

Embedding equality in staff student research partnerships – co creating an academic writing tool

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Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Teesside University. Sue's continuing commitment to partnership research has led to the development of a co-created pedagogic research strategy in Psychology section at Teesside.

An original SALT team member, Holly is currently studying MSc Health and Clinical Skills programme and currently leads work with JISC on the continuing development of the SALT app

An original SALT team member, Nadine continues to play a key role in developing the SALT app and is leading an evaluation of factors influencing student engagement with academic writing.

Luke graduated from Teesside University with BSc (hons) in Forensic Psychology in 2013 – part of the original SALT team he continues to be involved with the project as part of the steering committee

Georgie is a new member of the SALT team and is currently working on a qualitative evaluation of SALT with first year Psychology undergraduates.

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Summary

The Student's Academic Literacy Tool (SALT) project has brought together academic staff and students to develop an accessible and useful tool to enable students to recognise the characteristics of academic writing which need to be developed in order to be successful in written assessments. Crucial to the success of the project so far has been the involvement of student research partners, who teamed up as co-creators and owners of the tool around 18 months ago (Becker, Kennedy, Shahverdi & Spence, 2015).

The project initially received £3,650 from Teesside University Learning and Teaching fund to create and user test the SALT in booklet format. The project was also designed to provide student researchers with opportunities to present at regional conferences and collaborate with national organisations as well as experience the research publishing and dissemination process.

Since its dissemination, interest in SALT has grown through a series of successful publications, conference presentations, and national media coverage following the team's success in winning the Joint Information Systems Council Summer of Student Ideas competition 2015. This has led to the Student's Academic Literacy Tool being used across a number of Science and Technology disciplines at Teesside University and in addition it is being used in a number of other Universities across the U.K. With the support of JISC a mobile application of the tool has recently been launched and the project is now overseen by a steering committee which includes members of the original team and continues to provide opportunities for current students to engage in ongoing evaluation and enhancement projects. The launch of the mobile application also provides ongoing opportunities for students to engage in work around

developing additional features and ancillary content as well as engaging with industry to develop partnerships to maintain and extend the functionality of the application.

Description of project

The SALT project was started with the aim of developing a resource to improve student writing by working in partnership with students to produce a set of materials which would make the key features of a good academic writing style accessible and identifiable to students spanning a range of ages and abilities. The partnership team was established in May 2014 and initially included Dr Sue Becker (Senior Lecturer in Psychology); Luke Kennedy (final year Psychology undergraduate); Holly Shahverdi (second year Psychology undergraduate) and Nadine Spence (First year Psychology undergraduate). Following a call to all undergraduate Psychology students the original team were selected following informal interviews in which they presented their ideas for developing an accessible resource for students.

The project began after Sue Becker had spent several years delivering a first-year core module during which students submitted their first piece of assessed writing at the University. Sue observed high levels of anxiety amongst successive cohorts as they had little knowledge of what was expected of them in their first piece of extended writing at university level. Students' lack of preparation for the transition to university and unfamiliarity with academic writing style led to recognition that support for improving academic literacy needed to be embedded in disciplines as part of the first-year experience. As a way of supporting students to recognise and improve their writing styles, Sue had started to run a diagnostic academic writing test and provided targeted feedback to students as part of a formative assessment in their first term. Unfortunately, the highly-specialised nature of the test meant that both students and tutors on the module required extensive guidance and support to understand the technical aspects of academic writing identified in the diagnostic test.

The Student's Academic Literacy Tool itself comprises two main elements, a checklist and a glossary. The key features of academic writing are divided into four sections: grammatical accuracy, correct use of language, structure/development of text, and the use of relevant source material. Each section includes a set of criteria designed to enable students to identify key features of each element, which they need to incorporate into their writing to enable users to assess how successfully they have met each of the criteria. The second element of the SALT is a glossary, explaining each criterion in more detail and demonstrating, by means of short illustrative texts written by the student researchers, how these criteria appear in academic writing.

Enabling partnership

In contrast to many existing staff student research projects, working in partnership was not a theoretical starting point or 'bolt on' feature but rather a natural development given the nature of the project which was to produce an academic literacy tool which was useful and accessible to students. In large, part the success of the partnership has stemmed from the approach being driven by the research aims rather than as an aim in itself.

As such the project began with no clear intention to take or develop a partnership approach based on any theoretical model. The starting point for the partnership was rather a clear and immediate statement on intent that we were going to create the tool together and that credit would be shared equally. The pragmatic nature of the partnership, which has developed, has enabled power differentials amongst team members to be constructed as resources rather than barriers. Team members draw upon their own areas of strength, such as expertise in social media or publication experience.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

Extensive user testing was conducted using 164 first year psychology students and 60 psychology AS studentsⁱ to get feedback from both potential HE and FE users (Becker et al, 2015). Revisions were made to the booklet based on feedback including more simplified criteria and a shorter introduction. In order to begin to assess the effectiveness of the tool a pilot study was conducted with 114 first year psychology students on 2 study skills modules. Results indicate a significant improvement in tutor scores for formative writing and summative writing (Kennedy et al, 2016). SALT is now used across Psychology study skills modules with student representatives reporting that students find SALT extremely useful in improving their writing.

The team also gathered qualitative user feedback from an online link to SALT <http://salttool.wix.com/salt>. Respondents included both academics and students who responded positively to the tool. Based on this initial feedback, the team entered SALT into a national competition to gain funding to create a web-based version to meet student demand. Holly Shahverdi successfully project managed the team through the competition and won the JISC Summer of Student Ideas competition in September 2015. The team have now been given the opportunity to work with JISC to develop the website and which received local and national media coverage <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/sourcing-ideas-digital-technologies-students-actually-want>.

