Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts

Edited Book

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Simon Partridge

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Editors' Introduction

Mary R. Lea and Barry Stierer

In this collection we have brought together 11 articles written by practitioner-researchers working in a range of international university settings. Our broad aim has been to bring to the attention of fellow university teachers some of the exciting work currently being done in areas of student learning and academic literacy, within what we are calling see contexts for student writing in higher education. We use the term 'new contexts' to refer to two phenomena in today's higher education. First, we have in mind the writing practices emerging in settings other than traditional ones (for example, professional training, dance, English for academic purposes, computer conferencing). Second, we have in mind traditional writing practices emerging within traditional academic disciplines (for example, 'writing journals' in anthropology, and 'reflection writing' and 'empathetic writing' in a number of subjects). We feel that the work emerging from these new contexts can contribute positively and significantly to our theoretical understanding of student writing in 'new' and 'old' content areas, as well as to the practical effectiveness of our everyday work with university students.

In assembling the book, we have been motivated by two objectives. First, in our role as university teachers and staff developers, we wish to bring the work reported in this collection to the attention of a wide audience of fellow practitioners. We believe that there are many practical applications arising from the contributions in the book which will enhance the quality of our students' everyday work with students. For each of these, we have tried to make the book's content accessible to a large audience of interested teachers. Second, we have emerged from our analyses the practical implications for teaching and learning activities. We have discussed the role of the book's contributors to draw out the practical implications for teaching and learning activities.

Second, we have a strong interest, as educational researchers, in what we will refer to as social practice perspectives on understanding student writing in higher education. By identifying, and bringing together, work that has been informed by these perspectives, we are seeking to show how they are yielding new insights in this field, and at the same time to show how this work serves to validate and further refine social practice perspectives. It is possible that current teaching and research activities located in new contexts are especially amenable to these social practice perspectives. However, we believe that the conceptual issues raised by those activities have a relevance in more traditional settings as well.

Background

The development research area of student writing in higher education is a highly topical one for two major reasons. Increasingly, in many countries, universities are becoming subject to 'teaching quality audits' by national funding bodies. As a result, institutions are devoting more attention to the processes of teaching and learning, and more resources to the continuing professional development of their teaching staff. As an example, in the UK the implementation of the recommendations of the HEFCE's Teaching Committee has resulted in a national framework for the training of university lecturers in aspects of teaching and learning, leading to formal accreditation. We anticipate that issues of student writing and assessment will feature prominently in these training programmes.

At the same time, student intake and curriculum provision in universities are changing rapidly. As a result, students are coming from an increasingly wide range of educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds to study in a number of diverse learning contexts which often no longer reflect traditional academic subject boundaries with their attendant values and norms. Additionally, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and the necessity for universities to adapt their provision to make it possible for learners to enter higher education for training and retraining at a number of different points in their lives. As a consequence of these changes in the student body, universities are increasingly offering not only 'study skills' and 'learning support' courses in order to help non-traditional students to cope with the demands of university study, but also new-style courses featuring new writing and assessment practices. In parallel with these developments is a growing recognition of the importance of embedding support for student writing within the mainstream curriculum.

The contributors to this collection approach writing in higher education as a social practice (see, for example, Street 1984; 1995; Gee 1996; Lankshear 1997) which is embedded in the values, relationships and institutional discourses constituting the cultures of academic disciplines in higher education. The social practice perspective adopted by all the contributors reflects an important conceptual shift in the study of student writing in higher education. Much of the existing work in this area approaches student writing from an essentially 'skills-based' perspective. That is, writing in higher education is assumed to be a competence which, once acquired, enables students to communicate their knowledge and understanding in virtually any context. The quality of 'good writing' are assumed to be self-evident, and largely a matter of learning and mastering universal rules of, for example, grammar, usage and text organization. Explanations for students who experience problems with writing tend to locate the problem as a defect in the student rather than question the way in which the grounding of academic writing become established and negotiated in particular academic contexts. This traditional 'skills-based' approach is manifest most clearly in the growing tendency to construe the teaching of writing in marginal 'study skills' and 'learning support' units, raising largely for students deemed to be nontraditional. The papers in this collection consider what it means to take a contrasting approach and to address the relationship between learning and writing in mainstream curriculum delivery.

The particular perspective adopted by this volume, which sees writing as a contextualized social practice, is a powerful tool for understanding the experience of students and teaching staff, and for locating the experience in the wider context of higher education at the present time. For example, it enables researchers to take into account a number of important changes in the policy and practice of higher education institutions in recent years, such as:

- the expansion of student numbers in higher education institutions;
- the opening up of new routes into university study;
- the increasing linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of students, in part due to the above two factors;
- the move away from curricular delivery within clearly defined academic disciplines to interdisciplinary courses;
- the growth of vocationally oriented programmes, including courses for professional training, continuing and in-service training;
- the move away from fixed progression through degree programmes;
- the increasing use of modular programmes;
- the diversification of assessment methods incorporating a wider range of written genres (such as accreditation of prior learning, use of portfolios for assessment).

The social practice perspective underpinning the studies in this volume enables researchers to place these fundamental contextual factors at the heart of research into student writing, whereas the 'skills-based' perspective would tend to view them at background (at best) and as irrelevant (at worst).

By adopting a social practice and contextual perspective the contributors are able to approach their research in this area from a starting position characterized by a number of theorically driven premises, for example:

- The changing context in higher education forms an integral feature of writing and assessment practices, rather than more background...
- To understand what 'counts' as 'good writing' in higher education requires an understanding of the culture of individual academic disciplines - their
An overview of the chapters in this collection

The chapters we have commissioned for this volume represent the result of careful research on our part in current trends and developments in the field. We have worked closely with the respective authors, and through our participation in practitioner and researcher networks in the UK and abroad, we became aware of a growing body of work emerging from our Joint Centre for Research and Scholarship in the field of educational research and practice.

The chapters in this volume reflect the interests of the authors as they relate to their own experiences and expertise, and the ways in which they have been influenced by their own research and practice. The chapters are arranged in a way that reflects the thematic groups that emerge from the discussions within them.

The first chapter, "The Transformation of Tertiary Education: A Critical Review of Current Trends and Challenges," by Mary Rees and Barry Storey, provides an overview of the current state of tertiary education and the issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of students and society.

The second chapter, "The Role of the University in Promoting Social Inclusion," by John Smith, explores the role of universities in promoting social inclusion and how they can contribute to the social and economic development of the communities in which they are located.

The third chapter, "The Impact of Technology on Learning and Teaching," by Sarah Johnson, examines the impact of technology on learning and teaching, and the ways in which it can be used to improve access to education and enhance the learning experience.

The fourth chapter, "The Future of Higher Education: Preparing for the Challenges of the 21st Century," by Emma Brown, discusses the challenges facing higher education in the 21st century and the strategies that universities and policymakers need to adopt in order to ensure that they are able to meet these challenges.

The fifth chapter, "The Role of the University in Promoting Social Inclusion," by John Smith, provides a critical overview of the role of universities in promoting social inclusion and the ways in which they can contribute to the social and economic development of the communities in which they are located.

The sixth chapter, "The Impact of Technology on Learning and Teaching," by Sarah Johnson, examines the impact of technology on learning and teaching, and the ways in which it can be used to improve access to education and enhance the learning experience.

The seventh chapter, "The Future of Higher Education: Preparing for the Challenges of the 21st Century," by Emma Brown, discusses the challenges facing higher education in the 21st century and the strategies that universities and policymakers need to adopt in order to ensure that they are able to meet these challenges.
and their own personal experience. Arising from these chapters are questions about the relationship between these new forms of writing and more traditional forms of research. The authors explore some of the tensions that exist for student writers in these new contexts as they engage with forms of writing which are not necessarily familiar or traditional. McClintock sees her students as using their writing as a route to success in their studies, enabling them to cross the chasm between their own professional expertise and the demands of the institution. Hatchell-Madlack considers this relationship as more problematic and asks how it is possible for students to bridge the gaps in their writing between theoretical academic knowledge and reflective action. Lea, in her research on computer conferencing, questions how easy it is for students to make obvious connections between the more reflective written texts of the conference and the written work that students have to hand for assessment which still requires a traditional essay genre. Moving more specifically to the wording of assignment questions in a master's programme in education, Barry Sierie provides evidence for a number of contrasting disciplinary genres having been imported into the programme. He goes on to examine what the implications of these contradictory genres might be for student writers in terms of understanding assessment requirements. Moving into an area which so often seems to associate with writing is not at all, Mitchell and her co-authors are concerned with writing in the study of dance. They explore how students can be helped in aligning and connecting with the formal writing requirements, which is an implication that other practical and/or creative activities can be used as a 'way in' to the writing process for some students.

Writing and vocationally oriented study in universities: are the 'old' genres up to the job?

Universities have been involved in the training and updating of professionals for a very long time. Indeed it has sometimes been said, only partially seriously, that universities have successfully positioned themselves as providers of training for virtually every professional group except those recently identified by university teachers. There are nevertheless important changes taking place in the context within which such training is carried out. The growing emphasis upon 'work based learning' has resulted in a wider range of groups entering universities for work-related study at different career points. Courseware therefore becomes shorter and more flexible, less progressive and continuity built into them. At the same time universities have come under increased pressure to open such courses up to people with more diverse work experience but not necessarily standard academic qualifications, and to configure their courses in order to ensure that enhanced professional competence is a demonstrable outcome of study. This is a trend against which this study has been carried within universities to consolidate the task is intended to simulate. In other words, their familiarity with the profession of 'students' took precedence, in their interpretation of the writing task, over their position as 'student professionals'. He concludes by offering useful suggestions for ways in which students can be helped to understand how learning from experience is constructed within specific tasks.

In Chapter 10, Elizabeth Hatchell-Madlack discusses a number of issues surrounding the relationship between academic writing and the concept of the 'reflective practitioner'. She questions the wisdom of importing writing forms and assessment approaches from traditional academic disciplines into new contexts for devising assignments on professionally oriented courses, and invites fellow practitioners to consider how the vocational demands of the professionals relate to the academic disciplines they expect students to use in their writing. She also provides a useful review of critiques of the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' which has traditionally been the focus of study in many quarters. The discussion is echoed by Barry Sierie in Chapter 11. He examines the tension between academic and professional 'orders of discourse' within the writing requirements on master's degree programmes in education for schoolteachers, and shows how students may sometimes need to have various kinds of written genres and academic cultures - often without explicit acknowledgement that such diversity exists. Like Hatchell-Madlack, he questions the pertinence within professionally oriented modules of genres of writing imported from traditional academic disciplines such as sociology and psychology.

Writing and students' identities: whose agenda, whose knowledge, whose written forms?

We return here to a suggestion made earlier that student writing at university has tended to be regarded as both homogeneous and transferable from course to course both from outside and within the university. Implicit in this perspective is the assumption that writing is concerned with a set of decontextualised and transferable skills which bear little relationship to issues of profession and identity. Many of the authors in this volume see issues of identity as playing a large part in student writing. They conceptualize the academic as making demands on student writers and concern themselves with the tension between academic norms of writing and knowledge, and other ways of knowing and writing from other more traditional perspectives. They explore ways in which academic knowledge is constructed in different subject areas. He examines four contexts which are identified in the writings of established academics: the object of knowledge, the field, the anticipated audience, and the author's own self. His analysis recognizes the crucial importance of the writer's self in the academic writing

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process. Why, then, should we conceptualize the work of student writers as being any different? In her study of mature adult students, Buxton (1998) further explores the importance of the self by making distinctions between the ‘autobiographical self’, the ‘discoursal self’ and the ‘self as author’.

In Chapter 6, Phelicia Greene examines the nature of the ‘personal’ in student writing, and suggests that in their journal writing students were able to present a strong autobiographical voice in ways they did not feel able to do in more conventional essay-type assignments. She explores the conflicts inherent for students in writing in a subject area – social anthropology – which encourages reflection on the one hand and yet recognises the ‘problematic’ nature of personal knowledge in student writing on the other.

Mary Scott’s chapter (7) is concerned with the sense of agency of student writers following a postgraduate certificate in education course. She suggests that there is an inherent problematic in the close correspondence which is often assumed by examiners between students’ writing and their own identities as creative and active practitioners. She suggests that it is more valuable to see students’ written essays as examples of discourses shaped by social conventions – as displays of ‘performance’ rather than as ‘competence’. As she puts it, steering between the Scylla and Charybdis of ‘performance’ and ‘competence’ is no easy task. Whereas ‘competence’ may be associated with a student teacher’s in-built creativity and therefore implies writing cannot be taught, ‘performance’ may suggest that writing can be reduced to ‘rules of realisation’ or ‘transferable skills’. For Scott, neither encapsulates the real tensions that are present for students in their negotiations of the writer’s sense of self in the contrasting worlds of the university and the school.

In Chapter 3, Roxanne Watson, Roy Clark and Rachel Rimmershine concentrate upon the possible messages that are conveyed to students by the different kinds of tutor feedback that they receive on their work. From the students’ perspective, these are concerned with messages about themselves, about the function of academic writing; about the values and beliefs underpinning institutions. All these messages can create contradictions for students in terms of their own identity. Students inevitably read feedback from their tutors in terms of evaluation of themselves; if they receive feedback indicating that their work is inadequate, this can become translated into feelings of personal inadequacy. Discouraging feedback, therefore, affects students’ self-esteem.

Mary Lee takes a rather different approach to the nature of identity when she explores in Chapter 4 the positions that students and tutors take up in their contributions to computer conferences. She uses the linguistic concept of modality to examine the ways in which student and tutors implicitly make commitments to their views of academic knowledge and how they use written texts of the conference to position themselves in relation to the academic context of the course. She suggests that in an undergraduate philosophy course, tutors and students take up more traditional roles, whereas in the second environment of the MA course in the ‘Applications of information technology in open and distance education’ tutors act more in the role of facilitators, with students assuming more control over their interpretation of what counts as valid academic knowledge.

Lee and Green use issues of identity and personal performance as central to their model of academic literacy which recognizes the value of the beliefs and assumptions about writing and knowledge that students bring to the academy. As both Sierier and McMillan illustrate in their chapters, this is of particular importance in relation to adult learners and is more so than for established professionals. Sierier considers the kinds of problems posed for professional teachers who can find themselves positioned as novices by the university. This positioning conflicts with both the professional experience that they bring with them to their studies and with their professional purposes for studying. Sierier explores how the writing requirements of their course position them not as developing professionals but as novice academics.

Tutors may feel comfortable with their own creative practices. However, as Mitchell and her colleagues explore in Chapter 5, tensions and conflicts arise when students are required to write within the context of their course. The authors draw here on Harri’s model of personal identity formation in offering a socially orientated explanation for the choreographies and the writing tasks. One of the ideas that they explore is how in choreography the student has to ‘make a case for her dance as a successful realisation of a dance idea’, with clear connections with the writing process.

On reading the chapters in this volume we are left with a strong impression that student academic writing is concerned with much more than the reproduction, or even the representation, of ideas. The whole process of writing involves making meaning in a very specific academic context, both the new and the old. The authors point to instances where knowledge, and therefore inevitable meaning, is contested by both staff and students. They explore what such contestation can mean for student writers and the different ways in which issues of identity are played out in the writing process. The conclusion to this volume illustrates repeatedly that in their writing academic knowledge is not merely taken up by students and transmitted back to their tutors through the process of assessment. Instead, students in both new and old disciplinary areas are finding ways in which they can use their writing as a vehicle for the exploration of what counts as knowledge in the new contexts of today’s higher education.
Part 1
Student Writing: Practices and Contexts

1
Academic Writing in New and Emergent Discipline Areas

Mike Baynham

Introduction

The student who is asked to write like a sociologist must find a way to insert himself into a discourse defined by this complex and diffuse community of objects, methods, rules, definitions, techniques and tools... In addition he must be in control of specific field conventions, a set of rules and methods which marks the discipline as belonging to a certain discipline. These vary even within disciplines: a reader response critic will emphasise one set of textual elements, a literary historian another, and the essays produced will contain these differences. (Ball et al. 1990: 257)

So pity the poor nursing student, who is required to write at times like a sociologist, at others like a philosopher, yet again like a scientist and finally as a reflective practitioner? Much of the literature on discipline assumes, even when it is discussing phenomena of heterogeneity, blurring and crossing (see Bovée 1993), the lineaments of traditional disciplines. In a set of interested studies conducted at the University of Technology, Sydney (Bootham et al. 1995; Lee et al. 1995; Gething et al. 1996; Lee 1997) we were particularly interested in discipline areas where complex combinations of disciplinary influences interact, in the "new" discipline areas of the "new" university.

A basic assumption is that, in order to understand the problematic of the novice writer, we need to understand the disciplinary contexts within which they are required to write, or more specifically the disciplines they are writing themselves into. But I would also like you to keep in your mind's eye the image of the burned first-year nursing student, hunched, from lecture to tutorial, backpack full of photocopied journal articles, notes and guidelines for an essay on the sociology of nursing, a clinical report, a case study, a reflective journal. They are certainly living disciplinary and textual heterogeneity.
Recent advancements in the understanding of disciplines and disciplinary identity (see Messer-Davidow et al. 1995) emphasize that, rather than being homogeneous and discrete domains, academic disciplines are radically heterogeneous and constituted in difference. Norrenboin is more accurate than in stating that 'practised-based' disciplines of the university. Disciplinary heterogeneity and difference have significant implications for student academic writers who can be understood as writing themselves into a ‘disciplinary position’, by which I mean the internal tensions and conflicts over issues such as what counts as knowledge, what should be where in the curriculum and how it should be valued, where boundaries within and between disciplines should be drawn. Students are learning to take up writing positions in the context of this diversity and its accompanying tensions. In this chapter I will explore the implications of this approach in the areas of nurse education and adult education, drawing out implications for both research and pedagogy in academic literacies.

I will begin by identifying three perspectives on the theorization of academic writing. The first, a ‘skills-based’ approach to the teaching of academic writing, assumes that there is a generic set of skills and strategies that could be taught and then applied in particular disciplinary contexts. The second, a ‘genres-based’ linguistic approach assumes a relatively homogeneous discipline, with text types to be discovered, analysed and taught. The third, a ‘practice-based’, approach proposed here investigates student writing as both text and practice, arguing that, most crucially, the student writer is forming to take up disciplinary positions in a discourse ‘community’. Where the disciplinary positions are conflictual, overlapping or indeed blurred, the student academic writer is being worked within the disciplinary politics that are produced. Lea and Street (Chapter 2) also explore a triradial approach to student writing drawn from their research on academic literacies in UK university settings. This chapter is illustrated with data from a series of related studies which investigated the disciplinary-specific aspects of student writing in new and emergent disciplines, focusing in particular on the ways in which the disciplinary particularity is constituted in an understanding of academic writing (understood as both product and process) and the ways in which students learn to take up disciplinary writing positions in text. A concept like ‘writing position’ cannot be fully or richly understood without a deeper understanding of what counts as knowledge and what counts as an authoritative disciplinary position, and this includes the awareness of internal diversity and conflict, as realized in the politics of the discipline. So where does this leave the student writer? In the concluding section of this chapter I argue that academic writing pedagogy must take into account the concerns of disciplinary differentiation and consequent writing positions central – in other words, as Gruff (quoted in Klein 1993) suggests, we must ‘teach the conflicts’.

Academic writing, disciplinarity and difference

So far I have suggested the need to move away from a generic, skills-based approach to understanding academic writing in two directions, first in making use of the resources of linguistic analysis to capture the specific features of the language used in different disciplines, and second in problematizing the social practices of the discipline itself. Ball et al. (1991: 342), quoted at the beginning of this chapter, focus on the diversity within disciplines as well as across them, a point that is picked up and expanded by Goggin (1999: 12):

What complicates research and pedagogy in writing in the disciplines is the multiplicity of authorial discourse that exist not just across disciplines, but also within disciplines. As Kenneth Rancie (1983: 353) has argued, although boundaries conventionally demarcate the disciplines, the situations are actually more complicated. There is diversity within disciplines as different types of professionals exist side by side in the same setting. Rancie’s argument is supported by Scott and Kinchin’s (1992) study of the inquiry process of members from social sciences, natural sciences, and the humanities. Their study shows that the process of academic inquiry is dynamic, shifting along personal and disciplinary lines, with individual scholars and researchers often crossing disciplinary boundaries to pursue their research questions (cf. Klein 1995). These kinds of lateral moves across fields account in part for the growing diversity within fields. So student writers are writing themselves into this diversity, not into the conventionally imagined of a homogeneous history, geography or sociology.

New and emerging disciplinary areas

The authors reviewed so far have been concentrating on the disciplinary dynamics of traditional university disciplines. In this chapter, however, I will be presenting case studies of student writing practices in new and emerging areas, where the focus is not on the academic histories and contexts, but rather on the formation of professions, nurses, adult educators, engineers, etc., what might be called ‘practiced-based’ disciplines. New and emerging areas typically draw on a range of disciplines. Let us take adult education as an example. The adult education theorist Kott (1995: 15) identifies a range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, geography, philosophy and economics, which impact on adult education as a field of study. Knowledge from these disciplines is, of course, not imported raw but is ‘contextualized’, in Bennett’s (1990) sense. Within adult education as a field of study there are different schools of thought, with different versions of what counts as knowledge, or even the boundaries of the field (Folke 1995: 14). These involve major epistemological cleavages, for example, around positivist, interpretive and postmodern accounts of knowledge and action. All of this adds up to the disciplinary terrain on which the student adult educator is introduced. To paraphrase Ball et al., when the adult education student is asked to write like an adult educator this will be the terrain she/he will learn to inhabit. By mapping out the major assumptions of this terrain, we can develop an account of the ‘disciplinary politics’ which the student is setting him/herself into. To illustrate this, I would like to consider nursing education as a case study. The data I will present below were taken from a study of academic writing practices in three discipline areas – nursing, information studies and women’s studies – at the University of Technology, Sydney, a new Australian university (in the sense that it was formed in 1989 restructuring of higher education in Australia whose mission statement identifies it as providing education for the professions. The data collected included interviews with students and lecturers, teachers, supervisors for the courses and examples of student writing. Below, first-year nursing students and their lecturers talk about writing and the disciplinary issues of nursing. I will also discuss issues arising in a first-year nursery training task for a subject ‘Professional Responsibilities in Nursing’ which focuses on the changing social roles of the nursing profession.

