

FREE SPACE | フリー・スペース

Helping Students of Academic Writing Aim Higher

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Pleasantly surprised by the quality of my students' academic writing in English, especially given that the classes were mandatory and the students were non-English majors, I wondered how I might help them to help themselves aim higher above and beyond producing a final term essay. The answer, I concluded, was to make the exercise more meaningful not only by having my students write academic articles but also by offering them the opportunity to see their work published in a peer-reviewed academic journal. Failing to find one for university students, I started my own. Launched in December 2017, the journal is called *Academe: First Forays into Academic Writing*. The first issue, due out at the end of July of this year, promises to be very exciting in terms of both content and potential to raise students' aspirations of what is achievable. The following explains how and why the idea for the journal occurred to me and if you teach Academic Writing how you can help your students to aim higher and get their work in print.

When I teach Academic Writing I emphasize to my students how important it is to follow a process - or sequence of steps - leading, in theory at least, to a piece of good quality academic writing; a piece of writing, in other

words, that achieves its stated objective, is well-structured, clear, unified, cohesive, balanced, and referenced. I discovered that this works but only to a point. As the saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." Or, put another way, teaching something to learners, being careful to ensure the teaching is calibrated and comprehended, does not necessarily mean that the teaching will be learned.

I found the answer to my particular conundrum reading Wendy Belcher's excellent *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success* (Belcher, 2009) and Eric Hayot's *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities* (Hayot, 2014). From Hayot I learnt that teaching writing helps only insofar as the learner has what he calls a "good theory of writing". With all the formal academic writing instruction in the world, without a good writing theory, the learner will be attempting to write with their writing hand tied behind their back. Hayot's key point is that writing saddled with a bad writing theory hampers the learner's potential to be a (better) writer.

A good writing theory, in a nutshell, is underpinned by a set of core assumptions. These are as follows:

1. Good writing results from writers 'pursu[ing] their passions' (Belcher, 2009, p. 10)
2. Good writing has followed a process (Folse, Vestri Solomon & Clabeaux, 2014) and, through that process, ideas have evolved (Hayot, 2014, p. 1)

3. Good writing is subject to revision (Belcher, 2009)
4. Good writing has incorporated feedback (Belcher, 2009).

Talking to my students about their attitudes towards writing made me realise that the overwhelming majority were coming to class with “bad” writing theories: they were not, in other words, writing about topics they were interested in, following a process, allowing their ideas to evolve, and neither revising their writing nor seeking feedback. Besides mitigating against better writing, bad writing theories, by making writing a negative experience, are highly likely to adversely affect learner motivation. Exposing the students to a good writing theory early on in the semester and having them develop a personal theory predicated on it resulted in some extraordinary writing at the end of it. So good was the writing in fact that I felt it a shame that it wasn’t being disseminated to a wider audience. Searching in vain for professional outlets that specialised in publishing academic writing by university students, I took it upon myself to establish one. I teamed up with an experienced publisher, drafted the objectives and scope, purchased a domain name and built the journal a website. The fruits of my labours may be seen at the following url:

<www.academefirstforays.com/>.

If your students are producing high quality academic writing, please encourage them to submit their work to the journal or, with their permission, do so on their behalf. Read “About the Journal” in order to confirm your students’ eligibility to submit and then “Notes for Contributors” for a list of the criteria the work

should adhere to. Reading “About the journal,” you will also note that, as well as publishing work by students, the journal provides a space for advice articles on the art of academic writing. If you have something valuable to say about academic writing that will help students in and beyond your classroom to hone and develop their academic writing skills, then please consider writing it up and sending it to the journal for consideration.

References

- Belcher, W. (2009). *Writing your journal article in 12 weeks: A guide to academic publishing success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Folse, K., Vestri Solomon, E., & Clabeaux, D. (2014). *Great writing 3: From great paragraphs to great essays* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Hayot, E. (2014). *The elements of academic style: Writing for the humanities*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.