

# Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners  
for Lifewide Writing

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and Paula Rosinski*

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## CHAPTER 11

### **WRITING TRANSITIONS BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS**

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Of the many pernicious misunderstandings that writing teachers battle, perhaps the most aggravating is the notion that writing is a skill that can be learned once for all purposes—like riding a bicycle. Research on writing transfer, as evidenced for example in the work of the Elon Research Seminar on Writing Transfer and in the companion Research Seminar on Writing Beyond the University from which our research is drawn, persistently shows that writing is more contextually sensitive, more embodied, and more complex an act than the deeply habituated actions to which it is often compared. Writing is messy, and the act of teaching writers to carry that messy business from one set of circumstances to another is not straightforward. The kinds of writing people see themselves doing, the audiences they imagine themselves writing for, and the strategies they enact to produce that writing are not pre-existing structures that writers can effectively employ in all settings. Rather, these considerations are *constructed* by the writer, emerging from their previous experiences, their dispositions, and their perceptions of both the immediate circumstances of the writing and the eventual circumstances in which such writing will be read.

Such complex social, physical, and mental work suggests many fascinating questions about the transfer of writing and how we might teach for it (see, for instance, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014). It also suggests important questions about the ways we *currently* teach writing—what impact our teaching has on students, how they come to understand writing at the university compared to writing in their professional fields, and how they navigate the complex complementarities and contradictions moving from one setting to another.

In this chapter, we draw on data from across three higher education institutions, in three different countries, and across three different disciplines in an effort to understand how students about to start a work-integrated learning placement make sense of the writing demands that they will face. We outline the connections between those sense-making acts and the kinds of writing students have done, as well as the writing instruction they have received. By utilizing contemporary research on transfer and threshold concepts in writing, we identify patterns of anticipation and development in these writers and generate implications for future, holistic approaches to support transfer from the university to the workplace.

### **Transfer as Multidimensional Activity**

We treat writing transfer as a multidimensional activity, one that is simultaneously mediated by the materiality of context, shaped by interpersonal work, enriched by intrapersonal dialogue, and framed by past, individuated histories of literate action. Anson (2016) underscores the importance of such a framing, arguing that

Our conceptions of transfer must understand writers' experiences as involving much more than knowledge of genre, content, rhetorical situation, or process. To them we must add less explored writerly factors such as language preferences, the degree to which certain habits and practices have become sedimented, and aspects of writers' identities, cultures, and prior experiences in

particular communities (Wardle and Clement). (Anson 2016, 539)

If we wish our teaching to respect the complex, multidimensional nature of transfer, our research on transfer can only enable that complexity by searching for it in the data we collect and analyze.

Addressing the complexity of transfer in teaching is nothing new to the field of writing studies. Neil Baird and Bradley Dilger recommend that instructors

be mindful of relationships between classroom practices and transfer, with support from stakeholders such as writing program administrators. As instructors share the language of dispositions with students, and explain their power to shape transfer . . . those conversations could help resolve the negotiations of complexity, difficulty, and identity that inevitably emerge in writing. (2017, 708)

In this chapter, we aim to show the complexity of transfer *in action*, as writers move from one setting (university) to another (their placement in a pre-professional program). By highlighting the ways in which expectations for, and understandings of, writing change between contexts, we can identify particular aspects of transfer that are challenging even in closely related settings, and use that knowledge to inflect our future approaches to teaching for transfer.

## **Work-Integrated Learning as a Site for Studying Transfer**

Placements may be categorized under a broader heading of work-integrated learning (WIL). Jackson, drawing on the work of Von Treuer et al. 2010, notes that WIL is “the practice of combining traditional academic study, or formal learning, with student exposure to the world-of-work in their chosen profession” with “a core aim of better preparing undergraduates for entry into the workforce” (Jackson 2015, 350). Other examples of WIL include service learning, fieldwork, and internships. While students on placement agency are

not in full-time permanent employment, the setting is authentic and the writing-related tasks often represent authentic professional genres. As such, placements offer enhanced credibility and reliability in terms of professional writing demands in comparison to work-inspired university-based assignments.

A central factor in the multidimensional nature of writing on placement is the uniqueness of the context. While there will be patterns within the various demands placed upon students as writers as they move from the university to the workplace, the experience is still individual. This highlights a need, pedagogically, to balance the demands of the writing situations with one's individual development and agency as a writer. We aim to highlight broader patterns of engagement with writing in different settings that emerged across our data, so that teachers can use this information to tailor their pedagogy to individual differences within these broader patterns.