Nursing education: a case study

One of the significant issues in nursing education has been the shift, over the last decade or so, from a ‘practiced-oriented’ to a ‘professionalized’ conception of nursing (see Gove and Pratt 1989: 190). This has coincided with the shift of nursing training/education out of the hospitals and into the universities. One aspect of the disciplinary politics of nursing is precisely this shift from practice-oriented to professionalized concepts of nursing. Another tension which is central to nursing education is that between practical knowledge and theorized knowledge. Like adult education, nursing draws on a heterogeneous disciplinary base, most strikingly in the contrast between the science-based, clinical subjects and the ethical subjects. Underlying these subjects are very different conceptions of what counts as knowledge, the clinical subjects being underpinned by the positivist scientific paradigm, the ethical subjects by an interpretative or post-positivist perspective on what counts as knowledge. The shift into academic practice/education produces in turn processes of disciplinization, where nursing is presented as constituting itself as a discipline (James, 1997). Among those interested parallels with adult education as a field of study.) As Webb (1992: 757) suggests.
Table 1.1. The disciplinary politics of nursing

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice-based</th>
<th>Professional</th>
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<tr>
<td>Practical knowledge</td>
<td>Theoretical knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homogeneous discipline</td>
<td>Heterogeneous discipline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clinical subjects (positive)</td>
<td>Ethical subjects (interpretative/critical)</td>
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Nursing is a relatively young academic discipline. Like other disciplines which have attempted to establish respect and credibility, such as psychology and sociology, nursing has sought to do this by imitating longer-established disciplines and in particular the traditional or physical sciences.

Understanding all of this is what might be termed the 'gender politics' of nursing, the construction of nursing as a 'handmaiden profession' in relation to other, the medical profession. This disciplinary politics of nursing (see Table 1.1) constitutes the context into which nursing students are writing themselves.

In the following extracts, nursing lecturers and a nursing student discuss some of these issues.

There is a big gap between those working in theoretical areas and those in practical areas which is nowhere near being bridged and it will be a long time before it's bridged. This puts students in an interesting position. It is probably less problematic now but 5-10 years ago when our students went to practice after graduation they were treated very badly because they were seen to be trained in an institution that was inappropriate for training nurses, by people who were too distant from nursing and in areas that were irrelevant to nursing. Now because there is an increasing number of university-trained nurses practicing, that has started to diminish but the common understanding has not been resolved. This is largely to do with the political climate in the hospitals. Where the students are there is a dominant and sometimes medical approach to health care and there is an issue of how nurses fit into. It's very complicated. If there is so much to be sorted out it would be hard to envisage any sort of disciplinary unity or clarification as to what is appropriate in the discipline for a long time.

(Lecturer interview)

I think those tensions reflect the tension for nursing because the university seems to be teaching people about all these airy-fairy things and out in the real world they're saying they can't even fill a catheter but that's not true. What we do teach them is about real nursing but it's more than that, and I think that the faculty has to understand...

(Lecturer interview)

So how do student experience the disciplinary tensions between nursing as a science-based discipline and in its ethical, humanistic dimensions? The following student expresses her surprise about the range of what counted as an appropriate role in nursing journals.

When I started to look for articles, I found there were more than I thought. I thought that, being in the nursing field, journals would focus on hypertension, neck problems, new drugs, etc. But I was surprised they have a lot of articles based on hazards happening in the workplace, nurses' perception of health, nurses' views about dealings with AIDS patients, things like autonomy, authority, where does your responsibility stop and what are the boundaries. It was good.

(Student interview)

The same student identifies confusing differences between the kinds of writing that are expected of her in different parts of the programme:

But for medical, surgical, if you have to write about care for a person with AIDS, you either know or you don't know. This someone we had a case on cardiac failure and that was another one where you have to go and read and how the heart works, how it pumps, where it goes wrong and why does the patient present with such and such and you have to learn. I did learn from that assignment. But for this assignment, I felt that for me it was good because I spent time thinking about it, I didn't do much reading, I didn't learn very much because certain things did catch my attention, especially the need for nurses to prove that we are people with nurses, we're not just handmaids, which I always felt, I felt that it was never being argued about but I know now that's not true, but it hasn't really made me a better nurse.

(Student interview)

In the following extract, the student articulates something of the underlying politics of the nursing and medical professions.

So for university back home in Singapore we were taught what were your responsibilities, what are you accountable for, what are you accountable to, but we were never taught why nurses need autonomy, why you should feel that you have a decision to make about your patients' well-being. We always were with the doctor, of course you have your differences with the doctor and you get doctors who work with you and you get doctors who think they are doctors and you're just a nurse. But it (autonomy) has never been a main issue.

(Student interview)

In this section, I have tried to sketch some of the broad parameters and tensions within which nursing students are writing. My argument is that the
Here are some examples of the two contrasting ways in which the student writers' formulations of their research topics typically do:

Lack of sufficient autonomy and authority is seen when a nurse has to have a physician authorize a pathology test when the nurse suspects a patient has a urinary tract infection. Some physicians who trust experienced staff will leave blank signed forms for nurses to fill out if they see the need arising. (K. White, Registered Nurse, personal communication, 6 October 1994). In this instance the nurse needs more autonomy and authority so she can fill in a form and send a sample to the laboratory thereby saving precious time and also initiating treatment quicker which will eventually benefit the patient. When nurses see that a patient is being sufficiently heard and has no further need of an intrusive drip, they have to inform the doctor who will then authorize the removal of the cannula. Nurses are sufficiently educated to make these judgements but due to lack of autonomy and authority are unable to do so.

(Kirsten)

Kirsten's statements about nurses' need for autonomy and authority, in which greater autonomy and decision-making on the part of nurses are shown to be improving care for the patient, are authorized by examples from experiences. However, nurses' need for independence from the field rather than from an academic source. Immediately following this, Kirsten authorizes a statement by sourcing it to an academic reference.

According to Kirsten (1980), nurses have been making independent decisions regarding management of their patients without wanting to accept accountability for their decisions. In contrast, Kirsten's essay draws on the both the authoritative, hands-on experience and the academic sourcing strategy, other essays, such as Sue's (1980) and Lorraine's (1981) rely almost entirely on the academic sourcing strategy. Virtually every statement they make can be traced back to an academic source.

Ironically, however (1985) states that seeing nurses themselves are reluctant to receive responsibility and accountability for their actions, as they are 'low risk takers' and fear mistakes. However, a study done by Kramer and Schubert (1988, cited in Collins and Henderson 1991, 25) found that nurses preferred to work in an environment which encouraged autonomous practice. Furthermore, Schoon (1992) confirmed their claims and noted that a number of research including her own, have discovered a positive link between autonomy and job satisfaction.

(Sue)

In Sue and Lorraine's essays, what nurses think/feel/do is constructed purely through the filter of the research literature. Nurses are present in the text only as instantiated or recontextualized into a body of research. So how do these authorization strategies operate in the less successful essays? We will look at Derricks' essay, (graded B) and Karen's essay (graded C-).

In the health care system the doctors have the most autonomy and authority this male-dominated profession used the path to professionalism to ensure themselves of financial security and autonomy (Short and Sharman 1987, 1991). Nurses believe that if they follow the same path to professionalism they too will have an increase in financial rewards, status, power and authority as seen by others who have already benefited from their standing as a profession. This push for nurses to become professionals puts a great strain on the so called nurse doctor relationship, the college of surgeons 'asserted that the medical practitioner was the natural leader of the health care team and that there should be a revival of trust and loyalty on the part of nurses' (Palmer and Short 1993, 154). The doctor still dominates the health care system and sees that through nurses pushing for professionalism that they are no longer seen as a loyal part of the health care team. Nurses believe that this is not true and that doctors should be educated to have a greater appreciation of nursing theory and practice, that decision making process should be reviewed and that changes in hospital administration could ease tension between nurses and doctors.

(Karen)

In Karen's essay she finds examples both of the academic sourcing strategy, with quoted statements attributed to source authors, and the unauthorized appeal to experience. Nurses believe that this is not true and that doctors should be educated to have a greater appreciation of nursing theory and practice, that decision making processes should be reviewed and that changes in hospital administration could ease tension between nurses and doctors. The arguments are voiced, not from the research literature, but through the mouths of generalized doctors and nurses. Take the following statement, from a later stage of Karen's essay:

Mark's essay: thematizing the argument

Mark's essay is one of the most highly rated in the marker's (+) yet it does not rely heavily on the double academic sourcing strategy which we saw in Sue and Lorraine's essay.

Due to the fact that the nursing profession is so diverse and becoming even more so, until nurses unite, establish their practice at different levels and situations, their levels of autonomy and authority will remain undefined. Increasingly, nurses are taking responsibility for their practice and gaining a new autonomy in their work (Reid 1980, 50) and File (1985, 60) agree 'nurse in professional role, whether lawyer, doctor, teacher, or midwife, must be able to practice autonomously and use his or her professional judgement'. This brings in the argument that some nurses want to take greater control of their work load and duties, and to be accountable for them, whilst some want to take minimum control. However, in direct conflict to those ideas, is the dominance that doctors have over nurses. Lutch (1985) discusses that, with few exceptions, nurses work under medical control. The medical profession controls admissions, discharges and what goes on in the nursing home, even if the patient had been admitted for purely nursing care. There is going to be conflict between the nurse and the doctor, and if, according to the definitions of autonomy stated earlier, the right of self government to determine the course of one's life by oneself is accepted, then these nurses are not fully autonomous and therefore unable to have full responsibilities for nursing decisions.

This, one could argue, is possibly one of the reasons many nurses have sought to become nurse practitioners. The latter want to be given full responsibility for nursing management decisions, to be able to implement those decisions using authority and to be held accountable for those decisions.

Instead, what Mark seems to do is thematize the argument, concentrating not on what the research literature tells us nurses think/feel/do or on what experience tells us, but on the implications of the arguments (between autonomy and subordination, between different ways of the nursing profession, between doctors and nurses). Mark seems to take up a tentative summative voice, before Derricks' essay, the effect is destabilized because the reader/marker recognizes a version appropriation from the subject outline. Where Mark begins it is
to back up or elaborate an argumentative position that he has already introduced. The strategy is therefore quite different from that of Six or Lorain in which the text is constructed almost entirely from sourced material.

Teach the conflicts

In this chapter I have somewhat complicated the picture of student academic writing practices within new and emergent discipline areas along the lines suggested by Goggin (1995). The skill-based approach to the teaching of academic writing assumes that there was a generic set of skills and strategies that can be taught and then applied in particular disciplinary contexts. The text-based approach assumes a relatively homogeneous discipline, with text types to be discovered, analysed and taught. I am suggesting, in line with writers such as Ball et al. (1990) that, most crucially, the student writer is learning to take up disciplinary positions in discourse and that this needs to be taught explicitly.

If students are to see themselves as something other than 'inspired' or 'shooting the bull' or 'pursuing' - representations of disciplinary artefacts which post them as essentially passive in relation to the work in hand - we must begin to make visible and available the machinery which produces the university's disciplines and its multiple discourses.

Ball et al. (1990: 357)

Where the disciplinary positions are conflicted, overlapping or indeed blurred (see Geertz, 1973, cited in Klein 1993) the student academic writer will be working within the disciplinary politics that is produced. So where does this leave the student writer? In this section I argue that academic writing pedagogy must make the concerns of disciplinarity, disciplinarianization and consequent writing positions central - in other words, as Geirn (quoted in Klein 1993) suggests, we must 'teach the conflicts'.

As I suggested earlier in the nurse education case study, a major conflict is between, on the one hand, the practice-oriented account of nursing and the experiential ways of knowing that it makes authoritative and, on the other hand, the professionalized, disciplinary account of nursing, with its consequent impersonalization and generalization of the nursing subject. We have seen how these conflicts work within the texts examined earlier, producing at one moment highly valued, if dodgy, texts in the impersonalized disciplinary voice (Six and Lorain's). Other similarly valued essays (Kenore and Mark's) draw on the strategies of authorization from experience, through running the risk of the critical marker's comment. The less successful essays (Karen and Debbie's) appear to fail both in making authoritative statements in the impersonalized disciplinary voice and in the generalized experimental voice of 'what nurses think'. Mark's essay seems to thematically connect with the experiential/practice-based account and the impersonalized disciplined account of nursing. While appearing somewhat unconventional, i.e. not dodgy, in terms of the conventions of academic writing, it is highly valued by the marker.

It is worth noting that the tensions and conflicts between the experimental/practice-based voice and the impersonalized disciplinary voice and the consequent availability of writing positions are a major theme of the work of Six and others (see Six and Simpson 1995) on critical language awareness approaches to the teaching and learning of academic writing, as they are in Ball et al. (1990) and, indeed, are taken up by other writers in this volume (see Steiner, Chapter 11). Here they map specifically on to the shifts of nursing onto the academy with its consequent professionalization and disciplinarianization. This would suggest that the disciplinary politics of nursing is not so much limited to nursing alone, in that it draws on issues that are clearly broader than nursing such as the positivist/critical hermeneutic discourses as well as theory-practice divides.

What every student needs to know about academic writing is precisely the sorts in which taking up or rejecting writing positions involves taking up or rejecting disciplinary positions. This is not a pedagogy to be offered instead of a focus on the technical aspects of academic writing (of course someone needs to talk before through the social meanings of plagiarism, to give her the skills to quote and reference effectively). It provides a complementary lens in which the student academic writer can explore the writing/disciplinary/subject positions that are available along with the areas of blurring, overlap and conflict that create difficulties and choices in taking up an authoritative position in writing.

Conclusion: intrinsic and embodied readings

An underlying theme of this chapter has been, in a sense, how lecturers/markers read student writing and how students read the circumstances within which they are required to write. Here I take 'reading' in a broader pedagogical sense - how we read these texts as people concerned with the teaching of academic writing. I want to suggest that there are two broad sorts of characterizing this first, the idea of intrinsic reading or an intrinsic reading, second, the idea of embodied reading and embodied readings.

What do I mean by this?

An intrinsic reading is one which reads the pedagogical issues of student texts in terms of skills or technologies. Learner writers in this version will have greater and lesser degrees of skill in, for example, incorporating wordings and meanings into text. They will, to a greater or lesser extent have available to them the linguistic technologies to do so. An embodied reading is one that reads the text as an embodiment of the disciplinary politics within which it is produced, and as an embodiment of the processes of subject production at work in learner writers engage with the writing demands of the discipline. In this chapter I argue that such embodied readings are an essential basis for academic writing pedagogy.
Student Writing and Staff Feedback in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach

Mary R. Lea and Brian V. Street

Introduction

The opinion is often expressed that standards of student ‘literacy’ are falling, whether at school or in higher education: many academic staff claim that students can no longer write. ‘Back to basics’ ideas are now fast taking hold in today’s higher education. Recently, we received an award from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council to conduct a research project entitled ‘Perspectives on Academic Literacies: An Institutional Approach’ that attempted to look at these issues in more depth. The research looked at perceptions and practices of student writing in higher education, taking as case-studies one new and one traditional university in southeast England. Set against the background of numerous changes in higher education in the UK and increasing numbers of non-traditional entrants, this research has been concerned with a solo, institutional approach to student writing, rather than the pan-blotting ‘problems’ with individual students. One of the main purposes of the research has been to move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and to consider the complex of writing practices that are taking place at degree level in universities. As a starting point, the research adopts the concept of academic literacies as a framework for understanding university writing practices.

Academic literacies

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge. Academic literacy practices – reading and writing within disciplines – constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study. A practices approach to ‘literacy’ takes account of the cultural and contextual component of writing and reading practices, and this in turn has important implications for our understanding of issues of student learning. Educational research into student learning in higher education has tended to concentrate on ways in which students can be helped to adopt their practices to those of the institution (Gibbs 1994): from this perspective, the codes and conventions of academia can be taken as given to students, our research is founded on the premise that in order to understand the nature of academic learning, it is important to investigate the understandings of both academic staff and students about their own literacy practices without making prior assumptions as to which practices are either appropriate or effective. This is particularly important in trying to develop a more complex analysis of what it means to become academically literate. We believe that it is important to realize that meanings are contested among the different parties involved: institutions, staff and students. Viewing literacy from a cultural and social practice approach, rather than in terms of educational judgements about good and bad writing, and approaching meanings as contested can give us insights into the nature of academic literacy in particular and academic learning in general through researching these differing expectations and interpretations of university writing we hope to throw light on failure or underachievement, as well as success.

The notion of academic literacies has been developed from the area of ‘new literacy studies’ (Barnes 1994; Barthes 1968) that educational research into student writing in higher education has taken. In contrast to three main perspectives or models: study skills, academic socialization; and academic literacies (see Figure 2.1), the models are not mutually exclusive, and we would not want to new them in a simple linear time dimension, whereby one model supersedes by a process, the more or less provided by another. Rather, we would like to think that each model successively encapsulates those above it, so that the academic socialization perspective produces study skills, but includes them in the broader context of the socialization processes described below, and that the academic literacies perspective incorporates the academic socialization model, building on the insights developed there as well as the study skills views. The academic literacies model, then, incorporates both of the other models into a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities, as we explain below. We take a hierarchical view of the relationship between the three models, privileging the ‘academic literacies’ approach. We believe that in teaching as well as in research, understanding specific skills issues around student writing, such as how to open or close an essay or whether to use the first person, can take an entirely different meaning if the context is solely that of study skills, if the process is seen as part of academic socialization, or if it is viewed more broadly, as part of the whole institutional and epistemological context. We explicate each model in turn as both a summary of our major findings in the research project and as a set of tools through which to view the academic literacies model.
The research

During 1995–96 we carried out research at two universities, one new and one traditional, in south-east England. Ten interviews were conducted with such students at the new university and nine at the traditional university, either individually or in small groups. At the new university, 15 members of academic staff and 35 students were interviewed in the same way. The interviews at both institutions included the directed questions of quality assurance audits and "learning support" staff.

One of our initial research objectives was to explore the contribution of ethnographic research to educational development in higher education. The short length of the project limited the full in-depth ethnographic approach such research could warrant. However, we did adopt an ethnographic-style approach (Green and Bowen 1997) to the research which included conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with staff and students; participating observation of group sessions and attention to samples of students' writing, written feedback on students' work and handouts on "even" writing. A major part of the research has included a linguistically based analysis of this material. As the research progressed we realized that this was an equally important source of data which we needed to explore further in the second year of the research. As part of this work, we have been able to benefit from our own situated knowledge of the institutional settings within which we were researching. Adapting an ethnographic style approach to the research, within settings of which we already had prior knowledge, enabled us to move away from the focused, rather more "traditional" interview material to a more eclectic approach, merging the importance of understanding both texts and practices in the light of staff and student interpretations of university writing.

Our research, then, was not based on a representative sample from which generalizations and inferences were drawn but rather was concerned as providing case studies that enabled us to explore theoretical issues and generate questions for further systematic study. In this approach, therefore, was an ethnographic tradition described by Mitchell (1984). Rather than applying "empirical verification" (as in much social scientific research), etnograpy means to "generalizing, and for establishing the 'representativeness' of social data. Mitchell (1984) has created what he terms 'analytical induction'.

What the anthropologist seeking in a case study to support an argument does is to see how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish thoroughly valid and reliable connections between events and phenomena which previously were intractable. (Mitchell 1984: 236)

In the present context, the issues and sources which informed and substantiated we collected can be taken as case studies of different perspectives on academic literacies. While not representing a sample from which generalizations can be drawn regarding the whole of English higher education, these case studies can point to important theoretical propositions and connections that might not otherwise be raised. The data, for instance, enable us to explore the hypothesis that, viewed as 'academic literacies', the beliefs and practices of tutors and students constitute a different kind of evidence than that which were raised in terms of skills or academic socialization. These account for, for instance, generic evidence for differences between staff and students' understanding of the writing process at levels of epistemology, authority and content opposition over knowledge rather than at the level of technical skill, surface linguistic competence or cultural assimilation. We have therefore approached our research data in order to acquire insights and conceptual elaboration on our three models of student writing, and to generate from them analytic induction rather than 'enumerative induction'.

The unstructured, in-depth interviews examined how students understood the different literacy practices which they experienced in their studies and in what ways academic staff understood the literacy requirements of their own subject area and make these explicit to their students. We gave participants the opportunity to reflect upon the writing practices of the university, at different levels in different disciplines. In this way, we went on to consider what influences were being brought to bear upon them not only from in-practice movements but also from contextual variations. We asked staff to outline, as they saw them, the writing requirements of their own disciplinary practices and to make these explicit to their students. We also asked them to talk about their perceptions of student writing problems and the ways in which these were addressed at both an individual and departmental level. Students explained the problems that they experienced with writing at the university and their perception of the writing requirements of different courses and subject areas. We also collected copious amounts of documentation from both staff and students' own work: course handbooks; assignment guidelines. A further objective of our research was to contribute to the institutional understanding of academic literacies in higher education and, we therefore began the project with a focus upon these three traditional socio-cultural categories: humanities; social sciences; and natural sciences. In both universities, we began by carrying out interviews with academic staff in these categories and then went on to interview students. Early in the research it became clear from the interview data we were collecting that the traditional boundaries that we had identified to frame the research project were not relevant, particularly for students. Our interviews with students served us to the fact that the old disciplinary divides were of less relevance in our research and that we could not use our interview data to create staff/student or discipline/subject categories as research categories.

The diverse nature of the degree programmes in preliminary level resulted in students engaging in what we termed 'course writing' which, we suggest, can be paralleled with linguistic code switching (Gumperz 1982).

such switching may occur within traditional academic disciplines in a tradi- (physica) or within "fields of study", such as modular programmes in interdisciplinary courses (Asian studies, busi- (which is used), or to specific modules of course units in functional, interdisciplinary approaches to the historical sciences, literature (twentieth-century women's literature, operations management). In so doing, they have not just interpreted the writing requirements of different levels of academic activity. Such switching may also encompass the different demands of different subject tutors and their personal interpretations of writing re- requirements. As students shift between such disciplines, course units, modules and tutors, different assumptions about the nature of writing, related to different epistemological presuppositions about the nature of academic knowledge and learning, are being brought to bear, often implicitly, on the writing requirements of their assignments... Evidence from interviews with tutors and students and from handouts prepared for students on "good" writing suggests that it is frequently very difficult for students to "read off" from one context what might be the specific aca- demic conventions of the expectations for writing. Nor, of course, do we believe that the provision of general statements about the nature of academic writing helps students to meet the specific demands of different courses. We also interviewed learning support staff in both institutions. The data collected from these interviews reinforced the views expressed by students that many of the difficulties they experienced with writing were in the conflicting and contradicting requirements for writing on different courses and from the fact that these requirements were frequently left implicit. Learn- ing support staff also questioned whether academic staff were aware that they were asking for specific versions of written knowledge from their students.

