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ACQUISITION OF SCIENTIFIC WRITING SKILLS THROUGH ACTIVITIES EMBEDDED INTO BIOLOGICAL LABORATORY COURSES

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Scientific writing skills are important for a science career, yet specific training can be difficult to integrate effectively into a University program. Rather than design specific courses solely focused on writing, we embedded writing activities into two project style third year biological science laboratory courses where students wrote about their own data. Students were expected to complete the writing exercises during breaks in their experimental procedures and were given feedback during the laboratory session. These activities were focussed on preparing figures, tables, figure legends, and writing results and discussion paragraphs. These exercises provided practice and a model to assist students in writing the remainder of the report. We probed student opinions regarding scientific writing and the use of the exercises by anonymous pre- and post-course surveys using a combination of closed and open questions. In the first course student confidence towards scientific writing and performing simple writing tasks significantly improved after experiencing the writing activities. Therefore students commenced the second course with a higher confidence level. They related that undertaking writing activities in more than one class helped them consolidate their writing skills and challenged them to improve further. Students also commented that they thought the activities helped them develop skills relevant to future scientific careers. Independent assessors evaluated the standard of students’ written reports that originated from the same course held in years before and after writing activities were incorporated into the curriculum. There was a significant improvement in scientific writing quality that correlated with the increase in student confidence and attitudes towards writing.