Teaching Writing in EAP Contexts
A Case Study of Students' Reactions to the Use of Blogs for Academic Writing Tasks

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Abstract   Academic writing is a particular type of scholarly interaction which signals the writer's affiliation to a specific discourse community. Developing academic writing skills should become a priority for higher education. This paper describes a small-scale study which investigates the role of blogging in developing academic writing skills in undergraduate students. Blogging is viewed as a platform where the scholarly interaction between members of the same discourse community can take place. The paper is based on the survey data and observation during the experiment conducted at Alecu Russo Balti State University of Moldova. It reports on how EFL students reacted to the use of blogs for academic writing tasks. The findings suggest that students seem to have a positive attitude to blogging pointing out to such benefits as: enhanced self-efficacy, awareness of the writing process, development of reader awareness, increased responsibility for the quality of the writing. We argue that blogging can yield significant improvement in undergraduate students' academic writing.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Defining Writing in EAP Contexts. – 2.1 Approaches to Teaching Academic Writing for Non-Native Speakers. – 2.2 The Relevance of the Concept Discourse Community in Academic Settings. – 2.3 The Use of Blogs for Academic Writing Tasks. – 3 Method. – 3.1 Participants of the Study. – 3.2 Data Collection Procedures. – 3.3 Data Analysis. – 4 Results. – 4.1 Research Question 1. – 4.2 Research Question 2. – 4.3 Research Question 3. – 5 Discussion.

Keywords   Academic writing. Blogging. Discourse community. Scholarly interaction. Writing approach.

1   Introduction

Being a particular type of social interaction (Nystrand 1989), writing poses problems for students who are expected to write a substantial number of papers in their course of study. Students seem to be inadequately prepared for the tasks set before them, consequently the writing process becomes tedious and frustrating. This leads to students' low self-esteem and to their writing apprehension. The present study examines the use of blogging as a tool to enhance students' academic writing skills. It looks at the possibilities of rendering the process of writing more interactive and motivational

by developing a blogging strategy to academic writing for students studying English as a foreign language.

It appears students do not understand the purpose of academic writing and consider it as something contributing insignificantly to their academic development. The cause may lie in the fact that students do not consider themselves affiliated to their discourse community, which has the aim of sharing knowledge and/or of contributing their own to the existing knowledge. Hence the concept of discourse community as defined by John Swales (1990, 2016) is central to this study. Blogging can create the optimal context for the academic interaction to take place and to create the sense of membership in students to the local discourse community.

The complexity of teaching academic writing to non-native speakers has prompted researchers to look for viable solutions that would help teachers to scaffold their students' writing process. The traditional approaches are not exhaustive, i.e. they cannot approach every aspect of academic writing, yet they are not exclusive, i.e. they can be blended in order to achieve concrete pedagogical goals.

Academic writing can be approached differently with the help of blogs. The teacher needs to design the course of action in such a way as to respond to the students' actual needs. Blogging may help establish meaningful relationships not only between the teacher and students, but also among the students themselves. Hence the sense of affiliation to a specific discourse community is developed in students, making the process of writing more purposeful. Blogging can be viewed not only as a tool enhancing students' initiation into academic writing but also as a means of becoming members of a community sharing the same goals.

The study is based on the researcher's professional experience at Alecu Russo Balti State University. The researcher designed an experiment involving the use of blogs to help students develop academic writing skills. The findings have shown the need for a special course in academic writing in the university curriculum that will help students to produce cohesive and coherent academic writing. It is within this course that blogging practice should be introduced. The students are offered the optimal platform for the scholarly interaction to take place, making them more responsible for the quality of their wiring. Similarly the students become more aware of their readers' expectations and attempt to construct their texts in accordance with what their readers might possibly expect from them.

2 Defining Writing in EAP Contexts

Academic writing is a particular type of writing involving a specific readership that is expected to share the same background knowledge. It is a communicative event intended by the writer who wants to produce a specific effect on his/her reader. Both the writer and the reader have to collaborate in order for communication to take place. It, thus, becomes essential for the writer to determine what exactly he/she wants to communicate to the reader(s). At the same time, the writer should know how this communication is going to fit the acknowledged framework of the written discourse so that the reader perceives it as belonging to that particular genre. This generic construction will signal the author's membership of a specific discourse community and thus enhance writer-reader communication.

Success in any act of communication implies the participants' collaboration. The writer and the reader(s) tacitly engage in a collaborative process based on their conventional agreement to be clear, brief, correct and relevant. Thus, the process of writing should become "a matter of elaborating text in accord with what the writer can reasonably assume that the reader knows and expects, and the process of reading is a matter of predicting text in accord with what the reader assumes about the writer's purpose" (Nystrand 1989, 75).

