

Wanted: A Better Approach



Some of us folks down at the Writing Development Centre have been gettin' mighty concerned of late about the quality of that Good Old Time study skills advice. It sure sounds good – clear, direct, reassuring and easy to digest. But we realised it was giving more than a few students a headache.

- ❖ Some of them thought they had applied the guidance right enough, but feedback was suggesting they hadn't.
- ❖ Some tried to follow that good ol' step by step approach only to find it didn't work out for them so simple in real life
- ❖ Others knew full well that their writing ought to be clear, logical, relevant et cetera et cetera, but telling them that didn't help them make it so.

All this left them feeling mighty disheartened, frustrated and blaming themselves. Such good, wholesome advice, and they couldn't get it to work for them. Must be something amiss.

Were we peddlin' snake oil?



What was needed round these parts was a rethink. We formulated four powerful questions to help us ensure that our own remedies were the finest and best quality. We apply them liberally whenever we get to dispensing advice:

- What do we mean? It's no good without context. Many of the terms we use are ambiguous, abstract, subjective and genre-dependent. What's clear to one person may clear as mud to someone else. What's well-structured in one subject may be badly organised in another. What's concise at one level of study may be simplistic at a higher level.
- How are they supposed to do that? All very well to say they should make sure their work is clear, structured, relevant etc but have we given them something concrete and practical to do, as well as telling them what they should be? And are we letting on that they might find it complex and challenging and that's ok, or fobbing them off with false reassurance?
- How will that work for them individually? That advice might have worked for us, but we're all different. There's usually more than one right answer, and more than one way to get there. Are we acknowledging diversity and offering a range of approaches, or giving the false impression that we're offering the One True Cure All approach?
- How can they check? Does no good to tell them to check their work - it's not an easy thing to do, to see it through the eyes of their reader. Have we given them concrete strategies to help them look at their own practice afresh, and concrete criteria to judge it by? Without a idea of what they're looking for and how, they're not going to know if their efforts are working until they get their mark back and it's too late.

DOC WEBSTER'S PATENTED ACADEMIC REMEDY

APPLY LIBERALLY TO ALL STUDY SKILLS ADVICE, FOR MOST EFFICACIOUS RESULTS!