

Blurred boundaries: an investigation of the roles of Student Writing Mentors and Language and Learning Advisers

Writing Mentor Program Coordinators

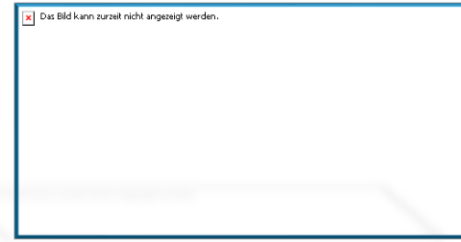
Dr Linda Thies (Warrnambool)

Maja Gelov and Dr Ruth Lee (Geelong)

Writing Mentor

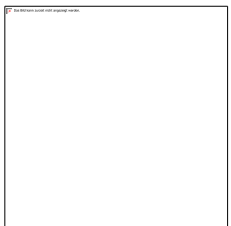
Michael Biggs

Presentation Outline



(Student Life website, Deakin University)

1. **Background** to the development of the Writing Mentor (WM) Program at Deakin
2. **Student feedback** (mentees) on the 2017 Program
3. **Outline of the research project** – roles of Language and Learning Advisers (LLAs) and Student Writing Mentors (WMs)
4. **Preliminary findings of the research project**

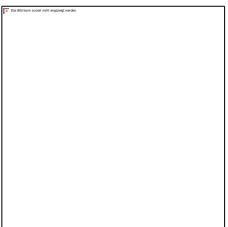


Development of WM Program

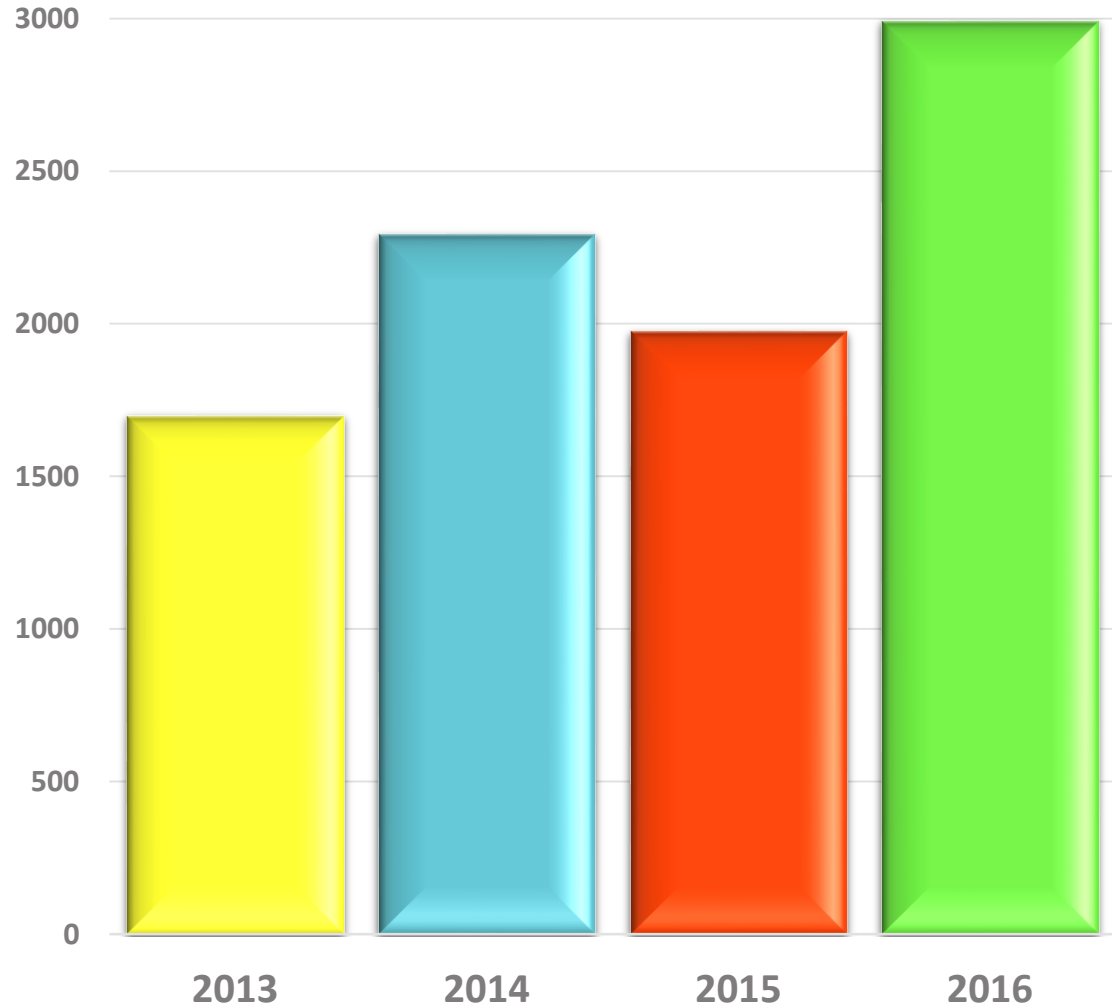
- Commenced on one campus (2013). **Expanded to all four Deakin campuses** and Dandenong Learning Centre
- **'Drop in'** service offered every day (3-4 hours)
- Supported by **Senior Writing Mentors**
- Co-ordinated by **Language and Learning Advisers**