Requirements of student writing: staff interpretations

The interviews with staff would suggest that academic staff have their own family of expectations regarding what constitutes a good piece of student writing in the areas in which they teach. These tend to reflect the more generic sense of understanding, categorisation and layout and to such apparently evident components of national essay writing as "introduction", or "thesis". Their own disciplinary individualities had a clear influence on staff conceptualizations and representa- tions of what were the main features to look for in student writing at both levels, although the epistemological and methodological issues that underlay these were often expressed through the surface features and imperatives of writing: in itself a further detail below. It was this confu- sion, we argue, that led to difficulties for students not yet acquainted with the disciplinary underpinnings of faculty feedback. This confusion was compounded by the move towards multi-disciplinary courses at degree level and the modular system that was fully in place at one of the universi- ties. As a result, although faculty understanding of student writing was often described in disciplinary terms, for example, "in history the discipline is particularly important", or "in English we are looking for clarity of ex- pression", in practice staff were often set at odds with one another in this integrated number of disciplinary approaches and where the writing requirements consequently varied and to describe the kinds and quantities of writing that were involved for their students. We also asked them to talk about their perceptions of student writing problems and the ways in which these were addressed at both an individual and departmental level. Students explained the problems that they experienced with writing at the university and their perception of the writing requirements of different courses and subject areas. We also collected copious amounts of documentation from both staff and students' own work: course handbooks; assignment guidelines. A further objective of our research was to contribute to the institutional understanding of academic literacies in higher education, and, we therefore began the project with a focus upon these three traditional socio-cultural categories: humanities; social sciences; and natural sciences. In both universities, we began by carrying out interviews with academic staff in these categories and then went on to interview students. Early in the research it became clear from the interview data we were collecting that the traditional boundaries that we had identified to frame the research project were not relevant, particularly for students. Our interviews with students served us to the fact that the old disciplinary divides were of less relevance in our research and that we could not use our interview data to create staff/student or discipline/subject categories as research categories.

The diverse nature of the degree programmes in preliminary level resulted in students engaging in what we termed 'course writing' which, we suggest, can be paralleled with linguistic code switching (Gumperz 1982).
Writing requirements: student interpretations

The research interviews with students revealed a number of different interpretations and understandings of what was meant by 'good writing'. Students talked about the different expectations of various audiences, the need to be aware of the context in which writing is produced, and the importance of understanding the purpose and audience of their writing. The interviews also highlighted the challenges students faced in reconciling these different expectations, and the need for ongoing support and guidance.

Relations around student writing: interpreting feedback

So far, we have attempted to outline some of the interactions in the research data that underpin these different interpretations and understandings of student writing. These interactions exist within and across courses, subjects and disciplines, and between students and academic tutors. They are complex and varied, and reflect the different responses and reactions of students and tutors to the feedback they receive.

Central to our understanding of both the variety of academic literacies practices which students engage across the university and the relations which exist around text production is an examination of the ways in which written feedback is interpreted and used by students. As we have illustrated, the research has been conducted with a textual examination of tutor written feedback on student work, both on standardized feedback sheets and in the margins of assignments - and with students' interpretations of the feedback. The research suggests that feedback is an important component of the learning process, and that it is essential for students to develop their academic literacy skills in order to be effective and critical thinkers.

Staff Feedback: An Academic Literacies Approach

Students know that variations of form exist, and that that their real writing difficulties lie in trying to gauge the deeper levels of variation in knowledge and how to set about writing it. It was much more about using the correct terminology or just learning to do 'academic writing' - as what we term 'the academic socialisation' process - would suggest. And this is something that students were adapting previous knowledge of writing practices, academic and other, to varied university settings.

The thing I'm finding most difficult in my first year here is moving from subject to subject and knowing how you're meant to write in each one. I'm really aware of writing for a particular audience as well as for a particular subject. Everybody seems to want something different. It's very different to A-levels, where we used dictated notes for essay writing.

Such common descriptions in interviews with students did not appear to support the notion of generic and transferable writing skills across the university. Students themselves often internalized the language of feedback. They knew that it was important to present an argument and they knew that structure played an important part, but had difficulties in understanding when they had achieved this successfully in a piece of writing. Students would frequently describe how they had completed a piece of work that they thought was well-structured and well-presented only to receive a very low grade and fairly negative feedback. They often felt unsure and confused about what they had done wrong. What seemed to be an appropriate piece of writing in one field, or indeed for one individual tutor, was often found to be quite inappropriate for another. Although students frequently had guidelines, either from individual tutors or as departmental documents on essay writing, they found that these often did not help them very much with this level of writing. They felt that such guidelines dealt with matters that they knew from A-level or access courses. These involved some broadly defined as 'structure', as such categories were not included with the formal organization of a piece of writing - introduction, main body, conclusion - or as an argument, involving advice on the necessity of developing a position rather than providing just a description or narrative. Students could assimilate general advice on writing 'technique' and 'skills' but found it difficult to move from the general to using this advice in a particular text in a particular disciplinary context. In both universities, the majority of the documents offering guidelines of this nature that we analysed took a rather technical approach to writing, almost in the terms of surface form: grammar, punctuation and spelling. They also dealt fairly with referencing, bibliographies and footnotes, and supplied warnings about plagiarism. They reach the conclusion that students had most difficulty grasping in terms of how to write specific, course-based knowledge for a particular tutor or field of study.

The conflicting advice received from academic teaching staff in different courses added to the confusion. For example, in one course, we were specifically directed to outline in detail what would follow in the main body of a text. In another course, we were taught that it was important to present an argument and structure the text in a particular way. In another, we were told to use examples to illustrate points, but to avoid using too many examples. These different expectations and interpretations made it difficult for students to develop their academic literacy skills in a consistent and coherent way.
has only to imagine other kinds of modality that could be expressed in this context to recognize the conventional and categorical nature of the usage mitigated connectives such as "you might like to consider," "have you thought about," "in my opinion," "perhaps," and open-ended questions such as "would this be interpreted differently?" "is there a link with other comments here?" etc., would evoke a different modality (more provisional or mitigated), create a different genre and evoke a different interpersonal relationship between student as writer and tutor as narrator than that indicated by the comments we describe here. In these the tutor clearly and firmly takes authority, assuming the right to criticize directly and categorically on the basis of an assumed "correct" view of what should have been written and how. Students, however, may have a different interpretation of feedback comments. The anthropology student in question could not make sense of the feedback comment "Meaning?" on his test. For him both the meaning of what he was saying and the development of the argument in his own text were clear. Even when students indicate in interviews they that they did not understand the comments, thinking it unfair or even disagreed with it, few if any challenge the tutor’s right to make such comments. It appears then, that written feedback on students’ work is not merely an attempt at communication or at learning a 'discipline' or at socialization into a community — although it clearly has elements of all of these — but is also embedded in relationships of authority as a marker of difference and a maintenance of boundaries.

Additionally, institutional procedures were implicated in the ways in which students were able to read, understand and make use of feedback on their work. In the new university, where a fully modular system was in operation, it was reported to us by both staff and students alike that in many instances students did not receive feedback on assessed written work until they had completed their studies for the module. Inevitably, students found that they were unable to benefit from receiving feedback in this manner since they generally found comments to be specific to a particular piece of work, or at least to the module being studied, and that reported that such feedback (frequently) bore no relationship to their studies in the subsequent module. Academic staff reported that they were unable to make use of standard feedback sheets because these were returned by authors after module completion.

The problem with the modular system is that every piece of work they [students] do is for assessment purposes. It is not until they are well into the second module that they get the results from the first.

Effectively there is no feedback.

Evidence such as this led us to suggest that we consider the analysis of writing in the university as an "institutional" issue, not just a matter for particular participants. The institution within which tutors and students write defines the conventions and boundaries of their writing practices, through its procedures and regulations (definitions of plagiarism, requirements of modularity and assessment procedures etc.), whatever individual problems tend to be explained mainly with respect to the students themselves or seen as a consequence of the mass introduction of 'non-traditional' students. From an academic literacies perspective such explanations are limited and will not provide the basis for reflection on learning and teaching in higher education that Dearing (1997) and others are calling for. Exploration of these themes within an academic literacies perspective may provide, we suggest, a fruitful area for research and for teacher training in higher education in the coming years.

3 What Am I Supposed to Make of This?
The Messages Conveyed to Students by Tutors’ Written Comments
Ron Ionač, Rayn Clark and Rachel Rimmerman

Introduction

Students receive an immense variety of types of response to their writing, all conveying different messages about university values and beliefs about the role of writing in learning, about their identity as a student, and about their own competence and character. It must be very difficult for them to know what they are supposed to make of some of these in order to respond to the responses. Our aim in this chapter is to identify some of the range of ways of responding to student writing, and to reveal some of the messages conveyed by these different types of response. We hope we will stimulate all tutors who have responsibility for responding to students’ writing to evaluate their practices critically, and to recognize the sorts of effects their responses may have on the fledgling writers in their charge.

The data for this paper comprise a selection of responses by tutors to student writing from those we have collected from no academic settings: our own university in the UK and the communication skills unit at an African university. However, the practices to which we are referring are not confined to the contexts from which these examples are taken, and raise issues of relevance to those concerned with academic literacies in higher education worldwide.

There are free subject tutors who teach a range of subjects within the social sciences at Lancaster University. All the subject tutors have to ‘mark’ in the sense of ‘grade’ to write a number to evaluate the work on a given scale. Of the four English for academic purposes (EAP) tutors whose work we refer to, some work in the UK university, others in the African university. The circumstances in which they work (rather than the differences between their institutions) are to some extent responsible for their ways of responding to students’ writing. Two of the EAP tutors (A and B) teach compulsory communications skills classes in which the assessment counts towards the students’ final degree. In this respect these two EAP tutors are rather like...
subject tutors, except that they must assess the writing in terms of its success as communication, rather than to any norms it communicates. Tutors’ C’s situation is similar, in that her course is compulsive and graded. The difference is that she uses the ‘process approach’ to the teaching of writing, which involves a lot of drafting, discussion and redrafting towards the production of final versions of writing. She sets students academic tasks such as argumentative essays, critical reviews and research papers on ‘general domain’ topics such as AIDS and pollution. Tutor D, by contrast, works in an academic support programme, running workshops and individual tutorials designed to support students in their writing they are required to do as part of the course. This provision is not compulsory, but available to any student choosing to take advantage of it. Work undertaken on the academic support programme is not part of the students’ accreditation, and consequently is not graded.

The chapter discusses the following aspects of responses to student writing:

- different styles of response;
- the nature and purpose of responses;
- the possible messages students may receive from different types of response;
- implications for student staff development and for EAP provision.

In each section we will draw attention to differences between subject tutors’ and EAP tutors’ responses.

Different styles of response

Table 3.1 compares the overall content and style of nine sample responses, selected to cover a wide variety of types of response. It shows that responses vary enormously in quantity. The quantity depends, of course, partly on how much time tutors have. However, we suggest that the amount of time and detail that tutors put into their responses to students’ work depends primarily on their values, their beliefs about what the nature of university education, about the role of writing in learning, and about the role of their responses in all this. They will have developed particular working practices to support these beliefs. Those tutors who give minimal responses perhaps see the task of students’ writing as largely administrative, and/or do not consider students to have the sort of role in the academic community which merits engaging in dialogue with those who give a lot of feedback must believe that reading and responding to students’ work serves more than just administrative purposes. We will develop this idea in the rest of this section and the next.

The tutor’s circumstances, values, beliefs and working practices become particularly interesting when we consider the relationship between specific textual comments and general comments, and where the common are written. Tutors and subject teachers organize their courses in a such a way that they have time to see their students’ writing in progress, enormously desirable.

Table 3.1 Nine different styles of response to student writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>Specific comments</th>
<th>General comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject tutor A</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>A grade only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject tutor B</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Three fails written in black ink at the end of the essay, plus a grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject tutor C</td>
<td>An occasional tick in the margin in red ink</td>
<td>Six fails written in red ink at the end of the essay, plus a grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject tutor D</td>
<td>27 numbers on the text in pencil, with handwritten notes in pencil on a separate sheet</td>
<td>Note 27 is a general comment, plus a grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject tutor E</td>
<td>30 numbers on the text in pencil, with word-processed notes on a separate sheet, to be discussed in a tutorial</td>
<td>More than 25 lines at the beginning of the word-processed notes, plus a grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAP tutor A: Communication Skills Course</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>‘Fair’ in end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAP tutor B: Communication Skills Course</td>
<td>Several wordings, underlining, arrows, short corrections and reminders written directly on the student’s text in red pen</td>
<td>About half a page of positive comments and suggestions for development at the end of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAP tutor C: Communication Skills Course, Practice Approach</td>
<td>Exclusively positive comments and suggestions in green pen on the top and bottom of the page</td>
<td>About four lines of pen in the end of the numbered comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

though this would be, in all but the rarest of cases, subject tutors are looking at a final product of the writing process, and are reacting with the primary aim of grading. This may explain the fact that, on the whole, subject tutors seem to focus more on general comments. All of them put a grade at the end, and all except subject tutor A write something to support that grade. Subject tutors vary enormously, however, in whether and how much they respond to the details of what the students have written. Subject tutors A and B appear not to see any purpose in reading and responding to their students’ writing other than to contribute to the assessment process. Subject tutors D and E, by contrast, provide a large quantity of numbered responses to the text itself—so many, in fact, that they are written in a separate sheet. The sheer quantity of these specific comments on the text indicates that these tutors believe that they should be engaging with what the students have written, as well as assessing it. The fact that the comments are written on a separate sheet is significant, too. One reason for using a separate sheet is to ensure that the comments are as legible as possible—these are very obvious intended to be read. They have the status of a separate document: a message specifically from the tutor to the student about their work, rather than ‘marking’ in the sense of ‘pointing marks on’—‘editing’—what the students have written. We suggest that the separate document is more respectful to the students’ writing than comments written directly on it.

In this way EAP tutors may make an important step in the balance between general and specific comments, and in the place of these comments. EAP tutor B’s style is, perhaps, typical of the uncertainty or insecurity on the part of many tutors to writing. Indeed, many of the tasks are designed to help students understand how they write, which they will reassess not earlier philosophy associated with the ‘process approach’ to the teaching of writing (see Freedman 1980 for reading ‘measurably’ and Clark and Isaak 1975, Chapter 4, for discussion of issues associated with this approach). This means that the main purpose of responses is to help students improve their work, which they will reassign after the tutor has seen them. For EAP tutor C, there is therefore any need to ‘point the student’s text’, as we mentioned when discussing subject tutors D and E, because this text is a rough draft. The responses are part of an ongoing collaboration between tutor and student to produce a good end product; hence the comments and suggestions written in any available space on the text. Tutors C also works with the philosophy of ‘inclusively positive comments,’ advocated by some ‘process approach’ theorists and practitioners (see Zb 1996). Even though EAP tutor D is not herself a subject tutor, she makes an enormous number of responses to specific details of comments in the text, rather than corrections of its form. This focus on meaning reflects EAP tutor B’s belief that coherence is a crucial aspect of academic writing, and that this depends on meaning, not form.

Both subject tutors E and EAP tutor D write their responses with the express intention of discussing them in a one-to-one tutorial with the student writer. By inviting students to discuss their responses, these tutors are giving the message that they do not have the last word on what the student has written: their comments are not final, but part of a dialogue.

The choice of writing implement is interesting, too. In our sample, these include pencil, black ink, red pen and word processor. It may be easy to see this as suggesting that these judges make a difference, but some things students have said to indicate that they do. Anything written in pencil suggests tentativeness; it can be discussed, rubbed out, altered. It also suggests trust, even collaboration between student and tutor: the pencil marks are there to help the student rather than to put them in their place. At the other extreme is the red pen. This is conventionally the symbol of teachers’ rigorous knowledge and their right to make unchallengeable judgements. The black ink represents, perhaps, the least difference between the tutor and the student: they are using the same writing implement; they are on equal terms in a joint project. The word processor is a new form of technology to use for responding to students’ writing. By using a word processor, subject tutor E shows both consideration for her students and how important she thinks it is for them to read her detailed comments. On the face of it the word processor seems to be a relatively neutral tool for the task. However, some students have recently pointed out to us that workprocessed notes seem formal, fixed and intimidating, and do not have the personal, provisional quality of the pencil-and-paper technology.

The nature and purpose of responses

In this section we show how responses can serve many different functions, both intentionally and unintentionally. We analyse the actual nature and wording of selected comments to subject tutors B, C, D, E and by EAP tutors B, D and E, reproduced on the following pages. You may like to read those before moving on to our analysis. We are particularly focusing on samples which include negative comments, as those allow us to discuss a wider range of issues.

**SUBJECT TUTOR B**

**General Comment**

(1) You make a number of good points but don’t really answer the question.

(2) You need to pay more attention to the structure of your essay.

**SUBJECT TUTOR C**

**General Comment**

(1) This is a very satisfactory essay.

(2) However, your arguments are undermined by the use of the personal pronoun.

(3) K. . . M. . . is not an established authority—or not yet anyway.

(4) Avoid the use of personal nouns and expressions like ‘in my view’ in all academic work.
SUBJECT TUTOR D
Specific Comments
(1) Unnecessary words.
(2) This paragraph contains many points each of which you could discuss in more detail.
(3) And? These are the same thing?
(4) Whatever 'poetic' means! This is culturally and historically determined.
(5) means the same: avoid unnecessary repetition.
(6) You already made this up, in the last para.
(7) This part in brackets needs explaining. Difficult for whom? which diachrony?
(8) Good point!
(9) Good to mention values. Here you only talk about the value people place on different types of language; wider social values affect language choice too, e.g. value assigned to woman, different types of work, education...
(10) Not quite: needs: more "technology".

(21) No, there is no proof that "the intelligence and language level" of any social group is higher or lower than any other. Some people just "fit the system" better than others.
(22) Good point. Not necessarily "stumbling" here, but moving with the times.
(23) So how can one say the older forms had higher "quality"?
(24) OK, but it's important to separate this argument from the one about language change.
Teaching grammar does not necessarily improve language use.
(25) Important point.
(26) You should show how you have used your reading by making references in the text.
(27) There are some good points here, but a lot of confusion too. I hope my notes help you to write more clearly.

SUBJECT TUTOR E
General Comment
(1) It is clear that you have considered the topic seriously and you have identified and illustrated three very important ways in which learners encounter frustration.
(2) Moreover you suggest a number of measures that teachers could take to avoid such learner frustration.
(3) I wanted you on occasions to go more into detail about these measures and I feel that, although your analysis stems from your HTH, some of your proposals are more theoretical than they are practical.
(4) I wanted to know more about how you intend to operationalise your ideas.
(5) I think that you rather unfairly make the teacher to be the "villain" and the "transgressor" and the learner the aggrieved, innocent "victim".
(6) I am thus a bit worried about the balance of your assignment.
(7) I quite agree that it is right and proper that learners' rights and preferred learning strategies are respected but I wonder if you do not somewhat underestimate the role that is put upon the teacher by the institution and society to build on what learners bring to the classroom in attempting to augment these skills and knowledge.
(8) There are one or two occasions when I find it difficult to follow your logic and sometimes I feel your argument +elay on an emotional appeal rather than an effective and considered thought.
(9) However, I suppose we all have such feelings and I feel rather churlish in putting this forward as criticism.
(10) The tricky bit is how to productively turn these feelings into plausible and acceptable action.
(11) A good starting point for more thought.

Specific Comments
(1) Yes, what you claim is true but there's something that makes me feel rather uncomfortable about your opening statement and it's taken me a long time to figure out what I think it is that worries me. I've finally come to the conclusion that it is the juxtaposition of the two nuns that you mention. This seems to me to suggest a "teachers versus learners' scenario. If your intended readership is ELF personnel in your own country then I wonder if they too might not feel somewhat alienated by what amounts to a criticism of teachers.
(2) I'm not sure what you mean by "full learning".
(3) Is this a conscious or unconscious action on the part of the learner? If the latter, to what degree should the learner be held responsible?

EAP TUTOR B
Specific Comments
(1) Puts "it" in the margin.
(2) Writes: "Are you sure"? in the margin beside a factual comment.
(3) Crosses out and rewrites.
(4) Writes: "incomplete sentence".
(5) Puts a "?" in the margin.
(6) "Wrong who"? above a pronoun.
(7) Puts "ap" to indicate misspellings.
(8) Writes "not clear" in the margin.
(9) Puts a "/" in the margin.

EAP TUTOR D
Specific Comments
(1) Great communication!
(2) Good, you tell your reader your intentions but the last part is vague, I think. I'd like to know a bit about your line of argument.
(3) Not sure what you mean here.
(4) Interesting I didn't know that.
(5) Are concrete examples?
(6) Not sure why you're telling me this here.
(7) Why not T?

EAP TUTOR E
Specific Comments
(8) Be whom, who, where, and why?
(9) All your own thoughts?
(10) Do you want to avoid give/give? language?
(11) Doesn't this contradict what you said on page 7?
(12) Yes, but you haven't said WHY.
(13) Why are you painstaking?
(14) Is this the best text here?

General Comment
I found this very interesting and learned a lot! With a bit more work – mainly explaining your arguments – this should be fine, as far as I'm a non-expert can tell.

We propose that responses fall into the following six categories:
- explain the grade in terms of strengths and weaknesses;
- correct or edit the student's work;
- evaluate the match between the student's essay and an 'ideal' answer;
- engage in dialogue with the student;
- give advice which will be useful in writing the next essay;
- give advice on rewriting the essay.

Of course, we cannot be sure that the nuances themselves would agree with our analysis, nor for that matter that the students who received these comments will make use of them in the way we do here. Zie (1984) has suggested that students often interpret "intended response" comments as evaluations.

Explain the grade in terms of strengths and weaknesses

This function appears in all the subject tutors' comments, for reasons we have already discussed. Table 5.2 summarizes the way in which the subject tutors' comments explain the grades.

All the tutors are making both positive and negative comments, although paying far more attention to the negative – perhaps to ensure the students know the weaknesses of their work so that they do not challenge a relatively low grade. The key difference between subject tutors B and C on the one hand, and D and E on the other, is that D and E indicate precisely what was strong or weak. For example, subject tutor D's student knows that what she wrote at point 1 is one of the good points mentioned in comment 27, whereas subject tutor E's student only knows that she "made a number of good points", but does not know which they were.

It is particularly interesting to contrast subject tutor E with all the others in the way they worded their comments. Subject tutor E is the only one who
phrased his comments explicitly as his personal view. He used the words ‘I’ and ‘me’ 21 times in this extract from his comments, particularly in the overall comment, and in detailed comment 1. He makes his evaluations subjective by using expressions such as: I find it difficult to follow your logic. I’m not sure what you mean by... I don’t think I can deal with it. I... This seems to me to suggest that the EAP tutors in our sample do not put a grade on the work, to which their responding EAP tutor B will, eventually, be required to recommend a grade on the basis of this draft, but at this point she does not want to give an indication of what that grade might be. In so far as they pass judgement at all, it is to give indications of what might affect their grade, and so encourage the writers by indicating the positive features of what they have written. Tutors D, particularly, makes sure that she includes very positive comments alongside any suggestions for improvement.