Academic writing is crucial to the students' academic development "because of the importance placed on written assessments in academic courses at all levels" (Bruce 2011, 118). In addition, it acknowledges their membership to a particular discourse community, whereas their integration into that community depends on their analytical ability to communicate their findings and ideas in logically structured texts.

The definition of academic writing is not monolithic. Researchers do not consider it as a fixed set of rules impossible to change. On the contrary, they point to its rather dynamic characteristic, being viewed within its socio-cultural context. Hyland (1999, 2002) points to the fact that academic writing is a social process meant to enhance persuasiveness either in an impersonal objective manner or in a rather subjective way, yet constrained by the methodologies, arguments and rhetorical strategies related to a specific discipline. The scholar emphasises the importance of the authorial voice within the given framework of a disciplinary submission.

Bhatia (1999) suggests that academic writing is an individual response to a specific demand of the academic community. The academic text becomes the means via which the individual's viewpoint is communicated to the other members. Yet, the text is regulated by the conventions of the context the individual is affiliated to.

Casanave (2003) suggests a socio-political perspective on academic writing claiming that social and political aspects of writing should be considered first while dealing with composition in a second language. Thus, in

the researcher's opinion there should be a shift from linguistic and textual aspects of writing towards its socio-political aspects.

Swales (1990, 1994) views academic writing within its generic network arguing that it has a particular structure and follows specific conventions. Yet, the researcher points to its capacity to generate other genres, i.e. an article can be developed into a thesis, etc. Thus, the students are expected to manipulate with the given generic framework and, at the same time, develop one's own authorial voice. In a way, academic writing could be viewed as an individual's response to the demand of the academic community as to how to communicate one's knowledge.

2.1 Approaches to Teaching Academic Writing for Non-Native Speakers

It should be noted that, apart from having an immediate outcome (i.e. communicating one's knowledge within a specific discourse community), "competence in academic writing also relates to the future needs of graduates to communicate within professional or academic communities through written publications" (Bruce 2011, 118). Therefore, the acquisition of academic writing skills should be fostered the very moment students enter a higher education institution. Teachers need to think of ways to scaffold the students' writing process and diminish the affective filter.

Among the existing approaches to writing, teachers need to consider the optimal way to help the students to overcome the main three challenges as defined by Kruse (2003) and which concern the demands of knowledge (what to say), language (what language to use), and communication (how to communicate).

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) argue that the concept of teaching writing should be revised. In the scholars' opinion writing cannot be taught as the other skills. What the teachers should strive for is to create the optimal contexts for the writing to take place.

The teacher is thus supposed to equip "students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts" (Hyland, Hamp-Lyons 2002, 2). He/she is expected to provide proper and effective education so that students become academically literate, i.e. they become able to respond appropriately to the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of a particular academic discipline.

Nunan (1991), on the other hand, speaks in favour of blending the existing approaches in order to respond to the students' actual needs. Indeed, the issue of developing writing skills is more complex than simply applying a single approach to writing. It becomes even more challenging when students have to produce texts in a foreign language. That is why teachers should think of viable models that would scaffold the students' writing process. Moreover, theorising is 'useless' if there is no

viable applicable model to help the students in their learning process (Balboni 2007).

Swales and Feak (1994) have elaborated a model meant to help students in their writing process for academic settings. It consists of six main parts.
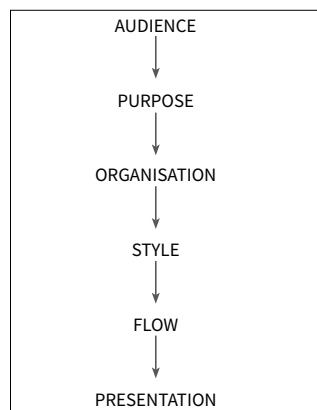
AUDIENCE
↓
PURPOSE
↓
ORGANISATION
↓
STYLE
↓
FLOW
↓
PRESENTATION

Figure 1. Considerations in academic writing

a. Audience: as seen, the audience is the first element to be considered in academic writing as the choices the writer will make will depend on his/her assumptions concerning the expectations of his/her audience. Swales and Feak (1994, 7) suggest that "to be successful in your writing task, you need to have an understanding of your audience's expectations and prior knowledge, because these will affect the content of your writing". It should be emphasised that students should be encouraged not to envisage the teacher as the sole reader. They should also imagine other possible readers who belong to their academic environment, including their peers. In fact, Hyland (2009, 32) argues that "audience is, in fact, rarely a concrete reality, particularly in academic and professional contexts, and must be seen as essentially representing a construction of the writer which may shift during the composing process".