Aim

To help students interpret academic expectations, and understand how to succeed with their studies



Development of WM Program (cond.)



2013

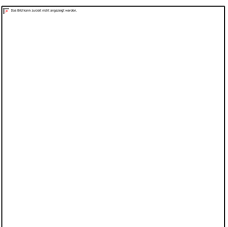
25 student mentors
1,701 student interactions.

2016

57 student mentors
2,994 interactions.

The program continues to grow in 2017, recording 2,371 student interactions for Trimester 1 and 2.

Data for trimester 3 (still to be added)



Student (Mentee) Evaluation - 2017



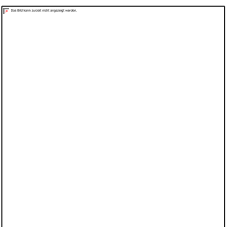
92% agreed the advice they received was helpful.



88% agreed the assistance has improved their confidence as a learner.



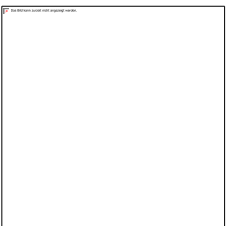
97% would recommend this service to others.



Rationale → Student feedback

Writing requires **clear thinking and constructive conversations** between student and WM. These conversations lead to better writing (Harrington, O’Neill & Bakhshi 2007, p. 27).

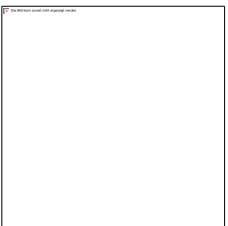
“D___ was great. He prompted me to think further on the question, and we had a short discussion on why open ended questions can actually be difficult to answer for those of us new to academic report writing. My tutor made me feel unintelligent for asking similar questions and, as a result, I lost confidence in my ability to study, falling behind in the assessment. D___ came along, boosted my study confidence and offered an insight into the work required of me ...



Rationale → Student feedback

Interaction **builds interpersonal relationships** by having students work together constructively. WMs are closer to the confusion and perspectives of other students (Harrington et al. 2007, p. 27).

*“... the mentor service has proved nothing but helpful. I was feeling quite inadequate at academic writing, and the mentors clarified where I had gone right/wrong. This has really **boosted my confidence** and understanding of the unit's requirements/content.”*

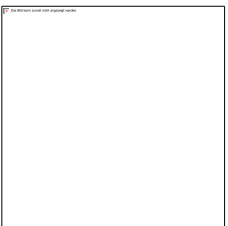


Rationale Student feedback

Value of a **non-directive learning environment and collaboration** (Harris 1992, p. 371).