### **Context: Foundational Writing at Our Research Sites**

Our data collection was carried out at three different sites: Drake University Law School (USA), the Froebel Department in Maynooth University (Ireland), and the School of Health Sciences at the University of Surrey (UK). The specifics of each site are described below, with a focus on support for students' writing and the different shapes this takes in our settings.

At Drake, law students are introduced to legal analysis and communication. This first involves understanding a new type of source material that comprises legal analysis. Judicial opinions must be broken down into component parts and students must make assumptions about which facts most influenced courts' decisions. Using that source material, students first engage in predictive analysis, typically in a fact-based client situation using an established legal principle to predict how the law will apply to their client's claim or charge. Students learn how to construct rule-based reasoning, policy-based reasoning, and most frequently, analogical reasoning. First-semester law students focus on predictive analysis

communicated in interoffice memoranda. In the second semester students focus on persuasive analysis in the context of appellate briefs, petitions, and answers. In this endeavor they often solve problems in which the law is not clear or settled. In this situation the written persuasive analysis focuses on types of legal arguments, often in constitutional or statutory interpretation problems. As a result, the writing instruction across the first year focuses heavily on pre-drafting analysis and gathering source material that will be used to substantiate predictions and arguments in conventional legal documents.

At Maynooth University, bachelor of education students use a number of different writing genres over the four-year degree. Students are introduced to writing lesson plans and schemes of work which are then used in their various school placement settings. Writing in the role as a reflective practitioner is central to a number of modules, and the students develop this reflective writing over the course of their degree. Academic writing and referencing are also introduced in the first year, culminating in an assessed action research dissertation in students' final year. To support this academic writing, the students complete two modules in English competency, which focuses on their own ability in the English language.

The School of Health Sciences at the University of Surrey offers bachelor of science (honours) programs in adult, children's, and mental health nursing, midwifery, and paramedic science. In the course of each program, students spend around half of their training in different kinds of clinical placements. In the first year, in addition to exams, they are required to complete assignments in a range of genres from more traditional discussion-style essays to scenario-based assignments to critical appraisals of research papers to practice portfolios. Some guidance on preparing for these assignments is provided by course teams and/or invited learning development specialists. In addition, all students have access to a range of academic skills workshops and individual consultations available through the centrally-based academic skills and development unit at the university.

We can observe that across the three research sites there is a range of writing expected. Whilst some of this writing is similar to the writing required in professional settings, other types of writing are more of what one might find in university settings, such as the academic essay. In exploring our data using threshold concepts, we suggest the potential for developing transferable competencies and dispositions that might function in the university and beyond. We also offer observations about students' writing development by tailoring our pedagogies to accommodate individual differences within the parameters of writing within and beyond the university.

### Data Collection

The data we are reporting on were gathered across the three universities between 2019 and 2021. Students completed an anonymous pre-placement online questionnaire asking them about their current university-based writing processes and what they anticipated in terms of writing on placement. The questionnaire used was the same across the settings, with only one question “localised” to reflect different professionally oriented genres students

	n	Placement experience	Programs	Year of study	Upcoming placement context
Surrey	35	Yes 22 No 13	Nursing, Midwifery	First	First full-time clinical placement
Maynooth	60	Yes 59 No 0 Blank 1	Education	Fourth	Final placement in primary schools
Drake	22	n/a	Law	First*	First or second placement in law practice setting

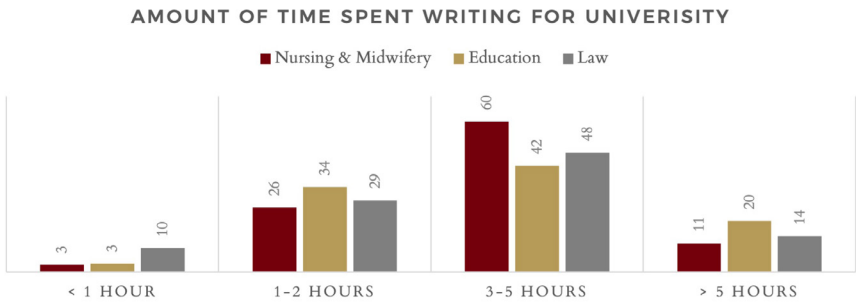
*Table 11.1. Demographics of Students Participating in Pre-Placement Survey.*