SALT is now used in first year study skills modules at Teesside University and feedback from student representatives at Programme Boards indicates that students are finding the tool engaging and extremely useful in starting to understand and improve their writing styles. Following this, the project has highlighted the effectiveness of students working as partners. The SALT project has built its success on dissolving traditional staff-student power dynamics in the context of project ownership. This approach has enabled the student researchers to become as invested in the project as the staff researchers, raised motivation levels, increased efficacy, and subsequently the drive for success. During the course of this project, as the students' gained research experience and project management skills, their confidence in the project became more pronounced and empowered them to take the lead in presenting and circulating their tool <https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/228>.

Following distribution through conference presentations and publications, the tool is now being used in a number of other HE and FE institutions.

Most recently the project was runner up in the student experience category of the Guardian university awards 2016. The team continue to receive invitations to speak

about the project and upcoming events include the Higher Education Show at Olympia in November 2016.

Reflections on the project

Staff Perspective

I began this project with no conscious intention to develop a partnership project or engage in change related work. My original focus was solely to produce a tool that students would find useful and accessible. As I began to plan and consider ways to do this, I realised that in order to produce a resource that students would find relevant to their needs students should be involved in all aspects of designing and producing the tool. Through working closely with a dedicated and highly talented group of undergraduate student researchers, I have come to realise that standard approaches to working alongside students in research and the traditional models of the 'student researcher' only serve to further the interests of academics and often make the contribution of the student researcher invisible. One of the main barriers I faced in delivering the project has been 'letting go' and sharing ownership and control of project planning and decision making with my research partners. The trust and confidence which this process has established in the team has meant that the project has gained wider attention and impact. Ironically my greatest contribution to the effectiveness of the project has been to step back at key points and support my research partners to lead in dissemination to both colleagues and students.

The greatest compliment I have received during the project was during an external event when colleagues were unsure of roles in the team and found difficult to identify and separate the SALT team in relation to staff/student status. For me this was an indication that the project was indeed a partnership where all members had equal ownership and status. 18 months on I see my role on the project very differently, using my knowledge and expertise where needed to enable the project to move forward. We have recently taken a team decision that moving forward to evaluate the use of SALT in our own and other institutions we will devolve the project manager role and with my support, in the next phase of the project a student research partner will take on the role of project manager. I see the confidence and skills that the student researchers have developed over the last year and their readiness to take up the challenge of project management as evidence of the effectiveness of true partnership working. In challenging the conventional model of 'student as a researcher' at my own institution and demonstrating the effectiveness of working with students as co-creators there has been increasing interest in partnership working amongst my colleagues. My main message in promoting this approach to colleagues is that partnership working should be part of the rationale for the outcome**

My main challenge in working on the project now is managing transition. As team members move on with careers, it has become clear that whilst this presents opportunities to involve new student partners the close bonds which have developed mean that this is a difficult process to begin. As the project moves into an evaluation phase the team has taken the decision to recruit additional members and say goodbye to those members who are leaving education and pursuing other avenues.

Student perspective

Within student partnership projects, there is inevitably due to be challenges and in our case these barriers have presented in numerous ways. For example, when

beginning the project, none of us as a team particularly knew each other very well, as we as students were brought together through separate years of study. This meant that we had to get to know each other and learn about each other's personal strengths before dividing jobs and producing a first draft of the SALT within the first two weeks. We feel that it was our communication and organisation skills and passion for the project that allowed this task to be completed quickly and efficiently. Another barrier we have faced was when the project moved from developing a tool to user-testing and promotion of the resource. We feel that this was due to the changing of roles and implementation of new responsibilities. Initially, us as students did not believe that we would be travelling and speaking at conferences and other FE and HE institutions, or winning national competitions and working with professionals to develop our idea into an app, and at the time were somewhat unprepared for that, but from the first ever conference we did, our confidence has grown not only in ourselves, but as a team. Moreover, we feel that the shift in responsibility and job roles has taught us about the importance of flexibility within a job role and enhanced our adaptability in the workplace.

The final, and maybe the most important, barrier we have faced has been gaining recognition as a team. Within the SALT project, despite Sue being the academic, us students have always been given ownership of the tool, and had a mutual respect for one another and for each other's ideas. This is what we feel makes us unique as a student partnership team, and what we personally believe is the foundation to our success so far. Despite this, other academics have approached the idea of this with uncertainty, and continued to refer to us as 'Dr Sue and her team of student RAs'. We personally feel that although this is no major problem, it highlights the notion that despite claims made by academics that they want to work with their students; they ironically still act as authority figures and make all the major decisions, and real, equal partnership is generally frowned upon. Student partnership is something that we feel is lacking in HE, but fair, equal student partnership projects seem to be almost non-existent, yet it is the solid working relationship (and friendship) that we feel has brought us so far with the SALT tool.

Follow up and future plans

The project is currently evaluating staff and student experiences of using the academic literacy tool and developing both web based and mobile applications in partnership with JISC.

The team are also working to promote partnership working and engaging with transition and legacy issues. Although the student research partners continue to be fully committed to the project, career trajectories and progression to work and further study by some members mean that the project has now begun to offer opportunities to other student partners and the project is now overseen by a steering committee made up of original team members and external partners.

Related publications and resources

Becker, S; Kennedy, L; Shahverdi, H; & Spence, N. (2015). Improving student writing: working in partnership to develop the Student Academic Literacy Tool (SALT). *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 2.

Kennedy, L; Shahverdi, H; Spence, N; & Becker; S. (2016). Using partnership working to develop an academic writing tool for Undergraduate students: The SALT project. *BPS North East Psychology Bulletin*, 1-8.

ⁱ UK students studying for pre university qualifications.