b. Purpose: when it comes to the purpose, it should be clearly stated at the beginning so that the audience understands the writer's communicative intention. In academic contexts, the writer is expected to produce coherent and cohesive texts related, as a rule, to discipline specific areas. For example, they might be assigned to write reports, essays, projects focusing on a particular subject.

c. Organisation: organisation in academic writing involves the generally-accepted information structure in such a context.

d. Style: as previously stated, the stylistic organisation of the academic text involves the writer's ability to manipulate the rhetorical patterns characteristic of the academic genre. Thus, "the style of a

> particular piece must not only be consistent, but must also be proper for the message being conveyed and for the audience" (Swales, Feak 1994, 15).
>
> e. Flow: flow ensures a smooth transition from one idea to another. It deals with the unity of the paper, which should be both cohesive and coherent.
>
> f. Presentation: it is the part where the writer considers the overall format of the written work, proofreads for careless grammar mistakes, and checks for misspelled words.
>
> g. Students need to be encouraged to consider such a model in their academic writing, yet the teacher's assistance is still vital. They need to scaffold the students' writing process by interacting with the students. Indeed, lack of communication between students and teachers is another challenge faced by students.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987) focused on the cognitive processes taking place in the mind that allow knowledge to be translated into writing. The scholars believe that students need to master the skill of developing writing from a more general process of writing towards a more complex one. They claim that the two main models involved in composition are the knowledge telling and knowledge transforming models. The ability to transform knowledge derives from the ability to tell knowledge, and, as a result, we can distinguish between mature and immature composing. A student mastering the skill to produce mature composing is able not only to tell knowledge but also to transform it. In mature composing knowledge is brought into the writing process after the writer has identified the problem and has considered the possible solutions.

Bruce (2011) distinguishes three stages in the development of academic writers, where one stage derives from the other. The first one deals with assisting students in deconstructing discipline-related academic texts, so that later on students are able to construct their owns. Only after has the first stage been developed, students can develop the other two. The second relates to developing the authorial voice within the discourse community students want to be affiliated. The third stage lies in the ability to innovate, change and reshape the discourse community. Bruce claims that due to lack of time the teacher can scaffold the development of the first stage, whereas the other two stages are developed later on, after graduation as the students are expected to have developed the necessary skills by being constantly involved in their discourse community. This brings forth such notions as autonomous learning and lifelong learning.

2.2   The Relevance of the Concept Discourse Community
in Academic Settings

Swales (1990) has developed the concept of discourse community. In the scholar's opinion a discourse community has to meet six criteria. It needs to (1) have common goals, (2) its own mechanisms of interaction, (3) be participatory and provide information and give feedback, (4) have one or more genres to communicate its aims, (5) operate with a specific lexis, (6) have expert members.

Swales (2016) has recently revised the six criteria and added other two to the list. Thus, a discourse community has to develop a sense of "silential relations" (Becker 1995). It refers to what remains 'unsaid' and gives the text its character. The eighth criterion states that a discourse community develops horizons of expectation. The co-construction of the discourse is possible only with the awareness of the other's presence. Hence, the writer while encoding his/her message shall develop reader awareness and construct his/her text in accordance with what his/her reader might possibly expect of him/her.

The concept of discourse community is central to academic writing as it helps to make writing more purposeful. It enables the students to feel a sense of affiliation to their discourse community and be encouraged to contribute their own knowledge to it. Thus it makes academic writing more motivational.

2.3   The Use of Blogs for Academic Writing Tasks

Information and communication technology has gained considerable popularity in both teaching and learning processes. Teachers consider technology tools that can help in the realisation of their pedagogical tools. Blogging has been used as a tool to enhance students' writing skills (Fellner, Apple 2006; Stapleton 2010; Sun, Chang 2012; Williams, Jacobs 2004; Wu 2006). Researchers have come to the conclusion that blogging can increase motivation in students. It appears to boost interaction among students and contribute to collaborative learning. There is also a visible increase in the students' self-esteem. They seem to become more fluent writers and more responsible for the quality of their writing.

The implementation of a technology tool needs to be carefully considered. The teacher should clearly determine in what way blogging can help in the realisation of his/her pedagogical goals. The course needs to be developed taking into consideration the students' needs.