*“She has been my light in my darkness helping me with everything. Sooo grateful for the **help and support.**”*

*“Very helpful with clarifying what writing mentors can help with, and **helped me understand that I am on the right track** with my approach to assignments.”*

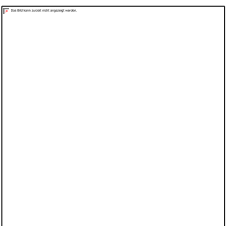


How do we develop WMs' skills?

Professional Development sessions

Different models of **reflective practice** **BUT** all involve three fundamental processes

- 1. Retrospection** – thinking about a situation or experience
- 2. Self-evaluation** – critically analysing and evaluating acting and feeling associated with the experience (using theoretical perspectives)
- 3. Reorientation** – using the results of self evaluation to influence future approaches (Quinn, 2000, p. 82).



Building on professional development sessions

WMs discussing/practising using different reflective frameworks

What? (Description)

- What happened?
- What did I do?
- What was my role?
- What did others do?
- What was I trying to achieve?
- What was good or bad about the experience?

So What? (Analysis)

- So what is the importance of this?
- So what more do I need to know about this?
- So what have I learnt about this?

Now What? (Synthesis)

- Now what do I need to do?
- Now what do I do to resolve the situation/make it better/improve?
- Would I do anything differently next time? If so, how could I prepare for this?

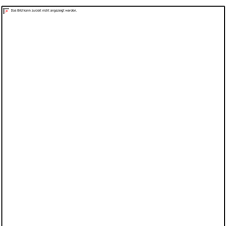
Borton's (1970) framework for reflective activities.

Other models (Gibbs 1988: Jay & Johnson 2001: Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985: Johns 2006)

Writing Mentor Research Project

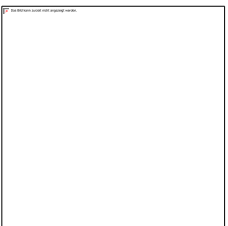
Aims

1. To facilitate **a more integrated service** – identify differences, similarities and boundaries between services of WMs and LLAs
2. To inform **professional development** programs for WMs
3. To further promote WMs' engagement in **collaborative reflective practice**



WM Research Project – Methodology

- 1. Survey** of all WMs held during initial induction session (4 key questions)
- Professional development program – **Reflective writing** session
- 3. Guided reflection** (WM and LLA discuss learning interaction and roles)



Survey Responses

Four questions

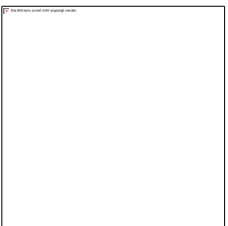
What is the role of WMs at Deakin?

What is the role of LLAs at Deakin?

What are the boundaries/differences between the two roles?

Can you suggest how WMs and LLAs can best work together?

Three most common themes in responses to each question



Question	Key themes	No of responses
What is the role of WMs at Deakin?	Developing academic skills	13
	Facilitating independent learning	11
	Helping students understand assessment tasks – assignment writing	9
<p>“To provide peer support to students from all faculties in relation to assessment writing, and referring them on when appropriate to both face-to-face and the on-line resources.”</p>		
What is the role of LLAs at Deakin?	Offering help that requires more depth, time and knowledge	15
	Improving students’ use of language	11
	Improving learning practices	5
<p>“To work with students who need assistance with regard to their language skills and learning practices and competencies, particularly where the issues the student faces are going to be a blockage to their progress through their studies.”</p>		