Evaluate the match between the student’s essay and an ‘ideal’ answer

This function and the next are both based on the underlying belief that the tutor is the arbiter of what is right. Under this heading we focus on the area of things which are particularly the prerogative of subject tutors to judge. There is, we suggest, a continuum from the sort of academic assignment which clearly has an ‘ideal answer’ to open-ended assignment, in which a wide range of answers are possible. The majority of assignments in the social sciences are probably at the open-ended pole of the continuum; this is certainly the case for the assignments in our sample. However, even for open-ended assignments, tutors often indicate that what the student has written falls short in some way of what they would have judged as ‘good’ or ‘ideal’. Subject tutor B gives a hint that there is an ideal way of answering, if not an ideal answer, by writing ‘[you] don’t really answer the question’. There are some hints in subject tutor D’s response: comments 27 and 24 are telling the student what she should have written on these specific topics, and comment 26 is telling her something about how she should have written the essay. Subject tutor E also indicates what would have pleased him more: notice the expressions in his general comments ‘I wanted you...’ to go into more detail’ (sentence 3) and ‘I wanted to know more about’ (sentence 5). In his detailed comment 28 he indicates what he would have judged as ‘correct’ or ‘good’ when he writes ‘Therefore maybe there ought to be...’. These all show the student that there was something different she might have written which would have been better in the tutor’s eyes.

The scare quotes around the word ‘ideal’ signal that there is no ‘ideal answer’ in social sciences and humanities writing assignments. But a given tutor might have strong views about what to expect in a good assignment, and in such cases students who want a good mark need to put some effort into seeing out how their tutor would answer their own question, what the tutor’s ideas, preferences and ‘observations’ are (Rimmershau 1993).

Correct or edit the student’s work

Compared with the two previous categories, very few of the subject tutors’ comments in our sample are aimed at correcting or guiding the student’s work: perhaps only subject tutor D’s comment 5, and subject tutor E’s comment 4. EAP tutor B, however, is clearly focusing on this function. All except, perhaps, the first comment are corrections. We do not want to suggest that this observation on our sample represents a clear distinction between the aims and purposes of subject tutors and of EAP tutors. It is, in fact, quite common to find subject tutors who see it as their business to edit and correct students’ work as if they were grading assignments, but we have not included any in our sample. Similarly, there are many EAP tutors who do not see this as their primary aim when responding to students’ work. EAP tutor D is an example.

Engage in dialogue with the student

Although this sounds as if it should be the major function of tutors’ responses, we have found it to be surprisingly rare. Subject tutor D shows an interest in engaging in debate over content with the student, but it is always reached in a relay of editor-critic-critic-editor, with no attempt at dialogic engagement. Her comments 4, 7, 9, 21, 22 and 23 all engage with the content of what the student has written, but they are full of indications that what she put in the first place was insufficient, controversial or wrong.

58  Derivational, Henry Clark and Rachel Rimmershau

There is plenty of evidence in subject tutor E’s comments that he sees engaging in debate with the student as one of his aims. In his general comments, he says ‘I wanted you...’ to go into more detail’ (sentence 3) and ‘I wanted to know more about’ (sentence 7). In other words, he wants the student to explain his/her ideas more clearly. EAP tutor D comments on parts of the student’s text in a range of open-ended assignments in which a wide range of answers are possible. The majority of assignments in the social sciences are probably at the open-ended pole of the continuum; this is certainly the case for the assignments in our sample. However, even...
An implication of our study is that tutors do not always give a great deal of thought to what they are attempting to achieve through their responses to students’ writing. Some tutors are more aware of the opportunity to fulfill some of the possible functions. Some are slipping from one function to another, without giving much thought to the activity. Looking at this from the point of view of the students on the receiving end, we do indeed wonder what they are trying to make of it. It is not surprising that they find such responses confusing, do not appreciate their purposes and are unable to benefit fully from them.

The possible messages students may receive from different types of response

Turner’s (1993) study of students’ reactions to feedback at Lancaster University suggests that most students do try to make sense of the responses they receive. He found that, while some students felt daunted by detailed comments, others were frustrated by brief ones. They often complained that they do not receive enough feedback, that what they get is not comprehensive enough, that it is not helpful, nor positive, or not timely. Some students talked about feeling ‘validated’ by detailed responses as they showed that they had understood the feedback. However, they acknowledged that they found assessment comments hard to understand in practice, as feedback was often not linked to the students’ understanding of the course content, and that it was not given in a way that could be linked to the feedback in a feedback cycle. The feedback was often not delivered in a way that was helpful to the students, and it was not always clear what the feedback was intended to achieve.

Messages about themselves

The ideology of educational institutions in most countries is that tutors are superior to students, and that students write to be evaluated by tutors. Writing ability is largely determined by the tutor’s perception of the student. Students have little control over what they write, and tutors often do not understand what they write. Some tutors have little control over their feedback, and they often do not understand what they are trying to achieve. Some tutors are not clear about what they are trying to achieve, and they often do not understand what they are trying to achieve.

Messages about university values and beliefs

The main implication of this is that tutors do not always give a great deal of thought to what they are trying to achieve through their responses to students’ writing. Some tutors are more aware of the opportunity to fulfill some of the possible functions. Some are slipping from one function to another, without giving much thought to the activity. Looking at this from the point of view of the students on the receiving end, we do indeed wonder what they are trying to make of it. It is not surprising that they find such responses confusing, do not appreciate their purposes and are unable to benefit fully from them.

Messages about academic writing

The very fact that tutors regard students as having written messages about their writing is an object to be measured, that writing is the only way, or at least an important way, of proving our knowledge, intelligence and effort. And, the more they have, the more they are encouraged to produce messages. These messages may be true, and they may be incorrect. They may be true, and they may not be correct. They may be true, and they may not be correct. They may be true, and they may not be correct. They may be true, and they may not be correct.

More generally, responses can encourage students, and give them a sense that what they are writing is valued. Subject tutor E and EAP tutor D both seem to be attempting to do this.

Messages about subject staff development

The main implication of what we have been discussing is that success at university involves a great deal more than just ‘skills’. Students have to work hard, and they have to be motivated to do so. They have to be motivated to do so, and they have to be motivated to do so.

Implications for subject staff development

We are all reluctant to make changes in our work practices unless we can find ‘evidence’ in the changes (Fullan 1991). Any program for staff development needs to be sensitive to tutors’ concerns about what their role is in the institution, about their workload, about what students need help with in writing, and about their role in the writing process.

In our experience, staff could benefit from being made more aware of the issues raised in this paper. The following are some points which are particularly worth emphasizing on staff development courses:

• Give thought to the quality, quantity and timelines of feedback - if necessary, change the way we do things so that we do not have to do the same thing over and over again.

What Am I Supposed to Make of This?

Not only, but they are also likely to expect negative evaluations, and to interpret many tutor’s comments to mean ‘What you wrote is inadequate’ and, by extension ‘You are inadequate’. Comments can be made in a way that is not intended to be helpful, and that is not intended to be helpful. Students may interpret these comments as expressing little confidence and their whole approach to a course.

Ideally, tutors’ comments could help to build students’ sense of membership of the academic community, rather than emphasizing their role on the margins of it, or some, seeming to exclude them from it. Carefully worded responses can encourage students, and give them a sense that what they are writing is valued. Subject tutor E and EAP tutor D both seem to be attempting to do this.
Implications for EAP practice

All the points listed above are relevant to EAP tutors when they respond to student writing. In addition, EAP tutors might develop courses which help students to become 'ethnographers' of the new communities they are entering (see Clark 1992, 1999; Clark and Innsi 1991; Clark et al 1990). This would include helping them to develop strategies for finding out what criteria will be operating in the assessment of their writing, what styles of response their tutors use, and what they are supposed to make of them. One way of doing this is for students to look at past essays from particular courses, respond to and 'evaluate' them, and then look at and discuss the tutor's comments and evaluation.

The kinds of comments we have identified from both subject tutors and EAP tutors suggest that much useful feedback can be given on writing as communication by an interested reader without drawing on subject expertise, so EAP tutors could build on this by facilitating peer feedback on student writing. Not only could this approach reduce the time involved in one-to-one work, it would also send messages about community membership and ownership of conventions to students who participate.

EAP tutors need to do a great deal more than just judging students' writing as right or wrong by some mythical criteria of communicative competence. It is important to recognize variety in academic practice: those of us working in this area should be concerned with the actual tasks which students are currently engaged in, and should examine these practices critically, both for ourselves and with our students. EAP tutors might also try to encourage students themselves to demand more, better and more frequent feedback. Work with students focusing on how to obtain the kind of feedback they think they need might be an important way of handing some of the choices about feedback back to those who will use it. As one of the undergraduate students referred to earlier put it (in Rimmer 1993):

After all, tutors often express what they expect from their students in terms of length, references, presentation of essay, so should we not be able to express our needs in terms of responding to our work?

Note

1. The ideas in this chapter originated in an activity conducted by Rachel at Lunac ter University in which a group of undergraduate students analysed some tutors' comments as a class activity. Rachel then presented some of the ideas and outcomes to the Teaching of Writing Group. Honey and Mum developed these into a workshop for a conference at the Communication Skills Unit, University of Dux ex Salurn. We are grateful to the students involved, other members of the Teach ing of Writing Group and colleagues in the Unit for their contribution to the development of these ideas.
Part 2

New Forms of Writing in Specific Course Contexts

4

Computer Conferencing: New Possibilities for Writing and Learning in Higher Education

Mary R. Lea

Introduction

Within today's higher education moves towards teaching on-line are becoming increasingly common. Computer conferencing is now being used in both distance learning and more traditional university settings. Although there is a substantial body of research which is concerned with computer conferencing and student learning (Mason and Kaye 1989; Mason 1995; O'Connell 1994) it appears that very little is known, as yet, about the nature of these written texts from a linguistic perspective and, more particularly, the relationship between students' use of computer conferencing and their assessed written work. In these new learning domains both students and tutors are having to become familiar with new ways of constructing knowledge through writing. In this chapter I hope to explore the part that this new form of written communication might play in student learning. I do this by examining a number of different conceptual frameworks to help gain a greater understanding of the relationship between knowledge, language form and the genre conventions involved in learning. I conclude with some implications of exploring these texts for practitioners who are interested in using computer conferencing in their own course design, delivery and assessment.

The research reported upon here is less concerned with the collaborative and social nature of learning than with the part that conferencing interactions play in the construction and negotiation of academic knowledge. It draws on data from two different Open University courses and builds upon other work which has examined the complexity of academic literacy practices in higher education (Geezer 1994; Sierer 1997; Lea and Street 1998). Other authors in this volume explore the notion that academic literacy practices are central to the construction of academic knowledge (Burcham, Chapter 1; Pascoe, Chapter 8; McMillan, Chapter 5; Sierer, Chapter 11). I draw on
a similar theoretical perspective in order to examine learning in these new environments and suggest that we need to understand more about the kinds of literacy practices that students engage with when they are using computer conferencing for learning. In other words, what kind of setting is this, what kinds of relationships between tutors and students are implicated in this setting, and what part is it playing in the process of learning and teaching?

Computer conferencing is being used by academic staff in higher education in a number of different ways. It can be an integral part of course design where the course is actually delivered online, either completely or partially. In this instance students have no choice about whether to contribute to the conference or not. Otherwise, tutors may set up a computer conference to provide a forum where students may discuss both academic and more general issues with other students on the course and with the tutor. In this case contributing to the conference may be an optional activity for students. Conferencing can also be used by tutors as the main way of discussing academic issues and giving feedback to students - for example, postgraduate research students studying at a distance. The way in which a conference is being used will depend in part on the nature of the course and whether it is being delivered in a face-to-face or distance setting. I assume here upon two distance learning courses being delivered by the Open University, UK. These courses have been chosen as examples because they embed rather different and contrasting academic content and contexts.

A425: "Philosophical Problems of Equality is a fourth-level (equivalent to final year) undergraduate philosophy course, in which students are required to use computer conferencing as part of their studies. Students access the conference via First Class, a closed internet system. Some face-to-face material support is also available. Students have access to their own tutor group conference, as well as access to a number of other conferences on which they have been assigned. Students are encouraged to make contributions concerning their course to their tutor's conferences, in a sense mimicking a face-to-face seminar. One tutor put it this way:

The idea is that the conference should be a substitution for the academic discussion that students would get in a traditional university. The idea of the discussion is to test students' understandings and to try out the construction of philosophical arguments.

Students also have access to a national conference for A425 and a 'Philosophers' chat' area for all philosophy students in the Open University. The main body of the course is delivered through traditional print-based course materials, and it is quite possible for students to follow and complete the course without making any conference contributions.

A1802: Applications of Information Technology in Open and Distance Education is a rather different course to A425. It is a module of the Open University's MA in Open and Distance Learning and is delivered primarily via the Web. This course uses a Web-based electronic bulletin board system for conferencing, and the conferencing is used as a major site of learning for participants on the course. Students are divided into four different tutor groups, with tutors acting as "facilitators". Unlike traditional print-based distance learning courses, students on this course have little in the way of ready-prepared printed material. Instead they have access to Web-based course materials and links to other relevant Web sites. Students on this course are expected to make their own contributions in terms of other relevant Web-based course materials. Additionally, as an integral part of the course, students are required to show evidence of their use of conferencing when setting their assignments. The course guide says that:

The amount of time you will spend reading set material is much reduced from normal OU courses, and the amount of time you will spend in practical activities, online interaction, collaborative work and Web-searching is much increased.

... working in this way is different from learning through studying traditional print materials.

New forms of text

Goodman and Graff (1996) explore the increasing use and importance of multimodal texts which, unlike traditional written texts, 'use devices from more than one semiotic mode of communication simultaneously'. Writing and images, pictures and photographs for example, are brought together in one text, and making sense of the text involves the reader in making sense of, and creating meaning from, all the different parts of the complete text. Goodman and Graff suggest that such texts are becoming increasingly important in global communications. In the two courses being reported upon here, in order to make the most appropriate use of these new learning environments, students have to learn how to negotiate what are usually described as multimodal texts. They have to use a knowledge of both visual and written codes in order to become successful participants in these conference settings.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the relationship between these two codes. It shows the conference desktop which uses the Open University's First Class internet conferencing system. Students enter the tutor conference for their tutor on A425 by clicking on the appropriate icon - for example, A425 Ian's conference. Additionally they can enter a number of other general conference areas where they can communicate with students and tutors from other tutor groups - for example, A425 Equality, Philosophers (the icon for which does not appear directly on this desktop) is designated for non-academic matters, not directly related to the substantive content of the course. Below these icons, representing different 'areas' of the course, students and tutors make their contributions. Clicking on the message icons to the left of the contributor's name enables participants to read or reply
be concerned with speakers' shared conceptualized knowledge of the different elements that go into making up a speech act, including writing, setting, purpose, character, norm, conference, and the terms of interaction and interactional genres. To get a more complete picture of the part that contributing to the conference might play in student learning and to accurately assess the impact of computer conferencing and consider participation in the conference as a 'communicative event on-line.' Hymes is primarily concerned with the intercultural and interactional features of communication. He suggests that 'an ethnography of communication' is essential in understanding language use and that we should not separate different elements of language usage for research purposes. It is always important to focus upon the use of language in the complete context.

One must take as context a community, or network of persons, investigating its communicative activities in a whole, so that any use of channel and code takes place as a part of the resources upon which the members draw.

(Hymes 1994: 11)

Following from Hymes, it is therefore important to explore all the different elements of the conference, including interactions not recorded by the written conference messages themselves. We run the risk of misleading the record for evidence of the whole process, if we restrict ourselves to this and refer to the use of primary email between students or from student to tutor, which is not recorded in the conference data. However, we can regard this use of one-to-one email as a literacy practice and could usefully explore the role that it might play in the learning process.

Once we start to regard participation in the conference as a 'communicative event on-line' = evidence of communication within a 'speech' or 'discourse' community = even we can begin to examine the ways in which students have to engage with a whole range of different practices = evidence of which is not always recorded = in order to become successful participants in the conference. Research carried out on the two courses confirmed that both had included both informal telephone interviews at the end of the course and online interviews with students throughout their course about their use of conferencing. This has given a level of interpretation based on students' use of conferencing posts and messages and timelines and, therefore, has enabled a more complete understanding of the different practices that are involved in the communication of academic knowledge. For example, students on all courses report the need to print off conference contributions so that they can highlight and annotate these written texts in ways which feel more familiar to them. Additionally, must not make unshared practice for conference postings but need time to reflect before preparing a contribution off-line, with all that entails in terms of redrafting and editing texts, before the final considered 'product' is put up on the conference.

Developing academic knowledge

I return now to the idea that computer conference postings reflect the different relationships of power and authority that are embedded in academic settings. Cooper and Selfe (1989) suggest that computer conferencing provides students with opportunities to resist a particular interpretation of their work. They seem to be suggesting that it is the conference genre per se which results in the breaking down of more traditional relationships between students and tutors. Evidence from the conference on the modeling of the students' use of conferencing suggests that this is not the case. This research suggests that the relationships between the academic and the context of the conference and the ways in which the technology is being used are a part of the activity. In other words, it is not the use of conferencing itself which enables students to develop the internally persuasive discourse that Cooper and Selfe value so highly. Equally important are the real and realized relationships between tutors and students that are embedded within the conference, and these are well dependent upon more traditional institutional university roles and expectations being taken up by both tutors and students.

When we are doing more than replicating traditional ways of learning in conference settings depends upon the learning environments that are being created within any particular course. Indeed, these new environments replicate some aspects of traditional forms of learning since they are still reflecting institutional power and might have not been replicated just because students are now using conferencing as part of their learning. As I have indicated, the philosophy of course appears to replicate what we might consider to be a more traditional model of tutor-led learning; the conference seems to provide students with a structure that has similarities with a face-to-face tutorial. The tutor often makes a definitive comment on a topic under discussion or 'sets the record straight' if students appear to have misunderstood a previous part of the discussion.

I think what John is saying is that Dreyfus's principle of equal prospects is for equal circumstances contradicts his differing principle. The latter says we should do whatever makes things best for the situation. But doing that in equal circumstances involves not doing anything to equalise prospects at all. In other words, his equal opportunity principle might rule out what he considers a difference principle requires. So, either in his situation, he does what the difference principle requires, and breaks the equal opportunity principle (this is the strategy in the Smith Guide). (The arguments supporting... ) or he enforces fair equality of opportunity but that breaks the difference principle (this is what

The last sentence says = in such circumstances, arranging for equal prospects would make things worse for the worst off than they would otherwise be, and could only be justified on grounds of desert which Rawls wants to exclude from determining the allocation of resources).

Does this help make the point clearer?

In contrast, in B208 the act of conferencing and their presence on the conference is much less apparent. Conference contributions encourage the students to be selfreflective learners working directly with their peers.

Sorry to be slow off the mark in setting up Activity 2. Here are the guidelines I suggest. 1. The aim of the activity is to investigate the experience of "searching as learning." Please read the primed course guide and the online description of the activity. The students are instructed on: (1) The search operation is "When or under what circumstances is searching learning? 2. It will be quite a challenging task in collaboration, as there is a fair amount of learning to be done in order to finish the activity on time. So, I recommend we retain the same groupings. As in Activity 3 of Block 1, and I will assign new roles. 3. Here is a plan of what the students are supposed to do. Please email me if you have objections to what I have prepared.

Because the conference structure is designed to be student-driven, the written genres of the conference appear to reflect the academic content of the course: an innovative course about learning and technology which in some senses challenges traditional academic concerns.

I am adopting here a similar methodological stance to previous work on academic literacy and academic written genres as evidenced in this volume (Puritz et al, Chapter 3; Stevens, Chapter 11) and, therefore, make distinctions not merely between academic content but between the different written genres within which conferencing is being used for learning by students and tutors, and the different practices that are associated with these genres. Different conference genres reflect the different relationships of power and authority being taken up by tutors and students within the particular conference.

Students are making use of these learning environments in their own ways, resulting in specific practices, and that learning is more complex, in particular instances, it is reasonable to make the assumption that the content matter of A208 can, at least at some level, be conceptually separated from the conference. For BR289 such a distinction is
more difficult to make. The academic context of the course and the use of the conferences for course delivery are not conceptually distinct. For example, students frequently write about the concern of 'collaborative learning' or 'on-line interaction' experienced in conjunction with conference

Epistemic modality and conference contributions

In order to explore the wars in which students negotiate academic knowledge through writing in the conference, I will use here the concept of 'modality' as a tool with which we can begin to examine the ways in which students position themselves in relation to knowledge in the conference. Modality is a term used by social linguists to indicate a speaker's attitude towards a proposition. Focus is often placed upon the use of modal auxiliaries such as 'may', 'must', 'could', 'should' and 'need' in order to indicate a speaker's attitude towards what they are saying. The use of modal auxiliaries indicates, in Coates' terms, that in more cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed. Although her own analysis is concerned with written language, I believe her work also tells us something about what is going on in terms of both their relationship to the academic knowledge and their perceived relationship to the writer of the essay, the tutor (Kain 1992). In this way, more than the students also help us to make more sense of the conferences.

Although on both courses students reported how much they enjoyed contributing to the conferences, they expressed some disappointment with regard to the kinds of debate taking place and, additionally, how these debates were intended to feed into their written work. In the conferences, students were concerned about the level of academic debate taking place in the conferences. As one student put it:

I want more than a discussion. I can get down the facts. the professional side.

They were therefore concerned that conference interactions were so

capacity to conduct oneself in an appropriate manner and it is non-

sense to set women and only women have the qualities required to

succeed in this do work. This seems a quite reasonable question.

There is so much more to this than simply raising the issue to the

It is a logical defence of a non-academic principle. It involves how we want to be, to conduct our lives, interact with each other, and the standards we set for ourselves. I believe, as I think you do, that many women would prefer not to have men in this job. But men would prefer not to have a woman working with them if the work involved heavy lifting. In both cases the feeling might be that the work was just not suitable for the person employed. Why should people of normal ability allow those of extreme views to make them feel incompe-

table in their daily lives? Who is being discriminatory in deci-

able such practices? Is there a majority?