Our belief is that blogging can offer the optimal context for the creation of a small discourse community consisting of teachers and students. The blogging practice can be based on Caon's (2006, 25) motivational model.
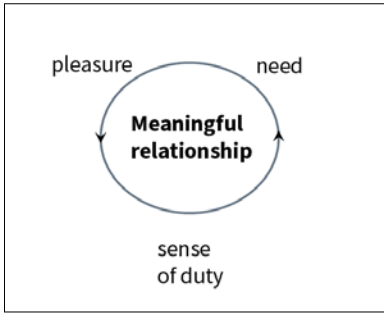
Figure 2. Motivational model

Applying this model may enhance students' pleasure in writing and consider it not only as a duty to be fulfilled but also as a process contributing to their academic needs. Students need to be encouraged to consider not only short-term but also long-term goals. By creating a meaningful relationship between all the factors students' motivation may increase.

Using Caon's motivational model, teachers might elaborate their own models to meet their pedagogical needs. Blogging itself should be viewed as a means of creating a small discourse community as well as of establishing a meaningful relationship among the members of this community.

3 Method

The study represents small-scale action research based on the analysis of the survey data and observation during the experiment conducted at Alecu Russo Balti State University of Moldova where I tried to design a blogging course in order to help undergraduates to enhance their academic writing skills. The research goal was to determine whether the implementation of such a practice can contribute to the students' enhancement of academic writing skills in the English language.

The following research questions have been posed in order to address the research goal:
1. How do students react to the use of blogs for academic writing tasks?
2. What relationships are created between the people involved in the experiment?
3. What teaching approach to writing should be applied during blogging?

3.1 Participants of the Study

The focus group consisted of 6 female students in their fourth year of study at the faculty of Philology, majoring in English. Their field of specialisation

was English language teaching. The fact that all participants were females corresponds to the gender division of this faculty (there are very few male students in general). The students' language proficiency level was intermediate and upper-intermediate. They were supposed to be familiar with features of academic writing in English as they had produced quite a number of texts belonging the academic genres before the experiment. Moreover, they all had already written their first research paper in the third year in Didactics. The students' identity is going to be kept anonymous.

Student 1

Student 1 (hereafter S1) was the most active of the all participants. She showed absolute determination to improve her academic writing skills. She always met the deadlines and was actively involved in the discussion process. Her level of language proficiency was upper-intermediate, which allowed her to construct quite cohesive texts in English. Yet, she found it difficult to logically connect the ideas in her text.

S1 had low self-esteem at the beginning of the experiment. She would be discouraged at first believing that she failed to write an appropriate academic text. S1 would often panic, but she would never give up. Till the end of the experiment her confidence increased, whereas her writing became more fluent. Moreover, S1 was considered by her peers as a member with a suitable degree of discourse expertise.

Student 2

Student 2 (hereafter S2) was sceptical at the beginning of the experiment as she believed writing is not as important as speaking is in her academic development. Yet, she maintained constant interest throughout the experiment. Her level of language proficiency was upper-intermediate and she was rather fluent in expressing her ideas. The biggest struggle she faced was in organising her writing. In addition, she paid attention first and foremost to accuracy (i.e. she was primarily interested in following the grammar rules).

S2 seemed to be rather unmotivated at the beginning of the experiment. Her determination to prove her self-efficacy to herself and to the other members of the group became a determining factor in increasing her motivation. She admitted that academic writing should be paid more attention to and that she needed to approach it more seriously. She also came to realise the issue of plagiarism in academic writing, which she had previously regarded as something acceptable.

Student 3

Student 3 (hereafter S3) was extremely determined to improve her writing skills. She was aware that her level of language proficiency was lower than that of her peers (her level was intermediate), yet she worked assiduously to improve her writing skills. She was convinced that in this way she would be able to improve her language proficiency.

Her writing needed to be improved regularly. S3 found it difficult to express her ideas fluently in English. She always needed a sample that she could imitate in her writing. She expected to be shown exactly what was wrong in her writing so that she could improve it.

Student 4

Student 4 (hereafter S4) was the most confused of the group. Having an upper-intermediate language proficiency level she was convinced that writing for academic purposes is similar to writing for personal purposes. She was confused to discover the intricacy of academic writing and was at first discouraged to acknowledge that she did not know how to write appropriate academic texts.

S4 was determined to improve her academic writing skills. She wanted to prove herself that she could produce appropriate academic texts and in this way become a member of the community her peers were affiliated to.