*\* One participant at Drake was in their second year of study.*

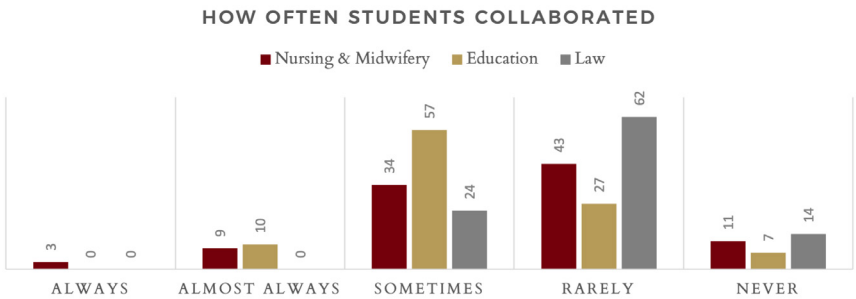
were likely to encounter on their respective programs. Table 11.1 provides an overview of the student samples in this study.

**Data Analysis**

In this section we present selected data analysis of the completed pre-placement questionnaires. As can be seen from figures 11.1 and 11.2, law (Drake) students reported spending time writing in a statistically significantly different distribution to education (Maynooth) and nursing and midwifery (Surrey) students ( $p = 0.005$ ), and also reported statistically significantly different levels of collaboration ( $p = 0.001$ ). Education and nursing and midwifery students reported these in a statistically similar fashion.



*Figure 11.1. Amount of time spent writing per day by students across the settings (expressed as a percentage of the total in each group)*



*Figure 11.2. Frequency of collaboration (expressed as a percentage of the total in each group)*

Table 11.2 presents the types of writing in which each cohort was engaged. It shows the overall number of selections for all the writing tasks within a particular category (“All”), as well as the number of all selections in each category that were in the top three writing tasks that students were engaged in (“Top 3”).

Students’ frequently used strategies (see figure 11.3) varied significantly across multiple categories. Statistically significantly more education (Maynooth) students reported collaborating and procrastinating on their writing compared to students from the other universities ( $p < 0.001$  and  $p = 0.001$  respectively). Conversely, fewer education (Maynooth) students reported reading aloud and drafting as a strategy during writing ( $p = 0.005$  and  $p < 0.001$  respectively). Next, fewer law (Drake) students reported frequently using self-imposed word count targets, preparing their writing space, and participating in collaborative writing groups when engaging with a significant task compared to students from other universities ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.007$ , and  $p < 0.001$  respectively); instead, they reported creating timelines more frequently than other surveyed students ( $p = 0.013$ ). Fewer nursing and midwifery (Surrey) students reported frequently using models or templates to write ( $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, while there are no immediate patterns present, there is a statistical difference between how frequently students revise and revisit their ideas ( $p = 0.002$ ).

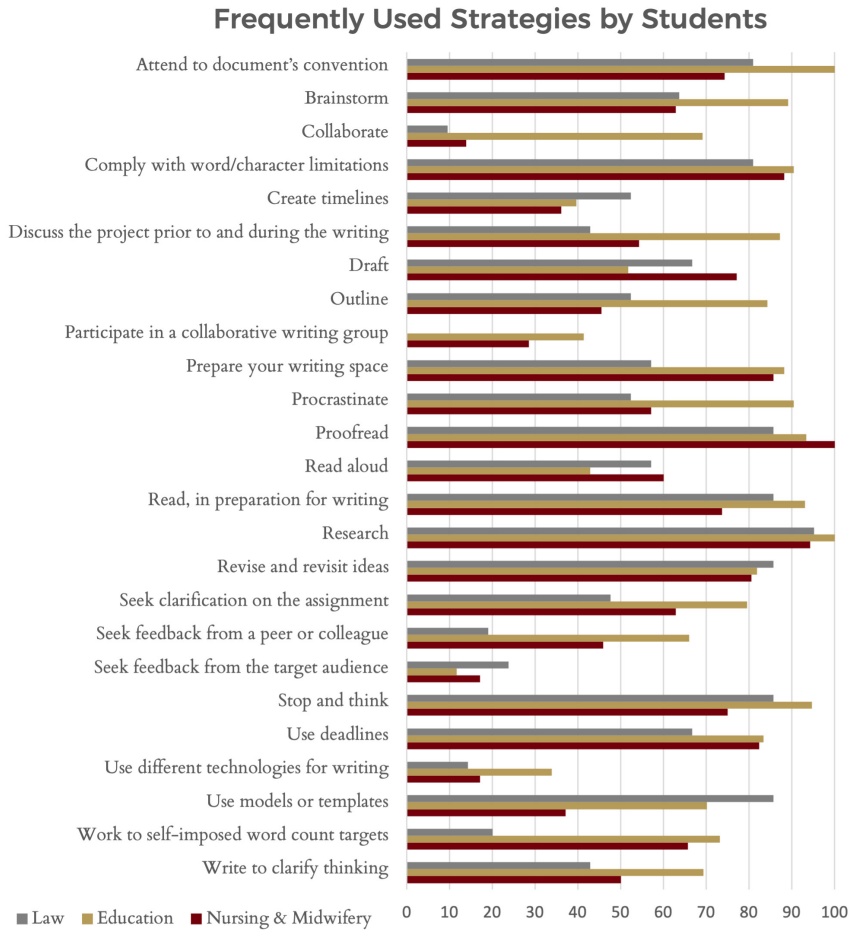
When asked what they believe writing will be like during placement (figure 11.4), statistically significantly more law (Drake) students expected to encounter similar types of writing and to not have to use different approaches to write on placement, and consequently they also believed they were well prepared by the university to undertake this writing compared to education (Maynooth) and nursing and midwifery (Surrey) students ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.013$ , and  $p < 0.001$  respectively).

