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Diary writing as a tool for students' self-reflection and teacher's feedback in the Course of Academic Writing

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Abstract

Diary writing is a very effective and natural tool for both students and teachers since this informal writing enables students to reflect on what they have learned, how they have learned it, what kind of difficulties they have when they have to write in formal English or what helps them to overcome these and other difficulties in the process of learning English. In addition, teachers can learn from students' diaries about their constraints in writing and help them to remove them. They can also discover what teaching strategies students appreciate most and implement them in their teaching. The purpose of this article is thus to discuss diary writing used in the Course of Academic Writing at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic, and analyse some of students' entries with respect to teaching approaches and strategies, students' learning preferences and their constraints in writing.

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1. Introduction

One of the courses which are taught at the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) of the University of Hradec Kralove is the Course on Academic Writing. It is an optional, one-semester course whose aim is to help both Czech and foreign or overseas students of the faculty. These students study English as an applied language. This course is designed to develop the kind of English that students will most likely need in their future jobs, specifically, business English. Students graduating from the faculty usually find jobs in tourism, finance and information technologies. Undoubtedly, they will use written communication, such as writing e-mails or reports, on a daily basis.

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The course focuses on the process of writing from beginning to end, and gives advice on how to write professionally. It shows the component parts of the writing process, that is: envisaging what to write, planning an outline, drafting passages, writing the whole thing, revising and rewriting it, and finishing it in an appropriate form, together with publishing all or parts of a text. In addition, it concentrates on those features which are different in English and Czech, such as citations, compiling a bibliography or using appropriate English. As for the last aspect, there are independent sections on grammar structures in written English, lexical structures, and punctuation. The course tries not only to address students' lack of experience in writing formal English language but also to approach writing itself in a new way. The course exposes students to hybrid/blended learning. That means students meet a teacher once every two weeks to discuss and clarify the mistakes they made in their assignments (i.e. essays), while at the same time, students are expected to undertake deep self-study of the materials that form their on-line e-learning course. See Fig. 1 below.

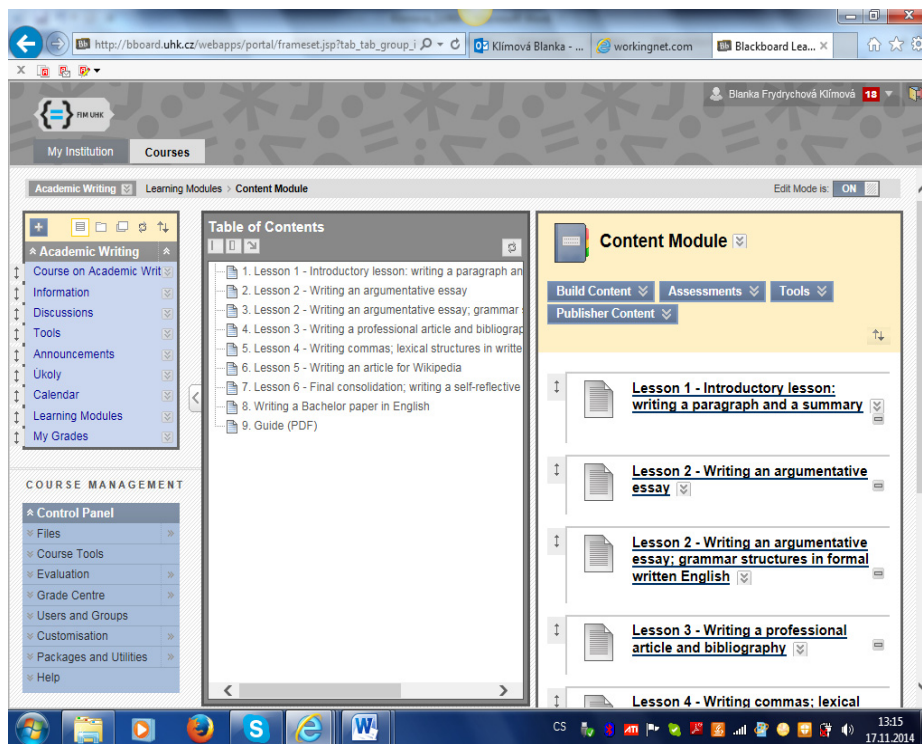


Figure 1. An online Course of Academic Writing and its content

The content of the course and student's assignments (essays) were discussed in Frydrychova Klimova (2012), as well as its evaluation in Frydrychova Klimova (2014). So far the course teacher has used the following evaluation methods for her course: *teacher's evaluation of students' essays*; *course evaluation questionnaires*; and *course self-reflective essays*. The purpose is to obtain useful feedback about the quality of students' learning and teacher's practices. Out of the evaluation methods mentioned above, the self-reflective essay has appeared to be the most beneficial. There are several reasons for it. Firstly, the structure of this essay differs from other formal essays students have to write in this course. The self-reflective essay in fact does not have any fixed format; it is written in the first person singular since students express their personal feelings, experience and experiences in it. Secondly, this essay is not included in the students' final mark and the language mistakes are not corrected. Students are just asked to reflect on what they have learned and experienced in the course in order to help to improve the course, including the teacher's performance in the course. Thirdly, students write this essay the last lesson when they meet their teacher face-to-face. They have the whole 90-minute class for it. Thus, they have enough time to contemplate and reflect on what they have achieved, what kind of difficulties they have when they have to write in formal English or what helps them to overcome these and other difficulties in the process of learning English.

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