Student 5

Student 5 (hereafter S5) was categorised as being a creative writer (i.e. she was interested in creative writing and transferred the patterns of creative writing to academic writing). Her level of language proficiency in English was upper-intermediate and she was able to produce good quality pieces of creative writing.

S5 found it extremely difficult to write for academic purposes. Her biggest challenge was the demand of what to communicate in her text. She was rather slow in posting her writing. She admitted she needed to see what her peers had written first. In this way she could better understand what was expected from her in her writing. Yet, she was determined to improve her writing, working at her own pace.

Student 6

Student 6 (hereafter S6) was the most curious of the group always questioning the remarks she would be given in order to make certain improvements in her writing. Her level of language proficiency was upper-intermediate. She seemed to understand the features of academic writing, yet, it was difficult for her to organise her work.

S6 also felt the need of having concrete samples of good writing which she could imitate. She would even consult more than one text before producing her own. Just like in the case of S1, her peers considered her as having a suitable degree of discourse expertise. That is why she would often be asked to give her feedback to her peers' writing.

Conducting an action research (as defined by Norton 2009) implied that I had a dual role, i.e. the one as a researcher and the other as a teacher scaffolding the students' writing process. I intended to keep my presence to the minimum as I wanted to observe how students establish academic relationships among themselves. I personally knew the participants to the study as I taught them in their first and second years. This means that we had already established a meaningful relationship between ourselves.

I also collaborated with two teachers who were teaching two courses to the students involved in the experiment. In this way it was possible for me to determine the students' needs and think about possibilities to help them to improve their academic writing skills. Thus, my personal experience has contributed to a better understanding of the existing problem, and allowed me to look for viable solutions.

3.2   Data Collection Procedures

Three qualitative research methods of data collection were used in order to increase the strength and validity of the study. The used methods comprise: (a) participants' structured post-treatment surveys; (b) participants' blog entries and comments; (c) observation of the participants' behaviour during Skype conferences.

The post-treatment surveys, analysis of the students' posts and comments as well as the observation made during the experiment were meant to elicit information regarding the participants' reaction to the use of blogs. Similarly I wanted to determine the way students' approached the process of writing for academic purposes. Finally I wanted to determine the type of relationships that were established between the participants involved in the experiment.

3.3 Data Analysis

The processes and procedures of qualitative data analysis were applied to the analysis of the collected data. Being based on an interpretative philosophy where the content of the data is examined in order to explain, understand or describe the investigated phenomenon, the responsibility of the data interpretation lies with the researcher. That is why there was the need for more than one source of data for the validation of the results.

Open coding consisting of several procedures was adopted. In particular it allowed to: explore the data; identify the units of analysis; code for meanings, feelings, and actions; make metaphors for data; experiment with codes; compare and contrast events, actions, and feelings; break codes into subcategories; integrate codes into more inclusive codes; and identify the properties of codes.

In order to determine the students' attitude I elaborated a rubric with the categories 'poor', 'fair', 'good', and 'excellent'. Each qualifier was assigned a numerical value in order to measure the students' attitude. In this way, the 'poor' category was assigned the number 1, the one assessed as 'fair' – 2, the one assessed as 'good' – 3, and finally the one assessed as 'excellent' – 4. This type of measuring allowed to present the results in charts and tables.

4 Results

The results of the analysed data show that students positively respond to blogging as a tool to enhance their academic writing skills. Their attitude did not significantly vary during the experiment. They established meaningful relationships not only between themselves and the teacher but also among themselves. It is difficult to state whether their attitude was influenced by the approach applied to writing. Yet, some approaches that worked well with some students (e.g. process approach to writing) turned less effective with others (they would prefer the product approach to writing).

4.1 Research Question 1

The first research question was intended to determine the way students react to the use of blogs for academic writing tasks. The results show that the students had a positive attitude and found the practice useful for the enhancement of their academic writing skills.

Table 1 reveals the results from the analysis of students' posts and comments as well as from my observation. As seen, students' general reaction to the use of blogs for academic writing tasks was positive. They all did

their best to write the assigned drafts on time. It happened only once when two students did not manage to post their writings on the due dates, and gave up posting them later on. Table 1 also shows what was improved most in the students' writing. Thus, S1 and S3 managed to understand what was incorrect in their writings. They needed to understand the mistakes in order to avoid them later on. S2, S4, and S6 managed to improve their organisational skills. They faced struggles in organising their texts following the conventions of academic writing. S5, on the other hand, started to understand what is expected from her to communicate in her writing. In all cases the improvement was due to the critical feedback given in the comments below the students' posts as well as to their face-to-face interactions and Skype conferences.