## **Findings: Patterns of Development and Anticipation**

In this section, we categorize our findings in terms of patterns of development and anticipation. We use the lens of threshold concepts

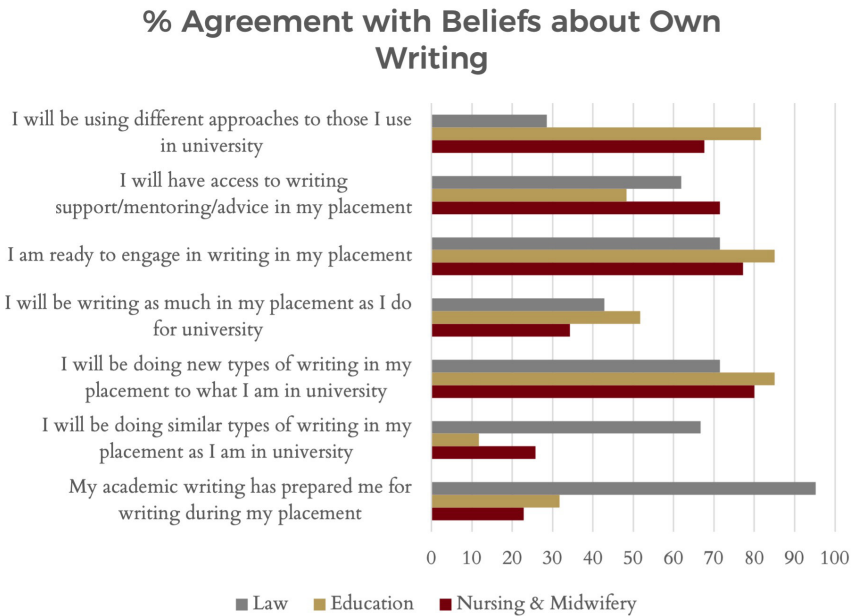
Thematic Group		Education		Nursing & Midwifery		Law	
		All	Top 3	All	Top 3	All	Top 3
Class/assignment associated writing (essays, presentations, reflective writing, worksheets)		496	164	222	109	56	12
Personal and interpersonal outside class writing (e.g., emails, formal letters, social media, scheduling)		90	13	46	8	19	8
Program/ field specific writing	Thesis/final year project writing (e.g., dissertation, thesis)	72	16	0	0	0	0
	Practical teaching writing (e.g., lesson plans, teaching materials)	115	66	0	0	0	0
	Practical law writing (e.g., briefs, memos, outlines)	0	0	0	0	140	44
	Practical medical writing (e.g., patient notes, case studies, scenario writing)	0	0	52	3	0	0
	Research-associated writing (e.g., proposals, literature reviews, posters)	86	1	69	18	8	0

*Table 11.2. Typical Writing Tasks, Thematically Summarized*



*Figure 11.3. Frequently Used Writing Strategies (percentage of students who reported using said strategy frequently or always)*

to help understand these patterns and their possible implications for future research and teaching. Glynis Cousin, drawing on the work of Meyer and Land (2006), notes that threshold concepts are thought to be “central to the mastery” of the subject (2006, 4). Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015, 2) define threshold concepts as “concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice.” We have chosen threshold concepts to guide the exploration of our findings because of their



*Figure 11.4. Perceptions about own writing (percentage of students who reported agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements)*

presentation in Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s edited collection as a “Naming [of] What We Know.” We hope that by bringing the writing community’s wisdom about the discipline and teaching of writing studies to our findings, we will be better able to identify, or *know*, possible navigation strategies which our students use in moving from writing in the university to writing beyond the university.

