Advantage Initiative Case Study: MA Architecture and Urban Design AR813/AR814

Kent School of Architecture (KSA)

Key figures

Professor Gerry Adler – Deputy Head of School G.Adler@kent.ac.uk
Allia Wilson – Manager, Student Learning Advisory Service A.M.Wilson@kent.ac.uk
Steve Cope - Student Learning Adviser sc540@kent.ac.uk
Ben Martin – Academic Support Officer B.A.Martin@kent.ac.uk

Nature of AI Engagement

SLAS was asked to provide a series of five, one-hour sessions, offering writing support to a group of five international post-graduate students studying on the modules AR813/AR814. The sessions were to be delivered during the spring term on Friday mornings between 10 – 11 a.m. in Eliot Holland.

The aim was to support the students in their endeavours to plan and produce an illustrated essay of 4,000 words. They had a deadline of week 24, the end of the spring term. The students’ essays were to focus on urban locations that were substantially different from those which formed the basis of the module’s lecture series.

Background

Gerry, Allia and Steve had an initial meeting to discuss the aims of the workshops. The idea was to help the students develop the essential skills necessary for effective essay planning and writing in English at a level appropriate for post-graduate submissions in the higher education sector.

This meeting was helpful in order to organise the timing of the sessions which included two hiatuses, the first due to staff availability, and the second to accommodate the Good Friday bank holiday.

It was decided that the first of the five sessions should involve a review of the students’ essay proposals. The next three sessions were to focus specifically on helping the students to develop their academic writing skills. The fifth and final session would clarify any issues that arose from the feedback which the students would have, by then, received in relation their essay draft submissions. This feedback would be provided by KSA staff via Moodle.

Details

The first session was used as an opportunity to identify the students’ concerns about their writing skills. Initially they suggested rather open concepts such as grammar, but eventually some more specific issues were identified and we agreed to cover the following: varying sentence styles; identifying and modifying sentence fragments; increasing subject specific vocabulary; writing critically; effective use of paragraphs; and effective note taking. Although the students did not bring drafts of their essay proposals to this session, we were still able to use the time productively to address specific areas on which they wanted to focus.
Even though it was a small group, the students’ language skills varied considerably. Common concerns were discussed such as the use of articles, subject / verb agreement, and the use of subject specific vocabulary. The latter was causing considerable concern so it was incorporated as a regular feature of the sessions.

The term ‘critical’ is one that perplexes many students. We had the opportunity to clarify what the term means and, through the use of a questionnaire and discussion, identify strategies to help them move towards a more critical writing style. This was juxtaposed with some examples of descriptive writing about architecture.

The students were introduced to the Cornell note taking system and were given the opportunity to practise this technique by watching a short video presentation about London’s Shangri La Hotel in the Shard.

KSA’s use of the Quick Mark system for providing students with feedback on their draft essays proved to be an effective way to share tutor’s comments and analysis. This allowed specific information, relating directly to the students’ essays, to be structured into the final teaching session.

Digital images were taken of any information written on the whiteboard at each session and these were shared with all the students via email. This was welcomed by the students as it ensured that information from the whiteboard was not lost at the end of each session.

Comments

The workshops were welcomed by the students and well supported by a range of staff in the school including Professor Gerry Adler, the module convenor and lecturer; Ben Martin, the school’s Academic Support Officer; and Rebecca Wilkinson, the school’s Administrative Assistant, all of whom were actively involved and remained communicative and helpful throughout the five week period. By offering focused, subject-specific content, effective support was provided for the students enabling them to work on specific language skills that were negotiated with the group.

It was not possible for all the students to attend every workshop, nevertheless they were active and engaged during each session. Attendance across the five weeks was good (5,5,4,4,3 across weeks 1-5 respectively) though illness and other commitments (an obligation to visit the British Embassy to organise visa permissions) impacted on student availability.

These Advantage Initiative sessions also afforded an opportunity to draw the students’ attention to the more general support offered by SLAS. Furthermore, because the last of the workshops was delivered in week 23, the students still had time to book 1-1 advice appointments before their deadline if they wished to do so.

Steve Cope
Student Learning Adviser (April, 2016)