Question	Key themes	No of responses
What are the boundaries/differences between the two roles?	LLAs provide more in-depth support	14
	WMs refer to LLAs	6
	Drop in service c/f longer appointments	4
<p>“The WM role is often to be the first contact point for questions and issues easily resolved ... LLAs’ role is more specific and they are fully trained educators .”</p>		
Can you suggest how WMs and LLAs can best work together?	More collaboration	13
	A system of referrals	8
	Better understanding of roles	3
<p>“By having clear expectations and guidelines when to refer.”</p>		

Methodology - Guided reflections

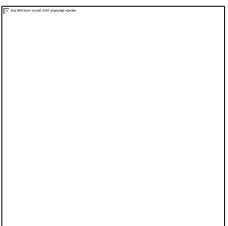
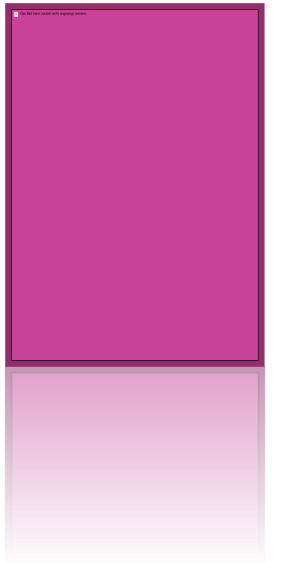
Some difficulties

- Finding time when WM's and LLA's could work together
- Time involved in completing guided reflections
- Lack of clarity re format/purpose of reflections c/f PLS
- Different understandings of versions and models of reflective practice

Definition of Reflective Practice

“... the process of learning through and from experience toward gaining new insight of self and/or practice” (Boud cited in Finlay 2008, p. 1).

- **Only completed 13 guided reflections**



Reflecting on the Guided Reflections

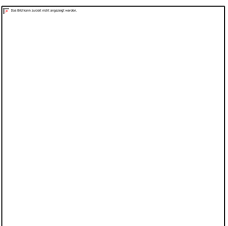
WM responses – varying degrees of complexity

1. Two page reflection on working with a student on draft assessment response, using Borton's model

“As a final reflection, ... it was clear to me that the student was not writing anything down as we spoke. I should have flagged this with the student or, if not, then I should have come back and at least given him a short list of four or five key things that we had discussed on paper to take away.”

2. Reflecting on student's referencing question

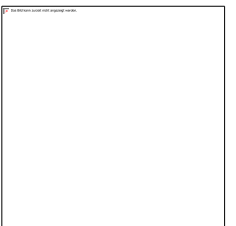
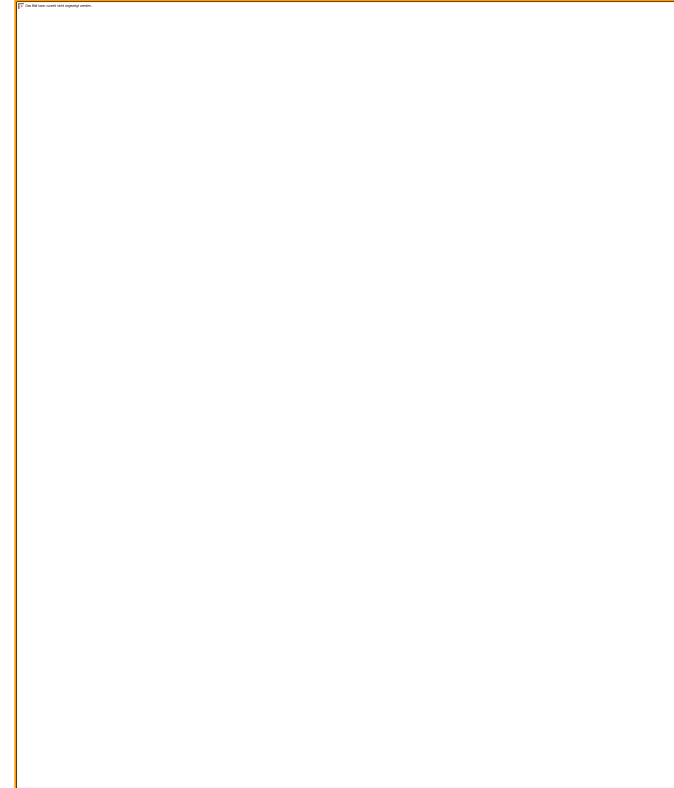
“I think that having a student do a practice reference in front of you ... this really helps their confidence when it comes to referencing ... this student was able to correctly write his practice reference.”