### **Patterns of Development in Competence - Practice and Experimentation**

In our data, we see a range of writing strategies in university writing and mixed student engagement across the strategies within this range (figure 11.3). The students in our research have an awareness of the processes involved in producing a piece of text and they have opportunities to practice their writing; most of them write daily (figure 11.1). From the data we can see that many students

across the three sites use some strategies frequently, for instance, attending to document conventions, complying with word limits, using deadlines, proofreading, reading and researching, revising and revisiting, stopping and thinking. Other strategies were used by fewer students; examples include collaborating, reading aloud, seeking feedback from a peer or the target audience, using different technologies for writing. And there was variety across the sites. Law (Drake) students used models and templates to a greater extent, education (Maynooth) students collaborate to a greater extent, and nursing and midwifery (Surrey) students draft to a greater extent. Thus, our students across all sites are practicing certain strategies but also experimenting with other strategies albeit less frequently.

Using threshold concepts as a lens through which to explore our data, we suggest that practicing and experimenting could go hand-in-hand in developing competency where the practice is associated with the completion of familiar writing tasks, whilst the experimenting might occur in the writing *processes*. As Andrea Lunsford explains, “When writers can identify how elements of one writing situation are similar to elements of another, their prior knowledge helps them out in analyzing the current rhetorical situation” (2015, 55). Kathleen Yancey (2015) asserts that “practice is the key” in developing as a writer, but she also remarks that it is important to engage “different kinds of practices” as the way for “all human beings to develop into competent writers” (65). For instance, in an education course, creating a worksheet would be a familiar writing task and thus something students would have practiced, but “seeking feedback from the target audience” for that worksheet would be unfamiliar and therefore in the realm of experimenting. In this manner familiarity with the writing task (or genre) through practice can be exploited in order to enhance the potential of the development of writing processes for facilitating transfer.

Certainly, in professionally oriented programs, an argument could be made for focusing on teaching and encouraging practice of the writing genres that will be used in the workplace as opposed to academic texts. Yancey emphasizes, “In the practice of writing,

we develop writing capacities, among them the ability to adjust and adapt to different contexts, purposes, and audiences” (2015, 64). As teachers we are mindful of these factors and may adjust them in order to support the agility of our writers. But this agility might also be supported by encouraging experimentation in terms of strategies and processes, even when engaging in the same types of writing tasks. We suggest that this is a way to facilitate ongoing learning about oneself as a writer, not least how our processes and capacities change with different kinds of practice, time, and effort, albeit within the same genres and for similar audiences. In this manner, instructors shift attention from the writing output to the writing process, and it is crucially the familiarity with the genres through practice that allows for experimentation with processes.

Providing opportunities to practice and experiment simultaneously may be of benefit to students as they move from university writing to writing beyond the university. As Shirley Rose notes, “All writers always have more to learn about writing” (2015, 59) and this learning will continue throughout their writing lives. A way of anchoring the learning for novice professional writers may be to provide them with opportunities to see that the “writing strategies that are effective for them in one context are often inappropriate and ineffective in another context in which they need or want to write” (Rose 2015, 59). Where they have had experience of seeing practice and experimentation as elements which co-exist in writing, they may be more comfortable with the openness that is required in encountering new writing challenges. As teachers, we might want to provide as many opportunities as possible to our students to try out and to recognize where and how they manage practicing and experimenting.

A companion pedagogical approach could be to personalize writing development so that writers have the opportunity to practice and experiment in the areas that are of most value to them. All writers have more to learn, but they do not all have the same things to learn. Neither are they bringing the same “prior knowledge and experience” which informs their writing (Lunsford 2015). Allowing

for choice in writing assignments would provide students with opportunities to engage in experimentation and practice in writing development which are most meaningful and worthwhile to them. A curricular approach and pattern of providing variety and choice allow for an accommodation of the individual nature of the development of writing. As Baird and Dilger point out, although context and community matter, there are individual “influences on transfer” (2017, 688). Accommodating and supporting the unique development of our students as writers within whole cohort pedagogies is an important consideration for teachers.

