing my own work*
> (apprentice lecturer)

The module required each participant to target a specific journal and write an article and as outlined earlier a framework was provided for individuals to engage in the writing process. The support, guidance and practice led to improvements in their writing over the timescale of the module and this resulted in an increase in confidence and an improvement in their writing process.

Towards a Model of Critical Academic Writing

The academic writing process demands that the participants are thinking critically and over the course of the module a model emerged which can/has provided for our participants an approach to the teaching academic writing in the context of their own disciplinary field. Figure 2 shows the six components of the model and how they interrelate: in-class activities, virtual peer learning sets, the support of tutors' feedback, the role of cross programme dissemination which took the form of a participant-led conference and an educational research forum, the online and in-class resources distributed and the impact on participants' practice of critical thinking skills and critical academic writing.
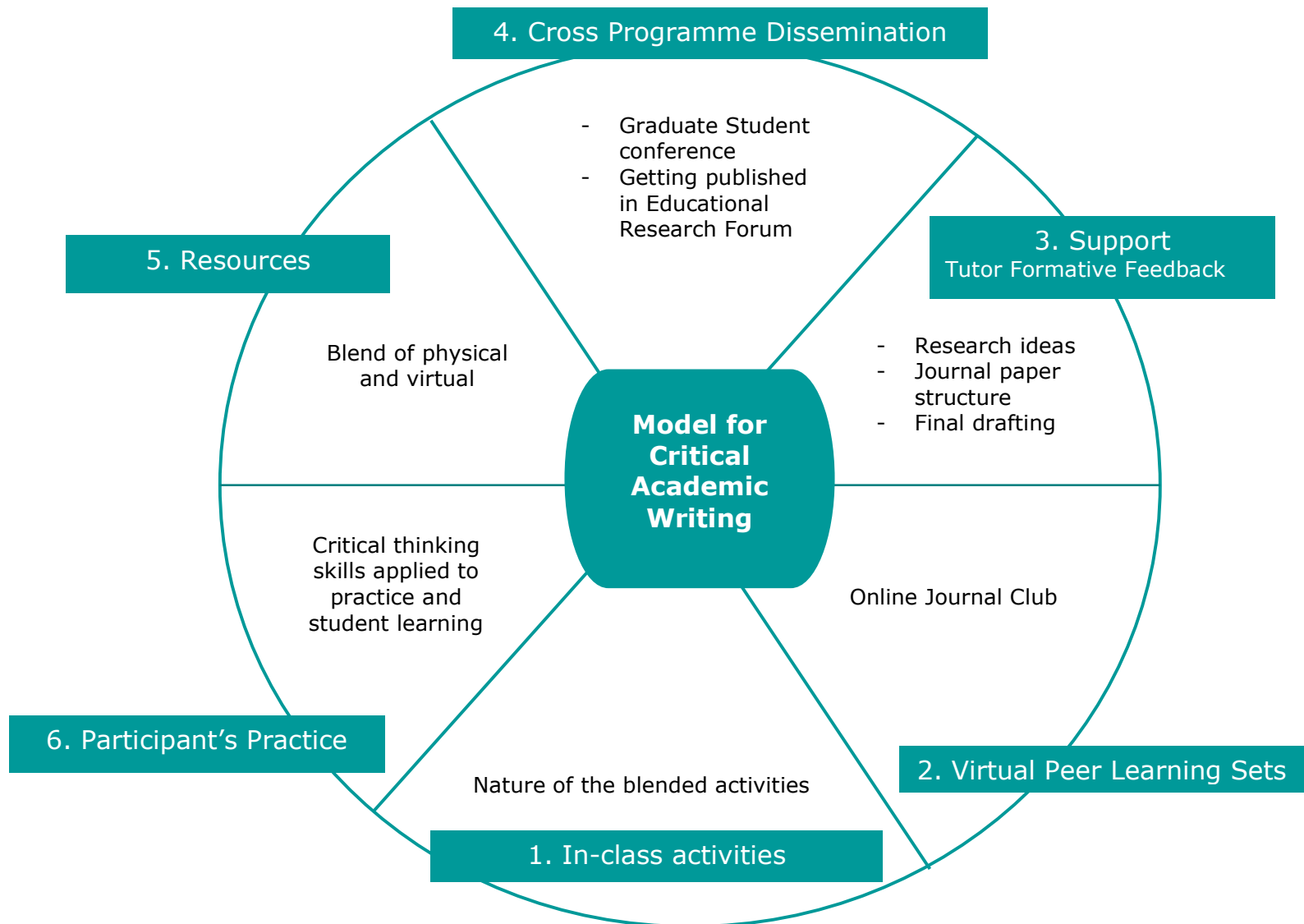
Figure 2   Model of Critical Academic Writing