This student uses a number of linguistic devices which indicate his un-

it is a practice in separate epistemic evidence from students' understanding of academic

The student begins the message by aligning his views with those of an ear-

In order to get to the conference: I agree we need not. He repeatedly uses 'if', indicating a conditional rather than a certainty. He goes on to say 'There seem to me', and 'I believe', as though you do, neither being strongly committed statements and the later again relating his ideas to those of others. He then completes his thoughts with a number of ques-

The use of these different devices seems to indicate both his own perspective on the exploration of philosophical knowledge and, at the same time, the necessity the student to his interpretation to that of the other students. In other terms, he is expressing doubt about his commit to the truth of what he is saying while at the same time creating interpersonal meaning with at least one other student. If writing in the conferences can give a voice in some degree to which students express themselves in relation academic knowledge, then maybe we can build upon our understanding of this to determine whether conference are effective in supporting learning.

I turn now to a conference from WM2. Here conference contributions tend to be of a rather different nature than those in AE1. This might reflect the factors which make this course rather different from AE1, that conference which involves entirely student-driven; academic content is not easily defined in traditional disciplinarily terms; the course is at post-

ment of the context. I do not mean to say that this is not more than a conference, is the exploring the relationship between collaborative learning and prior knowledge.

I'm not really interested in what other students think. How do I know if they are right or not.

It seems as if students were adopting a very traditional model of learning in this course: they were looking to the tutor for recognition that conference contributions had academic validity. In this conference we can discern quite noticeable differences between tutor and student contributions in terms of modality and commitments to the truth of the proposition. Whereas students tended to make more tentative and hedged contributions, tutor contributions were generally more categorical in nature, reinforcing the view that the conferences reflected a more traditional academic relationship between tutor and student.

Student contributions tended to be characterized by more tentativeness and hedging, with fewer categorical statements. The use of 'I agree', 'there seems to be', 'I believe' and interrogative forms indicate epistemic modality in Coates' terms. Coates also explores how epistemic modality functions to mediate interpersonal meaning between speakers, or in this case between conference participants. In effect, students are doing two things at the same time when they write their conference contributions. On the one hand, they are using the conference to indicate their own beliefs and understanding about the course being studied. On the other, they are creating relationships with other students and their tutor. Research on conference

The first query is from a student studying AE1, in which student had been using the conference to discuss the notion of being 'arrant'

I would not exclude having conversations from any job. All your argu-

ments denying the defence of normal courtesy can be used against the student's (not unscrupulous) principle, which you claim desires

men to right a job for a job-opening down and allocating cabbies to women in changing rooms. If there is a suggestion that the position might be abused so that applies to women as well. If there is no suggestion of this, or it is a matter of decency, then it is an entirely arbitrary notion of what is fitting for men and women. It is not.

There seems to me no direct correspondence between sex and the

I contented that without some assessment of prior knowledge that a student brings into a collaborative activity or project, there is no way to assess the extent or even if there has been an appreciable growth in the learner's construction of knowledge. For example, I bring to this activity extensive use of collaborative activities to construct knowledge in my face to face classes. For example, the one that I would like to bring to the work on Collaborative Learning with less construction of new knowledge than had I been placed in the topic on Course Design of a third generation on-line course as compared to a conventional distance edu-

The experience of the student in the conferences is that when more than one representative, adds, I know little or no previous knowledge or experience. That is not to say that I can learn nothing from my colleagues here, but that it would have been more fruitful for filling in my gaps to be placed in the other group.

One student could enter this course knowing virtually nothing about our topics, but with tremendous effort learn the various academic sub-

One student could enter this course knowing virtually nothing about our topics, but with tremendous effort learn the various academic sub-

This is a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge. How is this a bit misleading. Some commissioner's role is to make a much more influential role than someone who walks the course conversant and experienced in the field, who writes well, who construct fit less knowledge.
Linking conferences and assessment

A novel feature of H802 is that explicit linkages are made between confer-
ence contributions and assessed written work. In this respect, then, students
are expected to use conference contributions in their assignments. They
are being asked to reflect upon their own understandings of the academic
texts and to make linkages between the written texts of the conference
and the written texts that they have to complete for assessment. This is in
contrast with A2E5 where, although the intention is that students will make
explicit connections between what is learnt in the conference and their
assignments, no formal assessment procedures link the two.

Students on H802 did, however, report that they often found it difficult
to make the requisite linkage between the two kinds of writing. So why does
it seem difficult for students to make connections between the written texts
of the conferences and the texts that they have to write for assessment? We
have already seen how these texts embed particular relationships between
both tutors and students and students and students. Additionally, I have
indicated above that much of the conferences are characterised by different
levels of modality, which are related to both participants’ commitment to,
and their own understanding of, academic knowledge. I have also sug-
gested ways in which the conferences support collaborative learning in a
more or less explicit way. Arguably the conferences embed new forms of writ-
ing, new genres with their own distinct features and associated practices.
When we come to look at the assignments, in contrast to the conferences,
the assignments are less likely to be embedded in a very traditional academic ‘essays’
gener. Exitri for H802, assessment tasks are presented in familiar ways. Despite
the fact that students are consistently encouraged to make inferences to con-
ference messages in their written work, the assignment questions are still prescribed
by a traditional essay genre.

Conference conferencing is an ideal medium for collaborative learning.
Discuss.

likely to mean a very different form of assessment altogether - for ex-
ample, students keeping their own reflexive log (see Ciere, Chapter 5).

• Recognising the institutional relationships of power and authority that
exist between students and tutors and acknowledging that these are em-
bedded in, among other things, present assessment practices. Becoming
a “facilitator” rather than a “boss” does little to alter

Exploring some of the more obvivous written features of student contribu-
tions to different sites in this way might, hopefully, give us some clues as to
why students find it difficult to make connections between writing in the
conferences and writing for assessment. On the face of it, there are not the
obvious connections for students to make between these sites. For example,
the conferences are not the obvious sites of writing for students to make
connections between them (see A2E5). A2E5 is an example of the kind
where students are to be asked about how to approach their own writing
(Lea 1998). In contrast, in the conference there are few of the
familiar marks of authority that students are looking for - for example, the
referee’s own text to give validity to the text. This may, in part, account for
why students on the philosophy course were looking for the authority of the
tutor contributions. It appears that although the conference record but the
possibility of being a valuable record of reflection on learning, such a record
does not necessarily have an immediate or obvious value for students in
terms of their own learning. At the same time, neither is it perceived by
students as a record of academic content in the way that they generally
regard printed, refereed course material.

Directions

So how can this kind of exploration help us to make better use of computer
conferencing for learning? Writing in conferences can be a valuable learn-
ing tool, but we need to be able to make explicit the connections between
the different academic literacy practices associated, on the one hand,
with the conference texts, and, on the other with, assessed written
work. If we want to make the links between learning, conferencing and
assessment we need to start with the processes of assessment and ask our-
oselves what we are assessing. It may not be enough to encourage students
to engage with the academic ‘content’ of the conferences; we need to focus
more specifically on developing students’ awareness in terms of their own
learning, which must include a reflective approach to academic content.

Moreover, of course, he sites such as H802 where it is more difficult to
make a distinction between content and the process of reflectivity. In courses
such as A2E5, therefore, probably going to be easier to develop such
links. In others, such as A2E3, where the academic content is more
closely delineated, we need to explore further the ways in which features of

she comes to discuss ‘prior knowledge’ she again seems very committed to the
‘truth’ of what she is seeing: ‘it’s very subjective’, ‘I emphasise’, ‘I use’
and ‘I do know’. She appears to be confident about her presentation of
academic content because of her own previous experience in this field. Her
engagement with such ‘collaborative learning’ as an academic context but it
also feels as if the conference is giving her the space to contribute with a
strong commitment to what she isn’t saying. This is very contrast with the
previous student’s exploration of being ‘arbitrary’. Of course, on H802
students are not merely learning about collaborative learning; it is exactly
what they are doing. They are not having to make distinctions in their
conference writing between academic content and ‘using the conference’, as
is the case in courses with more traditional academic content, such as
A2E3.

Discuss the following quotation from Irene Flich (1971):
I intend to show that the inverse of school is possible: that we can depend
on self-mediated learning instead of employing teachers to believe or compel the student to find the time or the will to learn that we can provide the learner with new links to the world instead of
funnelling all educational programs through the teacher… ‘Network’ is
often used, unnecessarily, to designate the channels reviewed for
materials selected by others… I wish I had another word… a term of
‘educational web’.

Students reported that there was an artificiality about writing conference
messages into assessed writing. This might result from the fact that students
are being asked to make connections between two very different written
genres - writing on the conference and writing for assessment - the only
linkage bevels them to attempt to merge one into another. Since
the more familiar way of approaching such a question would be the refer-
ence only to established authors, this may arguably have made it even more
difficult for students to incorporate conference texts into their assessed
work. There seem, then, to be no obvious connections between the new
genres being explored and developed in the conferences and the old writ-
ten genres being replicated in the assessment processes.

In order to address the above points we need to consider the move in making
adequate use of conferencing in their learning and ultimately in their writing
for assessment; maybe, as tutors we need to concentrate on our efforts on
understanding the relationship between the different elements of learning
in these new environments:

• Understanding the specific academic content which is embedded in
the learning environment. What disciplinary and subject matter is being
made in exploring the conference? What assumptions are tutors making about
learning and teaching the course?

• Understanding the nature of the contributions that students make to
the conferences and how these embed particular commitments to and
understandings of academic knowledge. As tutors, recognising the im-
portance of these and building upon students’ understandings in their
learning. This may or may not mean replicating the features of more
traditional face-to-face tutorials, depending on the particular academic
context.

• Be clear in the design of the learning environment the conference is
an attempt to replicate or substitute for. We need to be very clear about
how students need to understand the links which they can make connections between the conferences and their
assigned work. This may mean more than asking students to weave evi-
dence of conference contributions into written assessment. It is more

the technology are directly implicated in the kinds of propositional know-
ledge that students are constructing as participants in conferences.

Traditional forms of assessment which are, at present, too often embod-
ied in the genre of the ‘written academic essay’ cannot adequately make
connections with the written texts of the conference. We also need to find
new ways of helping students to take advantage of the written records that
they have access to on the conference. They need to be able to merge
together new and more traditional literacy practices the ‘how’ in this
reflected in writing to the conference, and ‘traditional’ being concerned with
practices such as putting off contributions so that these can be high-
lighted and annotated in familiar ways. For example, some students on
H802 talked about printing out all the conference postings and keeping
them for reference for use as an assessed writing. We have seen that a
major advantage of conferencing for students is that it can allow a reflexive
engagement with learning through writing. It creates a written record that
students can return to at their leisure throughout the course.

I am aware that this chapter has raised questions which have not been
answered. In order to harness the potential of using computer conferencing
for learning we probably need to understand much more than we do at
present about these written genres. One danger is that if students’ use of
the conference appears ineffective from the tutor’s point of view, no matter
emphasis may be placed upon enhancing and improving student informa-
tion handling skills, much in the way that others in this volume refer to the
study skills based approaches being taken towards student writing more
generally (see Barybash, Chapter 1, Lea and Street, Chapter 2). What we are
really beginning to explore here is the relationship between epistemology
and writing in these new multimodal learning environments and the
consequences that this exploration might have for rethinking assessment.
Hopefully this kind of exploration will enable both students and tutors to
benefit from these new writing spaces for learning.
5

Making Dancing, Making Essays: Academic Writing in the Study of Dance
Sally Mitchell, Victoria Marks Fisher, Lynne Hale and Judith Harding

This chapter is concerned with the practice of writing in a discipline where the primary activity apparently has nothing to do with writing — the activity of dance. Dancers are physical. Many would say that they think with their bodies, not their words. We have no evidence from people to claim that they "let their hands do the thinking." They invest through the experience of moving in situations which are physical, to that space, to ideas, to music, and to other dancers within that space, the documentation of those intentions records their experiences. While dance students in a university setting are confident about their own practice, with its starting point of physical movement (and its inherent strengths of spatial awareness, sensitivity in physical relationships, concentration, teamwork and an experimental approach), they are often unsure about the formal writing tasks they encounter. The aim of this chapter is to explore the tensions and relations between the creative, physical work of dance and the formal writing requirements of the higher education context in which that work takes place.

The first part of the chapter is based on interviews, observations and essay samples gathered from staff and second-year students in a university school of dance, while the second part draws on the experience of teaching a "shifts" module for fourth-year dance students. It is about how participants within certain written forms, such as the essay or research report, as well as exploring the theoretical justifications, the project has sought to understand some of the social, institutional, pedagogical and attitudinal factors which influence staff expectations and student performance. The study in the School of Dance looked at the kinds of writing that students were required to produce, the attitudes of staff and students and the difficulties encountered. In this chapter, we look in particular at the writing required within the context of the choreography course. We want to suggest that the distinction between writing essays and making dancing may not be as great as staff and students often perceive. By looking closely at a typical essay title from the course, we offer a socially oriented explanation for the choreography and writing tasks, which draws on Harris's model of personal identity formation. We then describe the way writing functions in higher education to legitimate other forms of making. An analysis of a section of an essay text suggests, however, that the writing does more than comment on the making of a dance, in fact it creates meaning which is both unique and part of a discourse (Gee 1995). This enables us to draw an analogy between writing and choreographing — an analogy which is then, in the latter part of the chapter, illustrated in practical work undertaken with students. The chapter ends with students' reflection on this work and with our own attempts to see the implications for improving writing support for students.

Writing in choreography

The small-scale study conducted in the university School of Dance looked at the experiences of second-year students taking core courses in critical studies and choreography for both of which an essay was required. For dance students, writing tasks are coupled with some of the most "un-choreographic," it was not unusual to regard the essay as a distraction, an almost alien, to the intense creative and practical work the students undertake. In critical studies, however, where students learn how to analyse dance as theorists, the essay form seemed to be "the link in a relatively unproblematic way. In this chapter we concentrate on the writing required for the choreography course.

Seventy-five per cent of the assessment for the choreography course was accounted for, not surprisingly, by the choreographing of a dance. Each student had to arrange and negotiate time and space for rehearsal with fellow students as dancers, and to develop a dance from tentative beginnings to eventual performance. There were weekly group workshops at which the tutor introduced principles and exercises in choreography. On these occasions, students also had an opportunity to show work in progress and to receive feedback from the group. A video recording of the dance in progress then formed the basis of a more detailed discussion between tutor and choreographer. Formally the piece was performed to an audience of fellow students and staff and assessed. The assessment was based on the work of the individual person, and writing was an important formal exercise. It was with a sense of personal conflict that the piece brought her expectations in line with those she attributed to the academy.

I mean when I started it, I expected, what I wanted to see out of it, was a passion for their piece, and I marked all the pieces with a passion for their piece with good marks, and the others low marks and I got it all written, so as far as I'm concerned, I made the form to look like, if you're a good introduction, that's quite critically written as a piece — the conclusion, the conjunction.

It is one conclusion of this chapter that the distinction between choreography and writing is as much to do with perceptions of the differences as with any actual radical distinction between the two. There is, for example, a certain irony in the notion of giving stylistic and structural advice for writing when she is helping students to make a dance. It is previously considered that style and structure that she brings to their attention. Whereas choreography is considered in the context of realizing and transforming ideas through the medium of dance, the preference for writing is as a kind of commentary, giving (reporting) an idea of "how they felt" about the piece, from the piece's "contextual" and "educational" viewpoint. One explanation for the shift is that the tutor is able to give is not of course equivalent to that which the she gives to choreography. She is not in effect, a practitioner as well as a teacher, in academic writing she is a novice relying on a basic, perhaps superficially understood, shorthand: "don't use it," have a good introduction, conclusion, etc.

Such advice only goes so far in helping students understand what making an essay involves, other more elusive regimens govern success. The essay title is then was asked to respond to in the choreography provide clues — though no more than clues — for embedded academic rules and rationales. These titles had been set not by the choreography muse but by her predecessors, and in each case they asked us to consider our own work in relation to the work of others. The title that most of our sample chose was: Describe and discuss how you use particular movement vocabulary and movement quality to realise your dance ideas. How did you choose and develop your dance language and how best did it set your source idea? Illustrate your answer to this question from known works.

The tutor, along with several of the students, found the final part of this particularly baffling — what had the work of others to do with the work of the individual student choreographer? One of the students in the study, Hannah, remarked about her realisation of this:

I think I captured more of what the dance was about. But because I had to write about two other people in the piece, I had to start thinking of...it was a different way of thinking, of course, uniquely hers, a transmutation of everything she had appropriated.

When it is performed in front of an audience, the dance work is published — this is when it really reaches completion. The written work would be assessed on certain criteria (for example, in grade, whether it is chosen to be included in a university end-of-year show, and also what the student herself learns from it. The difficulty Hannah experienced was not concerned with 'beginnings, middles and endings' but with questions about the purpose of the writing, its rhetorical and epistemological orientation. These considerations relate to the ways in which dance, which is the subject of the writing, is to be known through the writing. They also relate to the way the dance itself is thought about. Hannah sees her dance as a personal achievement connected with the work of others; to look at other work is to detract from her own.

How to be new, how to be you

A more social perception of making dance begins to make more sense of the essay title. We read it as asking the student to make a piece her dance as a successful realisation of a dance idea? To do this she needs to show that her dance is 'original', which means it has to be uniquely hers, not a copy, but also to be recognisable, part of the collective "way of doing" that comprises the disciplines and traditions of dance. Hence she is asked to refer not only to her own dance but to the work of other choreographers. Making a claim for 'originality' in a particular feature of much academic writing (Kanter and Glitter 1989), but it is also a way of expressing what goes on in the making of a dance. Both activities can be clarified through the notion of a "personal identity project" (Harris 1985; see also Ron et al. 1993; Mitchell 1995, 1996). The project can be depicted schematically as two axes — the public/private and the individual/collective — which when they intersect create four quadrants. In personal identity formation the quadrants are transtered from the public/collective to a discoloured direction by four types of operations: appropriation, transformation, publication and conventionalisation (see Figure 5.1).

In terms of making a dance, the dancer student appropriates from the public/collective world of dance, knowledge and skills which feed her own peculiar making (transformation) of a dance piece. So, for instance, another of the students in our study, Lisa, described how her increasing knowledge of dance and choreographers liberated her to make dance:

It makes you braver, I suppose, to be just you, which is a difficult thing to do. You'd think it'd be easy, wouldn't you? Just being yourself. But it's not.

Lisa felt able to take risks and to follow her intuition because she knew from her dance history course that this approach was already conventionalised as dance practice. The dance was indeed, of course, uniquely hers, a transmutation of everything she had appropriated.

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about making dance) are part of its (and her) conventionalization into the discourse (see Hart 1990) of dance.

Legitimating through writing

So much for the personal identity project of making a dance and becoming a choreographer; within the higher education context, publication and conventionalization processes are only partially achieved through making in the art form itself. Over and above this, the writing of an essay functions to legitimate the work of the student within the conventions of the academic, largely text-based, institution. Another function of academic writing is to demonstrate, or to argue for, the presence of something (a raison d’être, a philosophical idea, a dance) where ‘necessity’ is understood, as Hart’s (1991) suggests, not as ‘found’ or ‘divine’ but as ‘essence’ (Hart 1990). The writing of a dance to become a text is a process of transformation, appropriation, and appropriation. Transparency in particular is a feature of academic writing, what Olson (1977) refers to as the ‘essayist technique’. Kazimir and Goeller (1985) comment that in Western academic contexts ‘a sense of exploration must be constrained by the process of writing’. Such a writing system makes a claim on behalf of the exploration system (which in this case is the choreography).

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the relationships with dance prerequisite and authority. Part of the art of essay writing, then, is not so much in choosing material that is similar or related, but actually in making relations, whether through similarity or difference.

Recognising the essentially creative component in essay writing could bring students’ perception of it closer to their perceptions of choreography. Essay writing can be a way to make meaning through the manipulation of form. When dance students leave their role as makers of dancers, they need to step into a role as makers of essays. Both activities involve a making process; both also have desired outcomes that are in some sense a commitment, a naming of how things are. The performance of a piece in front of an audience is comparable to the presentation of an essay; in its final form – both actions establish a kind of closure and create a certain fixity of meaning.

Exploring correspondences between writing and choreographing

A ‘dance skills’ module developed for mature students in the School explored the correspondence between writing and choreographing as a key component. As validated, the module purported to address a wide range of topics to support the dancers’ development of physical, information technology and communication abilities. In practice, the approach was less subsequent to the institutional notion of ‘skills projection’. It was based on a conjecture that the confidence the students experienced in their personal and creative practice as dancers and choreographers could help tackle the unease and distance often associated with formal writing tasks. The aim was to suggest to students that the process of constructing writing shares similarities with the process of making dance. A notion of making, in the playful manipulation of form, could be seen to underpin both activities.

The module involved students in exercises that focused on organisation and vision; the way things fit together or not – as ways of generating meanings. By physically rearranging objects according to particular criteria, students were to think about ordering in categories, sequences and hierarchies in patterns that spilled out the relationships of parts to a whole. On one occasion the 70 students in the group were asked to arrange themselves according to the colour of their clothes they were wearing. Where white tops were separated in terms of coverage and elaboration – sleeveless with short sleeves, with long sleeves, with long sleeves and collars – elements that did not fit in the overall sequence of colour/paragraphs had to be classified. Those without a dance studio among the ‘paragraphs’ made a ‘discovery’ of the dance bodies as a collage of bodies which ‘played’ a dance. The conduct between ‘paragraphs’; multi-coloured pits incorporating all the colour ideas were ‘conclusions’. The notion can be used as a method to allow the raw material and make their own discoveries about the way it could be shaped and sequenced as criteria emerged. The students were engaged in processes that the choreographerLabour ‘has’ to make the formal public with, in explicit verbal form, its necessity, or, in Hart’s terms, its potential for conventionalization into the public-collective realm.

An extract from an essay by another student, Ellie, makes a good example of how necessity can be claimed through the writing. Her dance is entitled How Come the Sun.

This piece [Alley’s To Bed with Love] is similar in structure to the second section of How Come the Sun. Alley’s dancers begin the piece by entering gradually on each side with their faces turned upwards rather than on those around them. As more enter, the stage fills and the atmosphere picks up to a hectic, wild moving of a circle of dancers cheeking in and out of smoothly timed moves and maneuvers.

Unlike To Be Still with Love, the actual dance steps of this piece were kept relatively simple, which allowed the use of more complex structuring in its spatial design […]

What became more and more important in the piece as it progressed, and what helped develop the use of the dance language was the enjoyment factor that both the audience and the dancers must experience through the piece. By using a strong element of naturalism, both in the general structure of the dance and in the performance of the moves, it allowed more opportunity for real pleasure to be taken from it both by those who were actually performing it and those who were just being put into it. Though most of the time she uses, possibly the most (opposite) of emotions, this is the same way in which Peter Weiss uses reality in her works. In 1980 for example, she has one dancer running, circling the stage 30 or 40 times, shouting the words ‘I’m tired’. The dancer does not have to feel any fatigue to the audience, because the genuinely is tired, and the audience do not have to allow for any kind of artistic licence to be used by the choreographer, and accept that she would be tired – they don’t have to because they know she really is exhausted.