Table 1. Students' overall reaction to the use of blogs

Student	Attitude	Improvement	Cause
S1, S3	positive	Understand the mistakes	critical feedback / interaction
S2, S4, S6	positive	How to write	critical feedback / interaction
S5	positive	What to write	critical feedback / interaction

In order to understand the students' attitude related to blogging, I tried to determine their level of punctuality, i.e. how well they met the deadlines. I assumed that the fact that students met the deadline was a proof that students positively responded to blogging. Chart 1 summarises their overall ability to meet the deadlines.
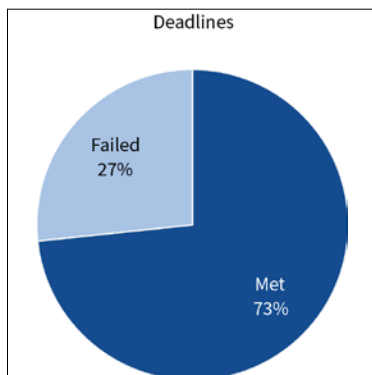

Chart 1. Students' ability to meet the deadlines

As seen, students were interested in posting their drafts on time. It should be also noted that in the causes of not posting one's draft on time varied. Thus, 9% out of 27% posted their drafts after midnight of the deadline day, 15% did not meet the deadline, posting their drafts one or two days after the deadline, and 3% did not post their drafts at all.

In the table below, the students' attitude has been measured with the help of a rubric I created to trace their degree of interest in the blogging practice. Thus, for example, the student's attitude was ranked as poor (1) if she did not meet the deadline, was unmotivated, and showed lack of interest. If the student found it hard to meet the deadline, was partially motivated, and posted sporadically, then her attitude would be fair (2). A good (3) attitude meant that the student met the deadline, posted regularly, was motivated, yet did exclusively what she had been assigned. Finally, the attitude was believed to be excellent (4), if the student met the deadline, was an active participant, made more than she had been assigned, was fully motivated, and always showed interest.

Table 2. Students' attitude towards the use of blogs

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	Average
Draft 1.1	4	4	4	3	3	4	3.666667
Draft 1.2	4	3	4	4	3	3	3.5
Draft 2.1	4	3	4	1	1	3	2.666667
Draft 2.2	4	3	4	3	2	3	3.166667
Draft 3.1	4	3	4	3	2	3	3.166667
Draft 3.2	4	3	4	3	2	3	3.166667
Draft 4.1	4	3	4	2	2	3	3
Draft 4.2	4	4	4	3	2	3	3.333333
Draft 5.1	3	3	3	3	2	3	2.833333
Draft 5.2	4	3	4	3	2	3	3.166667
Average	3.9	3.2	3.9	2.8	2.1	3.1	3.166667

As seen the students' average shows their overall good attitude towards the use of blogs for academic writing tasks. Their attitude was correlated with their preparedness to write a certain assignment on the one hand, and to their desire to improve their academic writing skills, on the other. S1 and S3 seem to be the most enthusiastic regarding the use of blogs (their average is 3.9), whereas S5 the least enthusiastic about this experience (her average is 2.1).

The same result is seen in the answers the students gave in the surveys they were asked to respond to. When answering whether blogging helped the students to improve their academic writing skills they all spoke in favour of blogging, pointing to the specific ways it helped them. None

of them mentioned anything hampering the process of academic writing while blogging. S1, for example, said:

> Yes, it has [blogging has helped to improve her academic writing skills]. The most helpful thing was that I wrote many essays on different topics; anyone could view my posts; I received some comments concerning my writings from my peers, from my teacher which I took into account and in this way I was rewriting my papers all the time and this helped to improve my writing skills.

All the other students responded in the same way. They only pointed to the benefits of the blogging practice, moreover, they perceived it as a course altogether in academic writing where they were not only learning from a teacher but also from each other. Thus they collaborated in the process of learning how to produce appropriate texts for academic purposes.

4.2 Research Question 2

The second question aimed to determine what types of relationships were created between the people involved in the experiment. The data analysed here was taken from the surveys and the observation notes.

Table 3 shows the exact number of drafts posted by students during the experiment (it needs to be pointed out that they were expected to post 10 drafts during the experiment). It also reflects how many comments they received to their posts as well as how many comments each of the students made to their peers' posts.

Table 3. Students' blogging practice in numbers

Student	Number of post	Number of received comments	Number of made critical comments
S1	13	19	27
S2	10	21	6
S3	11	20	13
S4	9	13	7
S5	9	16	3
S6	10	24	8

As seen from Chart 2 below, the number of received comments is bigger than the number of made comments.