Conclusion

This work contributes to the discussion about the role of writing in the university and draws lessons for readers from our experience of implementing an initiative with academic staff drawn from a variety of higher education institutions in Ireland and from a diverse range of disciplines. Antoniou and Moriarty (2008, p. 164) contend that 'successful academic writing does not depend on innate talent and ability but, like all writing, develops with dedication and practice'. There is much to be gained by adopting the practice of explicitly teaching academic writing skills with a particular focus on developing the skill of being critical. During the module, the lecturers through structured exercises and activities had on-going practice and gained confidence in academic writing in an educational discipline and also gained confidence in articulating what it means to be critical as a writer. Academic writing is a developmental process as is critical thinking and the pedagogic intervention with academic staff on two postgraduate programmes detailed in this chapter has highlighted the value of focusing on the role of critical thinking in the writing process.

Since writing and publishing are increasingly important in a successful academic career it is imperative that there is support for lecturers to develop their writing. Morss & Murray (2001) argue that despite the emphasis on publishing to enhance individual and institutional profiles there is not sufficient research or support for academics aiming to improve quality and productivity in writing. Moore (2003) suggests that to help academics write, we need to initiate discussions and undertake research and in this chapter we have sought to contribute by sharing the work we undertook with a group of lecturers. The comments of the lecturers indicate that the project has been successful and many have presented their work at conferences and some have published for the first time in peer review higher education journals. Also, a model has been developed which we hope can be used by lecturers to support their students in their academic writing endeavors so that the tacit understanding which lecturers have of the concept of critical thinking in the writing process will be articulated, discussed and become a focus of their educational practices.

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Appendix 1
A Critical Synopsis of a Text
(Notes on Questions)
Critical reading is part of academic study and requires you not just to passively read a text but also to assess the texts of other scholars. In order to do this well, a structured approach can be helpful. The **5 questions** outlined below provide a framework for a critical reading of a text.

Question 1
Sketch a simple outline of the key arguments or ideas.
This requires you to read the entire article and summarise the main arguments and ideas.

Question 2
What are the authors seeking to do in writing this article?
The abstract, introduction or conclusion should make clear what the purpose of the authors is. Authors may be seeking to do any of the following:
- Contribute to theory
- Report their own research
- Criticise what is currently being done
- Review the work of others
- Express opinions
- Give advice on future policy directions.

Question 3
What are the authors saying that has relevance to my work?
This question requires you to consider the links if any to your own project or research.

Question 3
How convincing is what the authors are saying?
This question requires you to evaluate the arguments put forward by the authors.
- Are the arguments supported with strong evidence?
- What claims are made?
- Are there unsubstantiated claims?
- What data set is drawn on and are the claims clearly related to this?
- Are the claims consistent with other articles you have read?
- Do the claims resonate in terms of your own research or professional experience?

Question 5
What use can I make of this?
This question requires you to think about the following
- Do you agree or disagree with the claims made by the author?
- In your own writing, is this a key text that you will use and discuss in depth or will you only refer to it briefly?

(Adapted from Wallace & Wray, 2006)