Ellie uses her piece into dialogue with the other pieces she has selected. She shows, for example, how Alley’s work is both ‘like’ and ‘unlike’ her own. She abstracts from details of her work to the primary concern of naturalism it works by. She has used the same principle in her own work, she says, with ‘the most opposite of emotions’. In making these moves, Ellie is arguing for her dance and its conventionalization within the framework of dance. By ‘arguing’ she is making the making of dances or meanings based on evidence (grounds) that can be justified (warranted) by reference to a rule, principle or authority (see Toussaint et al. 1984). Evidence in this case supplied by description of the dances. Justification comes through the articulation of rules (if dancers feel a certain strong emotion, the audience will recognize that emotion as being real and natural) and by invoking authority (‘a technique used by Balanchine, who is recognized as a highly talented choreographer, is likely to be a good experience’).

The space in the piece was much better than the lecture theatre and it was noticeable as far as concentration/energy levels were concerned.

Reflections: limitations and possibilities

Students’ reactions were generally of this positive kind. Nevertheless, there were some limitations to these experiments in making in part due to the context in which they took place. When a group of the students who had taken the module in their first year were interviewed in the final year of their course, their wide-ranging responses included a number of reservations. These students, it should be noted, could be assumed to be fairly confident writers since they had had a full year’s experience of a theoretical module with a considerable writing component.

The students felt guilty that the practical module came too early, before they had been able to deal with the overwhelming experience of being in a new and confining situation, and, as a result, they feared, before they had any sense of why they might have any need for this material. Help with thinking about their writing should happen when the writing was happening, so that needs and support could coincide.
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engage in discussion about why they are being asked to write and how this will involve part of us in preparing to be theoretical and critically political, that is to talk about writing on a broad level. Our discussion in this chapter of the ‘personal identity’ project, of necessity and of argument in relation to the choreography essay may provide suggestions as to how such talk might be focused.

Finally, all the above points come together in an expressed desire for subject-specific tutors, that is for support meaningful to students’ academic study. Although many students do value the freedom of judgement that they have in choosing tutors from other disciplines, there is clearly a need to engage subject tutors in student development which encourages thinking about what writing involves. Such tutors need to be able to convey their understanding confidently to students so that students may also feel confident or at least clearer about what they are asked to do. In dance, such discussion could usefully involve consideration of correspondences between writing and choreographing. It should also involve reflection upon the education that students need in interpersonal and epistemological purposes of writing (see Lea and Street, Chapter 2), and the different modes - for example, argument - that students might, directly or indirectly, be asked to employ.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. The project is entitled ‘Improving the Quality of Argument in Higher Education.’ It is funded by the Londoner Trust and based at Middlesex University where it started in 1989 (see Mitchell, 1989).

2. It is a fact that makes the timing of the essay important. In our study we found that, depending on when their performances were scheduled, some students were required to hand in their essays before their dancers had reached completion. Harris expressed the disillusion of this situation when she commented that after the dance is finished ‘you haven’t got much to go on apart from what you are left with.’

3. This list has similarities with that proposed by Heath (1985) in her analysis of the approach that children who have been told bedtime stories seem to use (explain, break down into small bits, note anecdotes, features and Retrieved is not necessary). These approaches, she claims, lead to easy adaptation to easiest literacy - ask questions, take notes, discuss various points of view, write discursive prose, review and re-read.

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I felt that that was a waste of time because there was no idea, no ground at that time of what you needed these skills. . . . Actually, having it later on when you had essay questions that you needed to work on . . . would actually have helped a lot. Even now, when we have to develop an argument - I have a 10,000 word dissertation to do and I am really struggling with it.

What we know of the difficulties experienced by students writing for the choreography course bears out this comment: help was needed not only with general essay-writing skills, but in addressing the particular requirements of the writing task, its epistemological and institutional purposes as well as its relation to the making of the dance. The student’s comment is also a reminder that essays are not the only text required in the higher education context; developing an argument across the 10,000 words of a dissertation is a new challenge altogether.

Some of the group also felt that the module should have been optional, especially for those who saw themselves as already confident writers and group participants when they arrived (most of these were mature students). Some felt it was too basic and unchallenging, reinforcing a stereotype they regarded but did not think.

Although a number of students felt liberated by the opportunity to discuss their formal writing with teachers from the sphere of dance, others wanted any writing support to come from tutors within their own disciplinary communities. They emphasised their own successes in writing to the help of a tutor who was a dancer, but who also represented academic authority in an intimate way ‘because she writes books.’ From their descriptions, this tutor seemed to treat the two practices of choreography and writing as quite separate activities. Discussions with her had, these students claimed, never reached the shared process of creative construction in the making of writing and the making of dance - a reminder that it is quite possible for dance students to become successful writers without recourse to any analogous with dance.

Despite this, however, we want to present in claiming some value in exploring the correspondences between the two activities. For many students, overcoming resistance to the idea of writing is the biggest hurdle. This is also recognised by the tutor on the critical studies course who devotes at least two seminars to detailed, rather technical, discussion of what essay writing involves. At times, she acknowledges, her clear explanations can be counterproductive:

They worry tremendously about the writing. And I think that, if they see it as a different kind of activity from what we’ve been doing all the sessions [discussion of videos of dance performances] . . . they see it is much too formalised a kind of activity which is somehow disconnected from them. They sometimes put on a different kind of hat, if you like, and engage in something which is alien. And it’s very difficult to draw the line between helping them with their work, focusing on it, as you know.

95 Phyllis Creme

The ‘Personal’ in University Writing: Uses of Reflective Learning Journals

In there a place and space for the expression of ‘the personal’, and if so, is it relevant in higher education? Here is an attempt to engage with the issues and concerns in the study and writing of academic disciplines by students and tutors. These are important questions for students trying to find their own sense of identity as students in higher education, as well as for their tutors who may have various and sometimes conflicting models of their task as teachers. In this chapter I compare the different meanings attached to the notion of the ‘personal’ in the context of learning journals used in a disciplinary and an interdisciplinary course. By ‘learning journal’ I refer to what is variously called, for instance, ‘reflective journals’, ‘study diaries’ and ‘learning logs’, which are increasingly used in a wide range of courses in higher education. They are written on a regular, ongoing basis, and focus upon the students’ processes of learning and their own relationship to the course material. Their use in higher education brings to the fore the complex issue of the meanings and status of the personal in student academic writing.

The problematic nature of an apparently rather innocuous suggestion to students to make use of their personal position was thrown up by our work in an action research project on the uses of ‘new forms of student writing’ that were introduced alongside traditional essays in courses taught by social anthropology faculty at Sussex University. The research was funded by a U.K. Higher Education Funding Council ‘Teaching and Learning Development’ project administered by the National Network for Teaching and Learning Anthropology in 1997-98. The study was designed to look at the impact on student learning of the new forms of writing, all of which can be described as some kind of learning journal, although they differed from course to course in important ways. The two courses that I discuss in the chapter are: a second-year, core political anthropology course, and an option in first-year, interdisciplinary critical reading course, on the topic of ‘death’. The debate was included in both courses in order to give students an opportunity to reflect on their own experience of writing and hence to create a more personal version of the material within the context of the course, according to the tutor who was responsible for teaching the second course; it was designed and taught by a member of the social anthropology subject group who was based in the School of Cultural and Community Studies, at Sussex. The
The research
Taking an 'academic literacies' approach, informed, for example, by research carried out by Lea and Street (Chapter 2), I aimed to place the students' writing in the context of the pedagogical and institutional setting in which it was produced. From the start, therefore, I was looking at the purposes and rationale for the introduction of the journals and how they were introduced, making allowances for the different treatment of the personal in the discipline-specific and the interdisciplinary course, which brought out some of the differences, advantages and opportunities of the new forms of writing. I want to argue that, although the 'personal' was defined, constructed and experienced in different ways, the very fact that it came up as an issue during this research demonstrated that the new forms of writing gave students an opportunity to define for themselves their own pathways within their university courses that many valued highly.

Benefits of the use of learning journals
The research indicated that writing learning journals had the potential significantly to enhance and develop the depth and range of students learning, in different ways according to their purpose within their respective courses. Moreover, whereas this potential was realized in practice varied considerably - not only for individual students, but also in the extent to which the journals were integrated into the course teaching, learning and assessment processes. Here I draw out some generalizations drawn from the research data which I believe are relevant for future practice.

First, journals gave students an opportunity to write regularly and at length, allowing them to develop their ideas and writing facility. It is a

came up in different guises in different places - for example, in tutors' discussions around anthropology as a discipline, and in discussions about the new forms of writing which offered students different and sometimes contradictory messages about what using the personal might mean. This emerged as an issue particularly acutely in relation to another highly contested area, 'reflectivity'. Concerns, as a part of the research project, the subject group organized a staff development workshop on reflexivity, which was debated with respect to both to anthropology and to teaching and learning. The discussion was later summarized in a report which compares 'reflectivity' and 'reflection' and then applies both concepts to students' learning of anthropology.

Anthropologists have always been 'reflective' in two related senses. First, they have concerned themselves with recognizing how knowledge about the world is insecurely situated - this is and must be a principle for a discipline concerned with the relativity of different knowledge systems. Second, they have concerned themselves with using 'themselves' in relation to knowledge and its production. What appears to have happened in recent years is a foregrounding of these processes in anthropological writing combining an intensification of self-criticism/self-awareness with the making explicit of the political functions of anthropological production. This latter development, which can be related to the project of modernity, has led to debate about the status of the 'personal' in the production of anthropological knowledge.

(Mitchell 1998)

The report goes on to question the notion of the 'personal in student writing.

The stance of 'personal knowledge/experience/opinion' appears problematic in student writing. It is common to see students writing explicitly when setting the guidelines for essay-writing that students should develop their own argument - the imperative seems even stronger when dealing with 'new forms of student writing'. However, it is not always stated in a way that encourages students to use their own knowledge and their position vis-a-vis production. By encouraging students to take a critical stance (rather than their own current social categories, the 'personal' in student writing...
knowledge or experience. In these terms, the question for my purposes here is how far the introduction of different forms of writing made a difference to the "writing self". The purpose of learning journals may be to introduce the writer's autobiographical selves (for these are multiple) into the text that students write at homework time, perhaps by facilitating the development of the different voices of the autobiographical self. Another way of putting this is that different forms of writing expand the range of the discursive world that students can access, and that the more "personal" discourse of the journal takes the transition to the adoption of the new autobiographical self involved in being a university student.

Different courses, different journals

These issues surrounding the diverse meanings of the personal in the new forms of writing emerged in a focused way in my study of the two courses on political anthropology and death. I do not want to suggest too great a difference between the aims of the new writing on the two courses, for they had much in common in their treatment of the material. Nevertheless, the differences were marked and had important effects on the students' work.

The "new writing" on the two courses had different titles that rather neatly reflected their different purposes as the tutors saw them—the JOURNAL OF THE PERSONAL AND THE STUDY AND THE JOURNAL OF THE PERSONAL. The second-year political anthropology course was seen as an important theoretical foundation to the final-year options that demanded a greater degree of independent work on the part of the student than the course had done so far. It was here that the means towards helping the student to "think like an anthropologist" (as the aims of the degree had been expressed) seemed to come fruition—tutors spoke of qualitative shifts in students' work at this point. The death course was seen as a foundational in a different sense: as an introductory/pilory course in 'critical reading' in the first term of the first year of the degree. The idea was to introduce students to academic practices, which also involved a shift into students' conceptual position. Making use of the 'personal' discourse of writing had different consequences according to different roles and epistemological frameworks of the discipline-specific and the interdisciplinary course. To some extent— as a course taught by a social anthropologist— these differences were also evident in the students themselves.

These different ideas of the "personal" were discernable in how the two courses were presented, taught and assessed, and were clearly present both in the rubric for each of the tasks of the new forms of writing and in the ways in which the tutors discussed them, as I consider later. The JOURNAL OF THE PERSONAL was seen as a way of using the personal to develop students' anthropological understanding, whereas the DEATH JOURNAL was seen as a way of exploring the personal in the context of the student's anthropological self—a self within a much larger structure (a small bubble inside a much larger one).

For example, the problem of the person has now crystallized on the subject. I tend to wander off at times (maybe you've noticed that in my record of study here?) although my marks on the whole have been very good.
students to ‘read across a range of text’ from different disciplines. In the ‘Handbook’ the courses are described as: programmes which compare the approaches of different disciplines to particular issues or problems. The course aims to introduce students to a range of themes central to the School. It seeks to understand the individual’s experience in society through modes of imagination and comprehension of the social sciences, literature and the arts.

The title for the Death Journal unit:

The purpose of the journal is to provide a space where students can: record and reflect on representations and explanations of death; in various forms of the popular media; literature; artistic work (a 'scripbook' format was suggested).

consider contemporary issues surrounding death and their own thoughts on this.

reflect on ‘personal’ encounters with death or dying.

reflect on assessed readings.

‘read across’ texts: make links between different readings on the course. The journal’s shape, content and style will vary a great deal depending on its author and I hope that students will make it their own.

The use of the first person here may be a signal of the writer’s/teacher’s approach. She referenced a number of times in the seminars to her belief in the need for a writer (in this case a researching anthropologist) to acknowledge her own subjectivity and her own presence in a research project. At the same time, her approach was also a ‘critical’ and ‘scholarly’ one. In a conversation, she elaborated on what she hoped students would get from the course and particularly from the experience of writing their journals:

One of the main things I’m trying to get them to do is to challenge, deconstruct, … to challenge common-sense views about there being a single and right way to do things and getting them to realize there are all kinds of ways … and I see that as a necessary step to a critical perspective.

I ask them to think about the different writing genres … I try to encourage people to read beyond the individual text to get some of that existence of others – and I try to show them that part of her approach framework, that she would not have introduced herself, and that would not have appeared in an anthropological course.

The relatively free-floating structure of the seminar was reflected in and consistent with the requirements of the journals, which allowed an opportunity to make choices about content and to make connections across the texts read, the representation of death in the public domain and their personal experience. The notion of ‘understanding’ became a more integrated matter than is often the case in higher education, one that neither eroded the personal nor allowed it to dominate. Personal thinking and experiences were seen as valid in the academic setting – not just as a means to a different ‘academic’ kind of understanding, but in their own right, to be articulated, refined and developed in ways that the writer herself decided.

The following for indicates the range of the death journals death with but does not give a sense of how integrated different aspects could be:

1. ‘Friends’ and relatives’ deaths.
2. ‘My parents’ death.
3. ‘Death in the media.
4. ‘Death in literature.
5. ‘Death in art.
6. ‘Death in popular culture.
7. ‘Death in religion.
8. ‘Death in the natural world.
9. ‘Death in the scientific world.
10. ‘Death in the medical world.’

The Personal in University Writing

The reflective report quoted above. Throughout the death course there was an emphasis on a movement between a (disciplinary) anthropologist and an interdisciplinary stance, and between a focus on the individual and the collective. These were fostered by the 1960s where the journal was perceived as a key tool in the construction of these two ways of knowing. At the first seminar the tutor presented her reasons for teaching the course: it was an anthropologist’s perspective to set the course in the context of the social construction of death. However, this was not an anthropological course and this ‘dominant’ orientation was countered by several factors that opened up discussion of other perspectives: the choice of books, which included fiction and psychology, and the encouragement to talk about ‘personal’ experience, enabled different approaches to be introduced. Here are some quotations from students about their reactions to the course and to writing the journal:

It helped me to feel that what I think is legitimate. Now I will be more confident about putting my own opinion into my essay.

The journals are exploratory – you work onwards from one idea. In an essay you have to select, whittle down.

I had never thought much about death but one time I had an experience and realised how lonely death would be.

It was nice to have an opportunity for self-expression in this setting.

It was like having a conversation with myself.

The tutor expressed her pleasure that students felt ‘comfortable’ being able to talk and write about experiences – in this case a presentation of death and life after death – that were otherwise confined to a personal framework, that she would not have introduced herself, and that would not have appeared in an anthropology course.

The relatively free-floating structure of the seminar was reflected in and consistent with the requirements of the journals, which allowed an opportunity to make choices about content and to make connections across the texts read, the representation of death in the public domain and their personal experience. The notion of ‘understanding’ became a more integrated matter than is often the case in higher education, one that neither eroded the personal nor allowed it to dominate. Personal thinking and experiences were seen as valid in the academic setting – not just as a means to a different ‘academic’ kind of understanding, but in their own right, to be articulated, refined and developed in ways that the writer herself decided. The following for indicates the range of the death journals death with but does not give a sense of how integrated different aspects could be:

1. ‘Friends’ and relatives’ deaths.
2. ‘My parents’ death.
3. ‘Death in the media.
4. ‘Death in literature.
5. ‘Death in art.
6. ‘Death in popular culture.
7. ‘Death in religion.
8. ‘Death in the natural world.
9. ‘Death in the scientific world.
10. ‘Death in the medical world.’
impression of being able to express the personal remained for them, and it was frequently validated by a strong authorial voice in their journals. The death journals explicitly invited aspects of the student's own experience to be brought in as a 'legitimate' part of the teaching and learning setting. Since death is, as the rubric for the course put it, a 'universal experience', it was a topic that everyone could, if they wished, engage with and relate to.

One student expressed her belief that 'everyone who chose this course has a story to tell'. For this student – and it was true to a greater or lesser extent of many of the students on the course – the death journal was a place for telling these personal stories in a context that attempted to integrate the personal and the academic approach.

Directions

I am suggesting that the careful use of learning journals can offer a rather liberating opportunity for students to chart their own course through their studying in higher education. The records of study and the death journals were different from each other because their contexts were different, but they also had elements in common. By giving greater scope for the personal in the academic setting they allowed student writers to incorporate into their university writing ways of knowing that are usually absent from it, and opened up a different kind of space for their engagement with the course.

By inviting students' autobiographical selves to appear centrally on the academic stage, the journals offered a way of fostering the development of a confident authorial self that claims the right to write as a university student. By asking students to write differently, the journals allowed them to think differently. In this way the new forms of writing have a potential not only for enhancing student learning but also for expanding tutor and student perceptions of the boundaries of higher education. There are many courses for which learning journals would be useful. However, the different uses of the idea of the personal in the two courses I have looked at demonstrate how the introduction of learning journals needs to be thought through as carefully as any other curriculum innovation within any particular course. Among the issues to be considered are the following:

• How do the journals fit with the epistemological assumptions and purposes of the course?
• How will they be integrated into the teaching, learning and assessment processes?
• How much 'freedom' do the journals allow in practice to negotiate their own relationship to the course?

It will be important to enable students to use the journals flexibly for their own purposes in relation to the course and to give both themselves and their readers the opportunity for enjoying their range and diversity. As the tutor on the death course put it: 'I like being surprised by the creativity of my students'.

Acknowledgements

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Writing in Postgraduate Teacher Training: A Question of Identity

Mary Scott

There are a number of professions in which entitlement to practise may depend on the acquisition of a vocationally oriented postgraduate qualification. Schoolteaching provides an obvious example, and initial teacher training at the postgraduate level is the immediate context within which student teachers are considered in this chapter. To be more specific, the writing to which I shall be referring was produced by students on the one-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course at ..., which was introduced, for example, by the ... subjects that they wished to teach in the secondary school.

However, while the particularities of postgraduate teacher training are my primary focus, I would hope that they do not represent the limits of the chapter's relevance. In fact, I would suggest that teacher training can provide illustrations of wider issues and controversies which are likely to be pertinent in one form or another to any postgraduate course which includes time spent both in the university and in the 'real' world of a profession — a premise which may also encompass, to some extent, those undergraduate courses which are offered in and outside institutions of higher education.

The field of education is characterised by a 'web' of dichotomies — dichotomies that apply equally to law, literature, nursing and business administration, to give but four examples. The metaphor of a web has a further usefulness, too; it suggests a generative centre. In this paper that location and function is given to 'theory' and 'practice' which are viewed as the dichotomy from whose substance other dichotomies are spun.

Popular discourse offers many examples of the antithetical evaluations which 'theory' and 'practice' currently tend to generate: the 'teacher's assistant' and the 'teacher'; the 'theoretical' and the 'practical'; 'the intellectual' and the 'the traditional'. 'Practice' as learning 'by doing' in the 'real world' is not infrequently associated with 'high standards', while 'theory' is regarded as remote from the 'real' world and thus as failing through relevance to prepare learners for their future roles and tasks. In this way the perception of higher education institutions as far removed from the concerns of the 'real world' is remitted in forms which derive at least some of their creative power from that derogated cultural myth of the 'ivory tower' in which reflection is held to be a nobiliary and inadequate substitute for the concrete immediacy of action.

Politicians in the UK have criticized educational theory along these lines for some time. As early as 1983, for example, Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education, referred to 'jargon-sodden theorizing' (Joseph, 1983). Such attacks became more vehement in the early 1990s, culminating in the statutory requirement that schools play a greater role in the training of teachers. Thus it is that schools are now linked to training institutions in formal partnerships arranged whereby student teachers spend two-thirds of their time in the partnership schools. The partnerships vary considerably in their day-to-day detail and especially with regard to the components of the PGCE course to which teachers in schools make their greatest contribution.

However, even within this new context, the preferred mode of training continues to be reflection on practice (White, 1996: 174). Like most teacher trainers, Carson (1995: 155) defends this focus against its critics: 'Reflective practice does not aim at an ultimate goal that is necessary for teaching in these uncertain and changing times.' A consequence of this view is that the individual learners are encouraged to think of herself as a 'reflective practitioner'. This image, which seems to convey a definite identity, is, however, problematic. It is, in my view, a necessary and sometimes overlooked element of teacher education that, as Carson (1995: 155) himself has commented, it tends to be no more than an empty cliché.

The phrase reflective practice has been abused in the land. So much so that student teachers will roll their eyes at the very mention of the 'R' word. Surely it is a term that has been oversold to teacher education and students are right to object to its endless and often empty repetition.

This comment matches my own observations as a novice. Consequently, in this chapter I attempt to put back into 'reflective practitioners' some of the conceptual clarity which has been lost. In my view, the greatest deficit in the promotion of reflective practice is that many of the conversations seem to be shrouded in the uncritical and one-dimensional generalisations which are such a feature of the... (cont.)