This is due to the fact that I in my position of a member possessing a bigger degree of discourse expertise commented every student's posts. It needs to be noted that students were not asked to comment every post
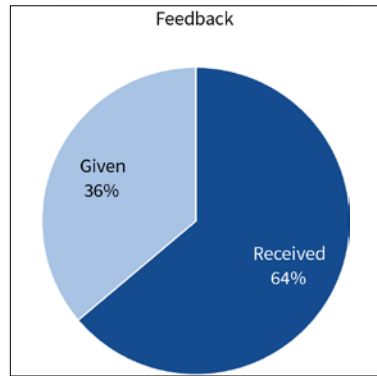
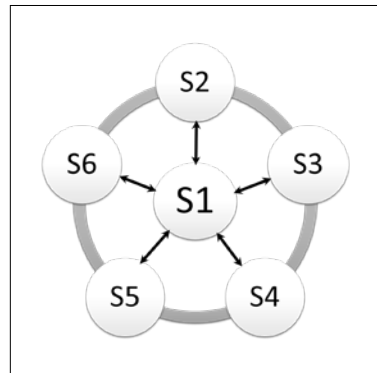Chart 2. Commenting process in numbers

Figure 3. Interaction among students. Pattern 1

made by their peers. However, the results show that they interacted with each other, and hence had created a network of meaningful relationships.

From my observation I noticed that they still preferred to interact face-to-face. During Skype conferences they would often refer to the discussion they would have when they met at the university. So they had all interactions related to blogging within the academic context they were affiliated to.

Another observation I made was that there were two patterns of their interaction. The first one is shown in figure 3.

This pattern reflects the distribution of roles within the students' small discourse community. Thus S1 would most often be referred to as the member having a higher degree of discourse expertise. So the other students would consult her whenever they would have questions related to their writing assignment. Moreover, she would be the one constantly giving feedback in her comments. Every time she would comment a different peer's post. She would also be among those who always met the deadlines. I think the student's personal experience with her peers as well as her

serious approach towards the experiment influenced the other students in choosing her as the expert member of their community.

The second interaction pattern among students can be represented as follows:
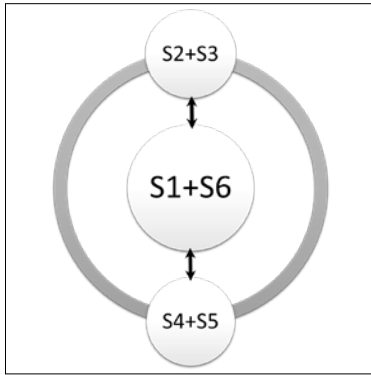

Figure 4. Interaction among students. Pattern 2

Figure 4 shows the pairs that were formed within the students' discourse community. Thus, for example, S2 would more often interact with S3, S4 with S5, and S1 with S6. It is interesting to note in the centre of the figure there is the pair formed by S1 and S6. So, the other pairs would attribute them the role of members with a higher degree of expertise.

Definitely there was a third pattern of interaction which involved the teacher as well (i.e. my presence in the discourse community). In this patter, the teacher's expertise would be the one trusted mostly. In fact, the students would not begin revising their drafts before the teacher also gave her comment. The students admitted in their surveys that they trusted the teacher's comments most giving as an argument the latter's higher degree of discourse expertise.

4.3 Research Question 3

The third research question is what teaching approach to writing should be applied during blogging. In the surveys the students took they were actually asked how they approached writing during the experiment. The results of the analysis of their answers are presented in table 4.

Table 4. Students' approach to writing

Student	Approach
S1, S2, S4, S5	process approach
S3, S6	product approach

4 students out of 6 used processes approach to writing, i.e. they considered the cognitive processes in their wiring. They planned, brainstormed, looked for information in books and on the Internet, and then try to write their first draft. The other 2 students preferred the product approach to writing, i.e. they needed a sample to imitate. It was interesting to note that it actually did not depend on the student's level of language proficiency. S3 had a lower level of language proficiency that S6, yet they both opted for imitating samples of similar writing. They would look for such samples on the Internet. I assume that had S6 been familiar with genre approach, she might have used it in her writing.

Drawing on my observations I can say that students felt more comfortable when process approach to writing was applied. As the attention is mostly paid on the writer here, it allowed the students to gain more confidence. Yet, they seem to positively respond to the genre approach to writing. During Week 7 and Week 8 we tried to deconstruct and then reconstruct three samples of analyses, so that students could construct their own analyses afterwards. The results in their progress did not differ from the results when process approach to writing was applied.