### **Patterns of Anticipation in Disposition - Awareness and Readiness**

Julia Bleakney (2020), considering what makes workplace writing meaningful, remarks on tensions which exist and on the way writers may seek “balance” between drawing on what they know about writing and being open “towards the unknown.” Helping our students understand, and allowing them to experience, through experimentation and practice, that writing is an ongoing journey towards mastery may be a profound insight which may empower them as they anticipate and negotiate unfamiliar writing situations. It may “enable them to recognize that encountering difficulty in a writing situation is an indication that they are ready to learn something new about writing” (Rose 2015, 60).

In our research we asked students about their beliefs about their writing prior to going on placement (figure 11.4). An interesting finding in terms of anticipation was that, although there were clear differences across the cohorts between the types of writing students practiced and the extent to which they thought academic writing prepared them for writing on placement, the majority of students noted that they were ready to engage in writing on their placement *and* that they anticipated that they would engage in new types of writing. This positive anticipation is noted across the cohorts, together with the clear awareness for two particular cohorts (education [Maynooth] and nursing and midwifery [Surrey]) that they will be using different approaches in professional settings than in

university, and that they will be producing different types of writing on placement than in university. In other words, although our student cohorts differ in terms of the types of writing with which they have engaged (where law students' writing heavily emphasized professional genres and education and nursing and midwifery students to a lesser extent), all students seem to have had positive development in terms of the dispositional qualities of awareness and readiness. These ideas remind us of the work of Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus (influenced by Bazerman et al. 2017) who propose "wayfinding" in an attempt "to develop a way of thinking about writing and literacy that would place an emphasis on the complex and recursive movement in and out of different territories, realms, spaces, and spheres of writing ecologies" (2019, 121).

## Implications

As the principles, rules, and values governing different professional communities vary to a great extent, the possible implications of our research for universities, departments, and individual programs will inevitably be determined and shaped by the professional fields and individual contexts of each university program. There are, however, some general recommendations arising from our findings.

We suggest that it is important to ensure ample opportunities within the students' university experience to both practice and experiment, not least because both will be required in professional settings. Within these opportunities there should also be some scope for choice where students can personalize their learning and foster agility by focusing on the areas where they need to develop. This approach reflects the fact that every student has a unique experience of writing. Where possible, we should allow for development of writing as best fits the individual while recognizing that certain parameters will always exist. As Anson (2016) remarks, "We must see every writer, and every context into which the writer moves, as a unique amalgam of situation and human agency" (540). In turn, a scaffolded approach to writing development will support students in both practicing and experimenting. If this approach is sufficiently

flexible, it could allow students to develop at a rate to which they are best suited while being mindful of degree expectations.

Writing is an important skill in many professional workplaces (Moore and Morton 2017) and becoming a writer in a workplace setting will involve personal change as well as a connection with others in a professional community. In our earlier publication, which is also based on our multi-institutional research, we note that collaboration can be a strong feature of professional writing (Fortune et al. 2021). Our findings, however, suggest that overall, students across our cohorts did not seem to engage in a lot of collaborative writing (see figure 11.2). As such, we may wish to encourage more opportunities to practice writing as a collaborative activity. An interdisciplinary approach to both of these ideas could prove beneficial to students, not least because they could find themselves in interdisciplinary teams in their professional settings (this may be especially so for the Surrey nursing and midwifery students). Such an approach may require institutional support in practical terms such as course scheduling, but also in terms of program design and accreditation.

On a related note to collaboration, we might encourage our students to share their writing more openly in the university as a way to develop the transferable skills and dispositions around giving and receiving feedback, which will be essential in virtually all workplace settings, and indeed beyond. In our study, for example, seeking feedback from the target audience was a strategy used less frequently than many others (see figure 11.3); however, feedback literacy will be required in many professional settings. Experimenting and practicing with feedback from a broader range of audiences than faculty could be beneficial for students as they navigate the move from writing in university to writing on placement.

One finding that we have not discussed in our analysis, but which merits mention in terms of possible implications, is the fact that low numbers of students across all cohorts noted using “different technologies for writing.” The continued rise of digital in all aspects of higher education and working life appears inevitable. Our

findings suggest that this is a gap in students' strategies, although it may have been addressed to some extent by the necessity for blended teaching and learning strategies required by many higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In looking to the future, a concerted effort to include a digital inflection to the curriculum and pedagogies could be considered at program and institutional levels.

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