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A brief retrospective

Before the introduction of formal partnerships between schools and institutions offering teacher education, PGCE students were offered few written guidelines concerning the assignments they had to produce for assessment purposes. The main requirement was that they should relate theory to practice in an 'enquiry'. This specification had as its implicit corollary an idealised identity for the teacher trainee. The PGCE student was assumed to be an active and independent learner who would benefit fromconsiderable freedom to pursue her own particular areas of interest — this being regarded as the pathway to the development of her identity as an active, creative and autonomous practitioner, her agency. In other words, the student writer was expected to present those dispositions which productive pedagogy advised her to foster in learners in schools. This perception of knowing or being a 'reflective practitioner' was firmly grounded in an idealised conception of learning as a process of autonomous reflection and analytical reasoning. Thus the assignment required the trainee teacher to identify both the 'competences' and the 'comprehension' of the 'learner'. The failure to understand the nature of the assignment made it impossible for the ... (cont.)

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A particularly graphic illustration of the extent to which an assignment could be understood by the individual who wrote it is provided by the following examiner's comment:

This is clearly an enthusiastic and hardworking student with considerable imagination and promise who should do well in her future career.

This tendency to treat the student's texts as indices of their identity is problematic. However, the problem should not be seen as deriving solely from a possible mismatch between the qualities suggested by an individual student's assignment and those the student might be expected to demonstrate in the classroom. Such an explanation is the pathway to the development of her identity as an active, creative and autonomous practitioner, her agency. In other words, the student writer was expected to present those dispositions which productive pedagogy advised her to foster in learners in schools. This perception of knowing or being a 'reflective practitioner' was firmly grounded in an idealised conception of learning as a process of autonomous reflection and analytical reasoning. Thus the assignment required the trainee teacher to identify both the 'competences' and the 'comprehension' of the 'learner'. The failure to understand the nature of the assignment made it impossible for the... (cont.)

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When the examiners' comments are carefully scrutinised, evidence of good practice can be seen in the following ways:

1. The difficulties faced by the student were really not knowing... what reflecting on practice would be like as a practice of writing.

2. More recently, students have been provided with detailed written guidelines intended to help them know 'what it would be like as a practice of writing'. However, as I shall demonstrate below, the new context of teacher education has created its own tensions and problems.

A new context: teacher training as a partnership

When the examiners' primary criteria was an interpretative focus in which the writer developed an individual set of meanings, arts graduates, and... (cont.)
especially those with degrees in English, tended to obtain higher grades than did science or maths graduates. This is not surprising, since the students could transfer to classroom and school the kind of close interpretative reading with which they were already familiar.

The recognition of how the assessment assignment advantaged some students while disadvantaging others was one factor which led to the development of new, more detailed guidelines. However, as I shall indicate below, the introduction of the summative requirement that trainers teachers spend two-thirds of their time in schools was a more immediately pressing influence: teachers in schools were to be involved in advising students on their professional studies assignments. Because they did not have a shared understanding of what was expected of students, a more detailed and explicit specification was required. Adopting an even wider perspective, I see a possible link between the more detailed character of the new guidelines and a change in the general perception of learners and learning in higher education. The new guidelines can be said to reflect a growing emphasis in UK universities on the importance of pedagogy - an emphasis which has led to an insistence that assessment criteria be made explicit to students. A selective plundering of Bernstein's (1977) metaphor of 'classifying' a task which Situationists claim: social origins, and by siting and analysing the circumstances in which the analysis of matrix presents the results of the research. In the second section, the guidelines provided to students permit a move towards 'performance', that is, towards 'specialised output' requiring 'specialised skills' and 'explicit rules of realisation' (Bourdieu 1984). In this instance, a successful display of 'performance' requires the student to adopt an empirical, positivist view of 'research' - a view which the training institution is identified with 'postgraduateism'. In practice, this research paradigm can lead to a rather mechanical application of research to new students, although the guidelines contain a few generalizations about the limitations of questionnaires or interviews (generalizations which could be used in any research on research methods), and then turning on brief summaries of vaguely relevant theories. This is a broadly a demonstration of 'postgraduateism', and it suggests a tendency to mean an understanding of research paradigms and the importance of 'methodological integrity' (Bourdieu and Boltz 1988). However, most assignments use the guidelines less strictly and in say, which point to the students' individual interpretations of the relationship between theory and practice - limits in which the difficulties mentioned in the guidelines would be identified as illustrations of very different approaches and which together show how two beginning teachers position themselves in relation to the competing discourses of competency and performance; that is, in relation to the unmediated but clearly evident parameters of their conception of the teaching profession.

A framework for analysing students' written texts

I have my approach on the four interrelated contexts which Baranenkov (1988) identified as shaping written academic discourse. These contexts are the:

object under study; the literature of the field; the anticipated audience; and the writer's own voice. Baranenkov was analysing papers by well-known academics (J.D. Watson and J.H. Crick, Robert K. Morton, and Geoffrey H. Hartman), who were intent on presenting new knowledge, but the difference between professional academic writers and students is actually an advantage to some extent in that in their pages will absorb the particular concerns of the student's situation as writers. In other words, as this reference to situations indicates, I seek to avoid the Romantic view of the writer which I outlined above and associated with 'competence'. In place of the detached, self-reflective and creative individual whose writing is viewed as the expression of certain personal qualities or dispositions, I propose a text in which the writer is primarily visible in the connections she makes with, and between, the object of study, the literature of the field and the anticipated reader(s).

In Baranenkov's paper the four contexts both impose a coherence on the three examples of academic discourse which he discusses, and simultaneously reflect the differences in the shaping of the three texts. The 'object under study' - the structure of DNA, the ambiance of science, and Watson's later paper - are represented in terms of its modularity: DNA is an object that exists in the world; the ambiance of science is, however, a concept which is generated by an analyst; and Northrop's later poems are the meditations of Hartman's 'subjective recreation of the poetic moment'. It is from these differences in the 'object under study' that Baranenkov largely draws his account of the differences in the other contexts. The use of the literature of the field and the role of the anticipated audience (in this case the wider public) is more directly visible in the connections she makes with, and between, the object of study, the literature of the field and the anticipated reader(s).

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The need to know has to be created cooperatively by teachers and students in ways that are personally meaningful to learners. This reality is a tall order for beginning teachers.

This positioning of herself in relation to experienced teachers is a theme that keeps surfacing. However, it seems to be concealed in the nature of A's problem. While the act of being experienced will not directly influence expertise, I would suggest that her difficulties currently derive from coming into conflict between competence and performance. On the one hand, she endorses competence-oriented discourses which locate agency in an empowering personal meaning-making (in, as in view of her) as an empowering personal meaning-making (in, as in view of her) as an empowering personal meaning-making (in, as in view of her). On the other hand, she is also a practicing teacher encountering performance-oriented discourses such as "transferable skills." However, since she assumes that competence discourses should translate into rules for the realization of specialized outputs, she sees no contradiction between personal meaning-making and "transferable skills" or between Learne's (1996) competence view of communication and the performance strategies of the communicative approach to language teaching to which she refers approximately in the descriptions of actual lessons which she includes in her assignment.

At this point I need to emphasize that I do not see the problem the way I have described as originating in the students. Her assignment is thoughtful and perceptive, and the bottleneck within which teaching is experienced for detailed planning and discussion of a proposed project. Beginning Teacher B has thus far to conclude that his procedures were inadequate and that some of her findings have any significance. Paradoxically, it is in her detailed account of the limitations of her investigation that the merit of her assignment lies.

The general significance of the above analyses of the two assignments can be summarized in the following two points: First, the assignment is a vehicle for teaching the tensions and problems associated with the current state of the PGCHE course in both the school and the university. However, whereas beginning teacher A does not perceive the conflict between 'competence' and 'performance' (Benner's 1996 perspectives on the teacher's agency, B identifies agency in the classroom with an exclusive, performance-oriented emphasis on what is viable within a positivist paradigm.

Conclusions

To conclude this chapter, I turn finally to issues of pedagogy which rest on my selective borrowing and reconfiguring of 'competence' and 'performance.' As far as it is identified with an 'embodied' construct, 'competence' can imply that writing cannot be taught. 'Performance,' on the other hand, can suggest that all aspects of learning can be acquired as explicit 'rules of realizations' or 'transferable skills.' A teacher needs to question the 'competence' view of the student writer, while also raising the 'expectations' of 'performance.' Hearing from this that Smith and O'Halloran in no case since there are no detailed maps; each of us, like each of our students, has finally to find a personal route; an anarcho of the need to find a route can only be as helpful as a discussion with colleagues (in both the school and the university) can be.

Such discussion should not, of course, be seen as uniquely appropriate to teacher training. It should have a place, too, in other professional settings, such as in business administration, teaching, computer and librarianship, where students also move between the workplace and the university. In fact, I would argue that primary students could be in a better position to understand and negotiate the tensions deriving from those two worlds than our primary students ever did. Writing a more prominent pedagogical role. What I have in mind is a series of seminars in which the numerous issues pertaining to each of Bowerman's four contexts would be addressed in relation to my own work. I want to use the work of Bowerman as a starting point and would like to see what issues can be applied to the teaching of writing skills which would include the study of published texts from the course reading list as well as students' own coursework in final form. As the analyses of the beginning teachers'
A Question of Attribution: The Indeterminacy of ‘Learning from Experience’

Simon Purdie

Introduction

Reading and marking essays that students have written can be a dispiriting experience. Sometimes it seems that key points of the course have not registered in the students’ minds. Often the texts seem even to lack a basic knowledge of the topic, so that their writing seems to be based on guesswork and speculation. In other texts, students may seem to have written an essay about the topic, but it is not clear how they came to their conclusions.

Criticism of student writing, by employers and politicians, and within higher education, is all too familiar. The difficulty is that such criticism, and accompanying calls that ‘something should be done’, is not actually helpful either to tutors or to students in understanding the difficulties they face in moving forward. Understanding unsuccessful student writing, in a way that offers practical insight and ways forward, is one of the key challenges for writing research.

What is frustrating about researching student writing as a participant observer is the opportunity to track students’ talk around their writing, and accounts of their writing. In this role, not immersed in the teaching and marking, it is possible to gain a quite different insight into the students’ texts. In cases where, as the tutor, I would find their texts apparently confused and ‘lacking’, as a researcher I have the opportunity to explore why. This is the opportunity to try to understand the origins of the unsuccessful aspects of students’ texts.

Like many other researchers, I often find that apparent problems in student writing do not simply represent a lack of skills, knowledge or understanding by students. Unsuccessful texts are often the result of students drawing on familiar ways of learning and writing that have served them well elsewhere, in their previous education, or in other areas of their lives. In the words of Stansfield (1977) the students’ unsuccessful texts potentially have a ‘rational’ or ‘logical’. We need to understand this if we want to know what further guidance students may need. And in doing so, we may find that we abandon the common view of any teaching of writing as somehow ‘remedial’—as teaching only what students should have learned before (Hull and Rose 1999; Swales 1999; Hull 1997). 1

What I find particularly striking from being a participant observer in a course, and from talking to students about their writing, is how difficult it is, for the novice or outsider, to work out what is required in a new context. A task or instruction may seem very clear when you are already very familiar with what is being learned, or are simply a pastiche observer. But the same task may be very unclear and very ambiguous for the student who is trying to use it to guide their actions and writing.

Equally, I am struck by just how difficult it is for tutors to make explicit what is required. Firstly, what is required seems so familiar and obvious to the tutor. Indeed, most of our own learning has been ‘on the job’, and may have remained very implicit. Secondly, there is no recipe to writing, no ‘cookbook’ to writing, no ‘financial audit’. For good reasons such texts are not all the same. Thirdly, even when we become aware of the students’ need for more detailed guidance, we can find that we are walking a tightrope between giving guidance, and feeling we are ‘spoiling’ the students. In most courses, there is a belief that part of the challenge is that students should work out what is required. Within vocational courses in particular, part of the instruction is that students learn how to work out what is required within a particular professional scenario.

In this chapter, I focus on a potentially major source of misunderstanding between tutor and student, that can lead to student writing texts considered unsuccessful by the tutor. I call this the ‘question of attribution’. It arises when students are involved in ‘learning from experience’. More generally, it arises when students are attempting to develop some general understanding from a particular case.

My argument is that learning from an experience in any context involves working out what aspects of it can be taken as generally significant, and what should be regarded as more particular. We cannot assume that the significance of an experience is self-evident. For example, within vocational education, where an activity or experience is inevitably linked to both the educational and the professional contexts, the process of learning from an experience involves working out what aspects of it can be taken as offering insight into the profession, and what should be regarded as being a consequence of doing it within the classroom. The implication is that for students to understand a particular activity or experience in the way they intend, we need to make explicit the significance that they attach to it.

The examples I will offer to illustrate this are taken from a vocational MSc course in environmental science: the students were learning to carry out and to write an environmental impact assessment (EIA). But first I want to argue that the ‘question of attribution’ is an important issue in any context of ‘learning from experience’, both within and beyond education.

A Question of Attribution: The Indeterminacy of ‘Learning from Experience’ 127

A question of attribution

Within traditional academic education

Within traditional academic education, in which there is an explicit and primary focus on learning about, there is nevertheless an important process in which the students ‘learn from experience’. They learn at least some of the practices of the discipline through the activities within the course. For example, philosophy students may experience the practice of philosophical debate through the seminars they take part in. However, what they actually learn from this about philosophy (that is, about the practices of the discipline) depends on a question of attribution. I explain this in Figure 8.1.

What the students learn about philosophy from their experience of debate therefore depends on the way in which they attribute this experience. Crucially it affects whether they think they should reproduce the practices of debate within their essays, and in other courses. In other words, the absence of debate in a student’s essay may not show the author’s lack of skill or understanding of philosophical debate. Rather, it may reflect their view or assumption that this is not required in an essay. (If debate is indeed required in an essay, students therefore need both explicit guidance that this is so, and guidance on how to do debate in writing, rather than only in speech.)

Similar questions also arise within other disciplines, and particularly when students are studying in several disciplines at once. For example, sociology, philosophy, English and linguistics may have different views about what ‘counts’ as evidence and argument. Students who manage to work out what ‘counts’ in one course may attribute this to the particular course or to

1 Hull and Rose (1999) provide a helpful discussion of the sense in which writing can be remedial.


3 See Hull (1997), where I discuss the ‘remedial’ and ‘flexible’ models of writing, and the role of writing in higher education.
the discipline, or may assume it has broader significance for all academic writing. Without guidance, they may sometimes appear to "fail to draw on what they have learned elsewhere, and at times apply practices that
were successful in one context to other contexts in which they are not useful.
This applies also within 'study skills' courses which prepare students for academic study. In such courses the students are often engaged in activities in groups of mixed disciplines, and the tutors are under pressure to claim that the activities and experience they provide have the kind of general relevance implied by the notion of 'skills'. There can therefore be some ambiguity in the attribution of particular activities (within, say, an 'essay' or 'essay' to 'academic in general' or to specific disciplines and sub-disciplines.

Within science education

Within science education, the notion of 'learning by doing' or 'learning by experience' has become almost the dominant pedagogy. Students learn not only the practices of science but the entire content by 'finding things out for themselves'. In doing experiments, by 'discovery'. For example, even in school, physics students may measure the gravitational pull of the earth for themselves, by conducting an experiment to measure the way an object accelerates when dropped. They learn both about the practices of experimentation in science, and about gravity.

However, this learning process involves a process of attribution. If students measure an object's acceleration to be, say, 10.2 instead of 9.8 m/s² (as is recognized to be), they have to attribute this result to their own inaccurate measurement or limited equipment and time. In other words, they have to attribute their result to the instruments in the classroom, rather than to actual variations in gravity.

The point is that this is for learning, and the basis for it, may never be explicitly discussed. Through recording teacher-student and student-student conversations in science classrooms, Leach and Skelton (1987) and others show teachers caught in the difficult position of believing students should 'discover' for themselves, but also wanting them to know the 'right answer'. They show teachers attributing significance and insufficiency to the students' different measurements, guided by their own knowledge of what the result should be. They show students acquiring with judgements made by the teacher, and accepting or rejecting measurements and hypotheses, 'on no basis that is ever explained to them' (Leach and Skelton 1987: 124). The implication is that students learn to attribute significance and insufficiency to their measurements, often attempting to produce what is expected, (ironically, in doing so they still experience the intended practices of science - of generating and testing observations so as to produce empirical findings that are accountable to their evidence.)

A Question of Attribution

Within science research, the notion of 'learning by doing' or 'learning by experience' also underlies the process of scientific research. The scientist's practice is often described as a process of discovery, where hypotheses are tested and verified through experiments. The results of these experiments are then used to refine or reject the initial hypotheses. The attribution of significance and insufficiency to the results of experiments is crucial in determining the validity of scientific conclusions.

Within science research

Beyond education, attribution is also required of scientists themselves. One of the key observations in sociological studies of the construction of scientific knowledge is of the ways in which research scientists, in doing research, have to attribute variations in their results either to the experiment or to nature. They have to ask whether a particular result, which may be different from what they had expected, is due to experimental problems, or is actually telling them something new about the system, or of what they are experimenting with. This is a process of assigning significance to the observation or experience (see Figure 8.2).

Within the workplace

Attribution is also an issue for those involved in learning professional practices from their experience in the workplace. A new employee who is, say, dealing with procedures on the factory floor, writing letters for the boss, or compiling a financial audit, and learning from this experience 'on the job', is involved in a process of attribution. They are involved in learning practices from other practices, and are not always aware of the attribution that is made to the learning process. For example, a new employee may be asked to handle a difficult customer situation. In doing so, they may attribute the outcome to their own ability or to the situation. This attribution process is crucial in determining the learning that takes place and the development of the employee's skills.

A Question of Attribution

Within the workplace, attribution is also a critical factor in the learning process. The attribution of significance and insufficiency to the results of experiences is crucial in determining the learning outcomes. The attribution of the results of experiences to the employee's own skills or to the situation is crucial in determining the learning process. For example, a new employee may be asked to handle a difficult customer situation. In doing so, they may attribute the outcome to their own ability or to the situation. This attribution process is crucial in determining the learning that takes place and the development of the employee's skills.
activity or experience to the wider profession, they will see it as significant and learning. If they attribute it to the "here and now" of the course, they will see it as insignificant or irrelevant to "real" professional practice. They will also see it as not worthy of inclusion in their professional text. This attribution is therefore counter to the students' developing understanding and learning, and to their writing.

If you are familiar with vocational education you will recognize the link here to the familiar classroom talk about whether an activity is 'real' or 'not real'. In a climate in which 'academic' is often used pejoratively to mean 'removed', or even 'irrelevant', the very legitimacy of a course can be contested in terms of the links to the 'real' professional practices of the workplace. Course information and publicity often emphasizes these links to serve the constituent identity of the department, discipline and course as in 'touch' and 'relevant' to the 'real' world of employment. It also serves to attract students who are making choices within increasingly modularized degree programmes.

Even within the lectures, talk and handouts of the tutor, there are often claims that the activity is 'real' or 'relevant', and that the students will be "writing, say, 'a proper report', as they would do in a professional context. It is common to hear students talking to each other in these terms. They may come to a course with an expectation of learning about the kind of professional activity in which they might be engaged in a future career. They may even be quite dismissive of an activity as 'not real', and may draw on their prior knowledge and assumptions of 'real' professional practice in guiding their writing.

I have come to be interested in this kind of talk, of tutors and students, because it is in power in legitimising and delegitimising educational activities and experience. On the one hand, it is a part of a view of education in which relevance is seen narrowly in terms of preparing students for employment. On the other hand, it is part of the fundamental process of attributing significance to experience, and learning from it. Such talk can reveal different understandings by the tutor and students, both of the course activity and of what was required of the students' texts.

Two examples of attribution

I will cite two examples from a study of an MSc course in environmental science. The research was carried out in collaboration with the tutor, who was interested in the way that previous students' texts were frequently disappointing; this was despite his offering students both tutorial support and an example of a professional text. Significantly, the study was therefore an opportunity to research the issues and difficulties in learning and guiding professional writing that arise even within 'good practice'; even when the tutor is interested in writing, recognizes the kinds of demands he is making on the students, and already offers students additional support.

Example 1: Experiencing and attributing uncertainty in the scientific data

In interview, the tutor told me that one of the key intentions of this course was to: "undermine the idea that in science you always have the data you want. We argued for the importance of understanding the often uncertain and provisional nature of claims that are made in science — especially within environmental science and EE."

Yes, you see with most of what we teach, we definitely give students the idea that science is in itself... something which is entirely under control... which is not true... because you only draw conclusions which are as good as the data you've collected... and the bit of data you don't have tomorrow may invalidate all you've done already.

Interestingly, he did not actually tell the students this within the lectures, seminars or tutorials. Instead, he wanted them to learn about the uncertain and provisional nature of EE from the experience of trying to do one; from the challenge of trying to understand the workings of a particular local enquiry from the typically limited data available, and then of trying to predict the likely environmental impacts of a future development.

His critique of most of the students' final texts was that this uncertainty their calculations were reported with certainty, as fact, and their conclusions were categorical, as the following examples demonstrate:

At high flow the concentration of sediment is so dilute that oxygen levels would remain static, and the then the effects should be considered negligible.

(Nick)

Then it is seen that scouring will be more pronounced nearer the pit with only a maximum increase of depth of 1.12 ft.

(Helen)

There was no discussion of the evident uncertainty in the data and methods. In his written assessment comments on their texts he often asks:

How do you know... and then they even as:

a collection of assertions without any discussion.

A Question of Attribution

I say this because there is an unfortunate habit within education of attributing unproven student writing first to students' lack of effort, understanding or ability, and second to the tutor's lack of expertise or 'poor explanations'. These may often be issues but, as readily available and rather easier 'explanations', they are ways of avoiding recognizing the limits of teaching and learning academic and professional writing, by blaming individuals. In the short term they involve an unhelpful denigration of the efforts and expertise of tutors and students. In the longer term they prevent real improvement in our collective professional practice and understanding, and undermine the expertise and value of education.

The challenge for researchers and educational managers is to avoid simply blaming individuals, and to recognize and explore the difficulty (for the tutor) of describing and explaining the kind of writing that is required of students, and the difficulty (for the students) of attempting to understand and (re)produce academic or professional texts from these accounts. The challenge is to try to understand the sources of difficulty and what can help.

In vocational education courses are often criticized for a lack of experience in the 'real world' beyond education. In this case, the tutor was himself a practicing professional in environmental impact assessment. He had considerable experience of the 'real world' of the profession. This is partly why his course was so interesting in terms of the generation of writing. He frequently described his own professional experience, and told the students that this course activity offered them a 'real experience of EE'. In other words, he frequently and explicitly attributed the course to the professional context.