Deakin's Best Practice for Writing Mentors

4. Writing Mentors focus on a student's individual needs.

*"I have found in some situations however, a more direct approach is needed, particularly when a student is stressing out of their mind. Sometimes a student is simply looking for reassurance that they're on the correct track, and bringing up alternative ways of research, or reams of information and resources may only serve to stress them more. **It can sometimes be something of a balancing act!**"*



Deakin's Best Practice for Writing Mentors

10. It's about the writing *not one* assignment.

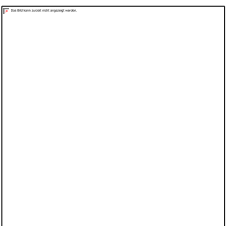
*"I think the importance of it is that they come to you and it's easy to say 'fix this and change that'- they may get an assignment out of it but ... they don't get any knowledge of how to fix it themselves ... **It goes back to point 10 of the Writing Mentor guide, it's about teaching them to write, not how to finish a particular assignment.**"*

Role of the WM – frustrations

Extending learning beyond initial question

*“I often find that **students are resistant to broad advice on writing**, they insist, ‘no, no I came for help with this’ (specifically) so it’s like, ‘it’s this I want help with’ ... [but] those people will be coming back, again and again, with the same sorts of queries, and you’re just going ... **I could have helped you figure this out a month ago** and then you wouldn’t have to come back.”*

*“One of the most frustrating parts of being a writing mentor is **when a student does not want to help themselves**. I have had a student come back repeatedly this trimester, making the same mistake, requesting the same help, and not learning from the experience.”*

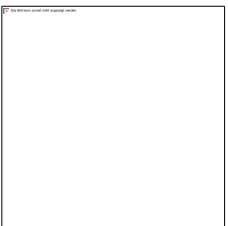


Reflections – role of LLAs

Reflections were similar to the survey responses

“The role of LLAs is to teach the required skills, for example grammar, punctuation, sentence and essay structures, and academic writing. They also provide a more critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of students’ work ... LLAs are teachers and have the skills to teach, which as a Writing Mentor I don’t have.”

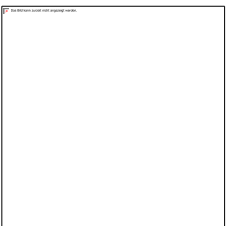
“Some subject areas more difficult to give advice on ... LLAs are better able to deal with the academic language specific to some subject areas which, as a nursing student, are outside my area of knowledge.”



Reflections – role of LLAs

WM's recognition of learning development

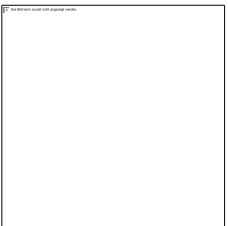
“We can tell students what’s wrong with their writing and possibly how to fix it, but we can’t necessarily explain why ... it’s the next level of help.”



Some conclusions

- 1. The research project contributed to a shared understanding of roles – first step in defining boundaries.**
- 2. The methodology reinforced the value of facilitated/collaborative reflection.**
 - building on professional development sessions
 - WMs exploring approaches to reflection and to their practice as WMs.
 - contributed to WMs' identity and sense of team membership
- 3. Reflective practice is complex.**

should not become 'mechanical' or be reduced to simple completion of 'check list'.
- 4. The WM Coordinators need to follow up on suggested ways of working together.
(LLAs and WMs)**



Comments from a Writing Mentor



(Writing Mentor website, Deakin University)

Thank you

Questions/discussion