5   Discussion

Blogging could be used as a tool to make the process of writing more purposeful and as a result to motivate students to write for academic purposes. By creating interactional networks within their small discourse community they can enhance their academic writing skills. The meaningful relationships they establish among themselves helps them to gain confidence and see their contribution acknowledged within their discourse community.

Thus, blogging seems to offer a new possibility to approach academic writing. Students are expected to feel more empowered as members of a discourse community where they make their first attempts of affiliating to the focal discourse community (as related to their "future needs to communicate within professional or academic communities through written publications" [Bruce 2011, 118]).
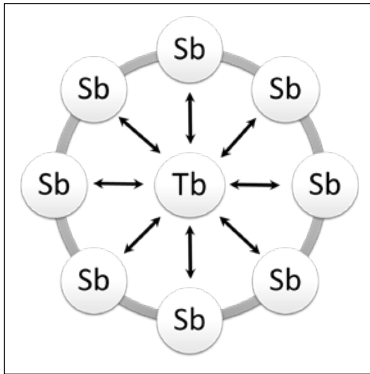
Figure 5. Meaningful relationships in a blogging community

Figure 5 displays a possible way of establishing meaningful relationships in a small, local discourse community. This community is expected to fulfil the six main criteria as described by Swales (1990). Consequently, it shall have:
1. common goals: to tell knowledge / transform knowledge;
2. intercommunication: face-to-face (during classes), online (writing academic assignments);
3. participatory mechanisms: giving feedback to the peers' posts;
4. genres: writing essays, reporting on an assigned topic, articles, analyses, research papers;
5. specific lexis: the use of academic, discipline-related vocabulary;
6. members of expertise: teachers, more experienced colleagues.

Blogging can be seen as the optimal context for the academic writing – interaction to take place. By encouraging students to post their drafts online, teachers actually help them to become more aware of the cognitive processes involved in writing. Students connect with each other for academic purposes. Similarly, while analysing their peers' posts, they need to deconstruct those posts in order to determine to what extent the draft follows the norms and conventions of the specific genre it belongs to. This means that both genre and process approaches to writing could be applied while blogging.

It is central though to exactly determine the pedagogical outcomes of the implementation of blogging in the writing process. It implies that based on the students' needs teachers should foresee the possible outcomes of such a practice. Moreover, the teacher should be prepared to be part of that discourse community as he/she will always be referred to as the member with a higher degree of discourse expertise. As seen, students need the constant encouragement from the teacher in order to gain more confidence in their own writing.

Another issue to take into consideration is that students as novice writers should first develop the knowledge telling model well. Then, gradually,

they need to be helped to develop the knowledge transforming model. I do not think that this is something which actually can be 'taught'. It is something which can be acquired by writing intensively and by reflecting upon the quality of the product, i.e. the written text. Thus students need to develop critical skills. By learning to give critical feedback to their peers they will learn to be more critical towards their own writing.

It is also worth mentioning that genre approach seems to be most suited to help students to develop into mature academic writers. The process approach is the approach students apply unconsciously. They may transfer the patterns of cognitive processes from other types of writing, but usually they plan the stages of their writing. Yet, while focusing on the cognitive processes (which means the writer above all focuses on himself/herself), there is the tendency to ignore the constraints of the specific genre the text is supposed to belong to. That is why deconstructing texts belonging to a specific genre and then reconstructing those texts helps students to become more aware of the generic constrains and follow them in their own writing.

Finally, scholarly interaction is of extreme importance in the students' development of academic writing skills. The fact that students do not get feedback from their teachers makes the process of writing tiresome and leads to the students' writing apprehension. That is why the teacher needs to be actively involved in the students' discourse community, he/she needs to be a member on whose expertise students can always rely on. Only in such a way can novice/immature writers be helped to develop into experienced/mature writers. Gradually the teacher's presence will be diminished as the students will have acquired the necessary skills to produce appropriate academic texts by that time.

To conclude, the undertaken study has proven that blogging can be used to improve the quality of the students' academic writing. The results of the study refer to the particular socio-cultural context where it was conducted. It may happen that the results will differ in other contexts. Similarly, being small-scale research a more thorough investigation into the problem is needed. Yet, the formulated assumptions can help teachers to scaffold the students' acquisition of academic writing skills in their own contexts. Teachers may consider using blogging in their practice of teaching writing by following the given recommendations.

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