EE is an agent which has to be carried out under UK and EU legislation. The function of it is to investigate and predict the likely environmental impact of a proposed development, such as a road, a new market or airport runway, and to communicate this to the local planning authority. The UK is a simply called environmental assessment (EA). The course I researched involved some traditional introductory lecture input, but the focus was on students learning about EA through actually doing one, and writing one. They were given a scenario, and a copy of a provisional development proposal — in this case to extract gravel from beneath a local estate. They were also given a lot of data about the estate itself, to use in their environmental assessment.

I joined the course as a participant observer. I attended and recorded the lectures, field trips, seminars, practicals and tutorials. The students were writing in teams of six, to simulate professional practice. With three permission I joined their meetings, in which they were discussing what they were going to do, generally listing, and collaborating in producing the final text. I also interviewed both the tutor and the students during and after the course.

In the analysis I explored the apparent origins of aspects of the students' texts that the tutor had criticized in his assessment. I went back to the recordings of the student discussions, and to the moments when they discussed these particular features or aspects of their texts. I was interested in the
practice. He attributed it to the professional context. However, the students understood the uncertainty as a consequence of the constraints, practices, and cultures of the educational context. They attributed the lack of time and resources, and the uncertainty or inadequacy of the data, to the educational context. They therefore did not 'experience' this as insight into professional practice. Instead, they sustain a rather idealized notion of professional practice, somewhat devoid of constraints and constraints (see Figure 8.5). (Rhetorically, when they later enter professional practice, and are confronted with such constraints as the real world, they will look back on their education and critique it for being idealized and not 'real'.) Significantly for the students, if they view the constraints such as uncertainty as belonging to the classroom, while trying to produce a report in the voice of a professional within the professional context, then it becomes impossible for them to articulate the uncertainty within the text.3

What is interesting here is the potential of this kind of talk of what is 'real' and not 'real' to derail the intended learning from the experience. Crucially the students have to view an experience as 'real' in order to use it as significant insight into the profession and to learn from it. In this case, for the students to understand that the task involved dealing with uncertainty, they needed to see it as significant: they needed to attribute the experience of uncertainty to the professional context, rather than the educational context.

It is clear that the students needed guidance on their attribution of the experience of uncertainty. However, the tutor's response to this is that he had already given it. He had told them that the set of data they were given was not, exactly as they might find in a professional. He told them it was 'real'. He said it was what the environmental impact assessors would be using if this development actually went ahead. It is therefore important to explore how these claims may be heard.

First, his assertion to the students that "this is real" can function, and can be heard, in different ways. In their discussions the students talked about whether aspects of the course were 'real'. They were evidently very familiar with claims from tutors that courses were 'real', and regarded these quite sceptically. They saw them as part of the same claiming legitimacy for the course; the claims refine the assumption that the course is removed from the 'realities' of professional practice. Indeed, information about vocational courses is often precisely about how they offer 'real' experience. The students did not perceive the claims of this tutor to be serving any other function: they did not identify these particular claims as offering potentially useful guidance for writing the text.

Second, as the tutor had articulated (above), the students commonly brought to the course an idealized view of science and professional practice. They drew on expectations that in university they were always given enough data to make claims with certainty. This combined with a wider belief that science necessarily achieves certainty rather than also involving uncertainty and contentious claims within the process of developing knowledge. They also drew on an assumption that a 'real' report would find enough data to achieve certainty (quotations above); it would not make uncertain claims from limited data. What the tutor had not anticipated was the resilience of these understandings—the way in which they could be sustained by a practice of discounting experience within education as 'not real'. In effect, the students' idealized assumptions could not impact the experience of uncertainty that he could offer. They were even able to withstand his very explicit (and awkward) statement in examples of professional EIA in his lectures. The students saw these as examples of 'what should not have happened'; they individualized rather than taking them as an indicator of a wider 'reality' within the profession.

To guide students' attribution of the experience within vocational education would therefore seem to require more than an assertion that an experience is 'real'. It would seem to require a recognition that talk of what is 'real' and 'not real' is actually central to developing understanding, and it is already pervasive in the students' thinking and understanding. It would therefore seem to involve anticipating and responding to the students' use of these attributions. It would seem necessary to address in some detail what aspects of the activity or experience we want them to recognize as insights into the professional practice.

Example 2: Understanding an instruction/activity

In Example 1 I looked at the students' attribution of an experience, when the same constraint legitimised 'real' and 'not real'. In this second example I look at their attribution of an instruction, and the difficulty students had when the tutor's own attribution was not clear. Once again I identify the implications for the students' text. This example requires some explanation of environmental assessment and the scenario. But it makes an important point, with wider significance, about the need to make explicit the rationale for a course activity within the classroom and professional contexts.

The scenario

As is typical of professional texts, environmental assessments are complex, and can have subtly different functions within different scenarios. In this course, the tutor therefore set out a scenario, and contrasted this with other scenarios they might encounter.

In this scenario (an actual case), the landowners of the banks of a local estuary had made a very provisional provision to allow a developer to extract gravel. The proposed method of extraction had not yet been decided. The planning authority was nevertheless interested in knowing what the impacts might be. The students were to take the role of independent consultants working for the planning authority at this early stage. Their task was to inform future decisions about the technique that would be extracted with minimum impact, and whether this was even possible.

The problematic instruction/activity

As consultants in this professional scenario they could, of course, assess the likely impact of every possible method of extraction. Clearly this would be a more productive use of their time if they could focus on the methods of extraction most likely to be proposed by a future developer. (The tutor explained that this would be cheaper, and the students decided that the extraction might be carried out on the basis of being cheaper, or of being least environmentally damaging and most likely to gain planning permission.) The act of choosing was therefore partly attributable to the professional context. However, as an initial stage in the time economy of the course they could realistically assess only one method. The act of choosing one was therefore also attributable to the educational context.

The tutor stated that the students first 'think what a probable extraction technique might be', and then focus on particular characteristics of that technique. After the point marked <> the instructions progressively lose the link to the professional scenario. His use of 'you' became ambiguous in what he was addressing them as consultants or students. His explanation 'we don't have that time' was ambiguous about the context (consultancy or profession) to which he was attributing this time constraint. But then his talk of the 'group', and the deadline in the 'workshop two weeks later' shifted the account firmly into the classroom context. In other words, he started by explicating the choice to professional practice and the professional context, and then shifted towards attributing these to the educational context. There is a dual attribution, in which the rationale for the choice is therefore ambiguous. Finally, with 'agree amongst yourselves what the extraction technique is going to be' he reified the instruction merely as a procedure ([a procedure] (Messer 1993:18), which the students were also using from other curricula.

In the students' discussions, in trying to understand this instruction, their own articulation similarly identified the procedure without the rationale. The most common reference to the instruction was "we've got to pick a dredger by Friday."

Interestingly, the tutorial discussions did not clarify the rationale for the choice. The tutor asked about, and the students described, the extraction method they "chose to use", and their reasons. Their discussion was equally ambiguous about the context of the choice, and the capers from which they were choosing. Yet neither the tutor nor I saw this ambiguity at the time.
The students' confusion, and the implications for their text

Within the students' meetings, when they were trying to work out exactly what we do, there was a certain act of confusion, as the extraction technique became increasingly confusing. Without a clear understanding of the rationale for this "choice" within either the classroom or professional context, it was possible for both the status of it, and the capacity in which they were taking it, to shift between within their discussions, and finally in their text.

The students did mean the notion that the choice of extraction method was made prior to writing the text. However, in trying to understand the choice of method within the professional context, the students lost touch with the tutor's original scenario, and developed quite different professional scenarios in their minds in which they might also be producing a report with the choice already made. In particular, they shifted into another possible scenario in which they had worked with a developer, who chose a method, and were now presenting the method and the likely impacts of it to the planning authority.

The tutor's written comments on their texts reveal the significance of this in terms of the different function of their texts. He espoused these comments for announcing decisions as if they were already made, rather than informing future decisions.

We have identified the role of the target system with only one possible scenario that is not of an independent arbitrage whose role is to find an acceptable way for extraction, or if this is even possible.

...the contrary of our previous scenario already made as a basis for an open discussion of the merits of different approaches.

The shift is apparent if we look at extracts from their texts. Here, for example, Alun makes categorical and authoritative statements about the decisions and future actions of the developer, as if these decisions are already made, and as if he is actually party to these decisions and actions:

Section 2: Project description

The extraction of the aggregate will be done using a class-based development tool. Three/or more pomdons will be in the class first. Work will be initiated in the north end of Block 5.

Once the developer has executed a suitable set, they will be loaded onto a computer. The class-based development will be done in the following stages:

...the main alternative to the chosen method of class-based development was extraction using a custom-written developer but this was rejected due to the followingShowing shortcomings: ...this contrasts with a previously successful text (given to me by the tutor as an illustration of what he wanted in which the authors - as independent consultants - intend "to come to the conclusion that decisions are already made, and as if he is actually party to these decisions and actions and from their analysis identify the key issues that will need to be addressed in this future decision about extraction methods. They therefore offer information and criteria to inform the reader in making a decision, and they demonstrate the distance of an independent third party."

The implications for the students' learning

Since the general function of EA is to inform decisions (both by the developer and by the planning authority), the students' own shift into this, and towards the activity of making and assessing them, represented a major leap in learning opportunities.

It is significant that making and announcing decisions is perhaps logistically easier than seeking to inform the decisions of others. If the students were to recognize and take on the more challenging function of informing decisions, then they needed that crucial understanding of the rules of their "choice" of developer within the professional scenario. They also needed a recognition that the format and function of their text was something new and unfamiliar, which they needed to learn. It involved more than "reporting what they did" in the way that they were used to doing within lab reports. They would seem to have needed a guided look at how environmental assessment texts inform rather than announce decisions. Yet this is precisely the guided analysis of examples that is usually mandated in higher education courses.

The students' reaction to the tutor's comments (quoted above) was one of common and simple. They immediately threw into question both what they thought they were doing and what they thought EA saw above. Their own reactions confirm their shift into a very different scenario, and a different understanding of this text: rather than informed of decisions, their text had become part of the final submission for planning permission, in which all the decisions had been taken.

Robert: But if this is an environmental assessment... it shouldn't be open for discussion anyway... you should have made your decisions from the alternatives.

Alun: This is what I did /

Robert: So what is it that you put in an environmental assessment / you don't go for planning permission... and say "well I've left all these other things/"

Alun: I thought our job was to pick which we thought was the best / that's what I thought/

By this time, the students had shifted towards the process of "being exposed to" within a pedagogy of "learning by experience"; they had made sense of the activity to be developed in an understanding of what a professional would do.

The critique meant they left the course in confusion.

Problems with general claims that the activity reproduces 'real' professional practice

Critically for the students, as they had shifted into their different scenarios, they had nevertheless been able to sustain their actions with the knowledge...

A Question of Attribution

The way in which I have addressed the question of attribution has an important implication for how we view talk between tutor and student, and between student and advisor, about what is "real" or "realistic." It is important to analyse the functions and the effects of these claims within the classroom, rather than simply joining in to this I mean that it is not helpful for researchers simply to react to the claims of vocational education (that the activities are "real") by counter-claiming that they are not "real". I see this as a potential danger when, for example, Bruner (1990) argues that knowledge and practice are inevitably "fundamentally transformed" by being "re-contextualized" into the classroom, and when, for example, Freudenthal et al. (1994) argue that student writing within professional simulations needs to be seen as a process of bringing professional practices and texts into the classroom, but as types of texts in their own right, quite distinct from the "real" workplace. Being unsure of what is 'real' and 'unreal' themselves, their analyses miss the negotiation of this within the classroom. They miss the ways in which making links to professional practice beyond the classroom involves a process of attributing significance to activities and experience, and learning from them. They miss the way in which the students repeatedly argue that their experience and activity from the "real world" is already a practical perspective, the way in which students identify a highly sterile view of claims that activities in education are "real." And therefore they miss the need for tutors to anticipate and respond to assumptions and talk of what is 'real' as an integral part of developing shared understandings within their classroom.

Implications for researchers

I now summarize what I see as the practical implications of this research for tutors. My concerns is where students are learning the general practices of a profession or discipline from particular examples and experiences provided by the course.

First, we should not assume that the significance of an experience is self-evident. As I have shown in Figures 3.1-8.4, learning from an activity or experience in an context involves working out what aspects of it can be taken as more generally significant, and what should be regarded as more particular. Within vocational education, where an activity or experience inevitably links both to the educational and professional context, the process of learning also involves working out what aspects of it can be taken as offering insight into the profession, and what should be regarded as being a consequence of doing it within the classroom. For example for students to understand a particular activity or experience in the way we intend, we need to make explicit the significance that we attach to it.

Second, we need to be aware that certain professional and science courses with an already scripted view of claims that an activity or an experience is 'real.' They may bring an established practice of thinking...
aspects of an activity and experience as being simply a consequence of it being within the educational context. If the observations of Edwards and Mercer (1985) and others (above) apply more widely, they may have learned from school science sometimes to dismiss their actual data or results, and report what they think "should have happened." If we want students to experience constraints on a professional activity (such as time, resources or accuracy) as a part of their experience of professional practice or science research, then we need to make the status of that experience explicit. We may need to articulate explicitly that this is a part of the intended learning. Conversely, if they need to understand some aspects of the activity or experience as being a consequence of the educational context, then we need to make that clear, too. This does not undermine the way in which other aspects of the activity can nevertheless give important insights into professional practice. After all, the educational context provides an opportunity for developing exactly the kinds of understanding that get missed in "on-the-job" training in the workplace.

Third, as Edwards and Mercer (1985) have argued for science education, within courses where students are learning the practices of a profession from the experience provided by the course, we similarly need to be very wary of dipping into explaining an activity solely in terms of the immediate classroom procedures. This fails to give students the understanding that they need of the rationale for the activity within the profession, and/or within the course. In particular, if students are to report their activity within a professional document, in the voice of a professional, they need an explicit understanding of this activity as a part of professional practice.

Equally, as tutors, we need to be wary of the general claims (common in vocational education) that a whole activity is "real" or "realistic." These simply encourage students to assume that if they have followed "real" practices and a "real" text, then their own text must be acceptable. Instead, we need to develop their understanding of how the task and their text link to particular scenarios and sets of practices within the profession.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to make explicit for students the implications of the professional scenario for the text. This is likely to seem self-evident to the experienced tutor, but is exactly what needs to be learned. If there are new challenges involved in their writing, such as articulating uncertainty, informing a decision, or even using evidence and previous research to produce an argument, then students need some guidance about how this is done. They cannot simply deduce the linguistic form and strategies of a professional text from the task or from the scenario, and they cannot reinsert it from first principles. Without guidance about the new genre, and how it may differ from those in their experience, students may simply reproduce old familiar practices. Without guidance about the ways in which the provided text needs to differ from one scenario to another, they may feel it is acceptable to refer to any "real" professional texts they find in an attempt to use what is available. To go beyond the reproduction of their existing practices, or of available examples, they need to be offered a range of chosen example texts, and they need explicit guidance in seeing what is both common to these, and significantly different. Only then can they begin to understand what is demanded of their writing, and recognize and understand the subtle strategies and wordings that make texts functional in different scenarios.

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- underlines indicates author's emphasis.
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Introduction

Writing in higher education is a challenging task for many students. Such 'literacy acts' or individual constructive acts, are, according to Flower (1994: 11):

...metacognition, written, emergence, and context. They happen at the intersection of diverse goals, values and assumptions, where social roles interact with personal images of one’s self and one’s situation ... (they) are often sites of negotiation where the meaning that emerges may reflect resolution, abiding contradiction, or perhaps just a temporary gap against uncertainty.

To understand learning as a 'site of negotiation' is a useful way of exploring students' experiences of writing in higher education. This is particularly so in South Africa, where many adult learners cross the formal boundary into higher education with relatively poor previous experiences of formal education or schooling. Recent literature highlights the barriers or feelings of 'disempowerment' facing non-traditional mature learners once they have crossed the formal, institutional boundary (Weil 1986; Janes 1993) has been argued that there is often a tension between formal institutional access, and curriculum or epistemological access. While significant, this view neglects an important component of learning, namely the role students play in this process. The quote by Fraser above attests to this, and highlights how complex a process it can be. This chapter sets out to examine these issues from a particular perspective. While many students struggle to cross epistemological boundaries in higher education and we need to be mindful of this, others succeed, often against all odds. In order to understand successful learning, this chapter draws on research exploring the learning and writing experiences of first time non-traditional mature learners. The main question it examines is what the process of constructing a 'successful' learner role entails, and how this

Background and context

At UCT, certificate-based adult education provision has traditionally been non-formal. From the mid-1990s until the end of 1994, the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies offered two year-long non-formal programmes, the Community Adult Education Programme (CAPE) and the Adult Learning in the Workplace Programme (WLP). While there was substantial overlap between the two programmes, there were important distinctions in terms of student groupings. Whereas students on CAEP were predominantly community-based adult educators, Nsoso- or Afrikaans-speaking and predominantly 'black' (used to denote both 'coloured' and 'African' apartheid racial classifications), the students on the WLP were a mixture of 'Cape' people and students and corporate- or industry-based trainers. There was thus a strong representation of white, English- or Afrikaans-speaking students on the WLP courses over the years.

Provision on both these programmes was non-formal, access to the institution being granted on the basis of previous experience. Given that the courses lacked formal accreditation, assessment took on the same non-formal nature, although certificates were awarded to students who had a high attendance record. The aim of such courses was to provide access for the further development of practitioner competence - students thus entered with the role of practitioner firmly in place, and this was built on during the programme. They were provided with an opportunity to reflect on and further develop the skills and experience they already possessed. The notion of the 'critical reflective practitioner' (Schorr 1985, 1987), explored by Elizabeth Hoadley-Maline in Chapter 10 of this volume, guided the thinking behind curriculum design and development and the teaching approaches adopted, allowing us to integrate learning and experience, and to facilitate critical thinking and problem-solving. In this way, increased possibilities for practitioner development and, I would argue, 'successful' learning were put in place. However, with the move to formalise the certificate course, the relationship between roles and learning became more complex.

Skills from non-formal to formal

Incorporating access to higher education as well as problems in the relationship between higher education, national reconstruction and human resource development are currently high on the agenda in South Africa. The African National Congress's (ANC) Education and Training document (ANC 1994), on which the government White Paper (Department of Education 1995) is based, continually links access to the need for redress and equity. Access is thus viewed as providing equal opportunities to those who have found education inaccessible in the past.

Many providers have responded to formalising provision. UCT responded to such calls in 2003 by introducing a new formal Certificate in Adult Education, Training and Development. Many of our students - mature adult educators/trainers - now entered the programme without the formal qualifications or access to many of the programmes that our department had to offer. This qualification, therefore, together with these experiences as practitioners, provided them with formal access to the university. However, while we retained a policy of institutional access on the basis of prior experience, the course now offered formal accreditation, and formal written assessment was introduced. The course thus had a mixed aim: the further development of practitioner competence and the development of academic skills and competencies.

During 1995, while conducting the research reported here, student numbers more than doubled, from the usual 30-55 students per course to over 70. This more also brought a very diverse group of practitioner students on to our course, including both community-based educators and trainers and those located within a corporate or industry setting. The latter grouping included some students who already possessed undergraduate and even postgraduate university qualifications. What interested me, therefore, was to investigate and explore what possible 'missing combinations of connections' (Fairclough 1992a) students might be adapting in the process of learning in order to be successful. I wished to understand these through the students' experiences of learning and writing.

In thinking about writing and assessment on the certificate programme, we see the need for it to serve two parallel purposes. First, given the fact that the course targeted adult education practitioners, there was a need to allow them to draw on that work experience through assessment. This enabled them to become 'critical, reflective practitioners' (Schorr 1987). While writing is by no means the only way in which this can be done, assessment is an important component of formal learning, and we attempted to incorporate assignments tasks which would require a reflection on their own work (see Appendix 1).

Second, we understood, given that many of our learners had no experience of formal higher education, that we needed to allow for them to
this process, she looks at three adult learning domains and the interrela-
tionship between them: the domain of cultural/social context which situates
the circumstances in which individual students learning is taking
place; the learning/teaching domain which is concerned with the texts that
are produced and the ways in which students construct their academic
knowledge through the production of these texts; and the domain of academic
literacy which mediates the relationship between the other two domains. In
consider-
ating
these three domains, Lea argues that we are better able to understand
the different interpretations of text production and the ways in which
these are
shaped in cultural and social contexts.
Within this frame, she highlights two approaches to learning: reformula-
tion and reparation. Reformulation is one whereby students re-
produce course materials, thereby attempting to 'learn the discourse',
while the latter is often an explicit attempt on the part of students to relate
a course to their own wider world. Student learners in higher education, Lea
believes, are thus trying to do two things simultaneously: primarily
producing texts; and trying to construct their knowledge in ways which
make it appropriate for assessment, yet at the same time they are trying to
maintain a sense of their own identity and the validity of other ways of
knowing.
Learning and writing for 'success': the construction of roles

This brings us to the notion of 'role'. It is a useful and important concept
in understanding learning as it can be argued that it is within roles that
meaning is made and negotiated – it is 'meaning-making made active'.
At different people relate differently in the same role, it is the actual
out

put or social construction of a role that relates the individual to society.
Furthermore, within a specific role, there is also space for 'subroles' such as 'best
student' and 'stupid one' – all of these are taken on in order to establish a position
in relation to other members of the group.

Kosner's (1996) study of adult learners in formal higher education settings
highlights the importance of role in interesting ways. Drawing on
an extensive sociological theory of Vijgen and others, she explores adult
learners' patterns of interaction with the higher education context. She
identifies four patterns of interaction: conflict, withdrawal, accommoda-
tion and transformation – all of which look at the kind of learner-teacher
relationship, the kind of learner roles students identify for themselves, as
well as their own perceptions of what higher education learning is about.
Both Lea and Kosner argue that 'other' or 'otherness' approach to
learning and writing. In the words of one student, students exhibit one particular
approach to their learning and writing experiences. I believe we need to
understand that there are often multiple and even contradictory patterns
which emerge in each learner's experiences of learning. Negotiation and

The study

My research involved working with four student women in South Africa: one
of them is a 25-year-old mother, another is a 29-year-old mother, a third
is a 37-year-old, and the fourth is a 25-year-old. The students share many
similarities with other adult learners in South Africa: disrupted or poor
schooling, impoverished backgrounds and broken family. Two are ex-SEC students and two are ECD. In their own ways, they have all
led strikingly different. Two are English language and one is German and
one is Afrikaans. Their ages range from early 30's to '60's with one foot in the
future (as the eldest herself put it).

My data consisted of interviews, informal group discussions, observations
and pieces of assessed student writing. I adopted an ethnographic case
study approach in order to collect 'thick descriptions' of what was happening
with some of my students. While my approach was, obviously, not a full
ethnographic study in the anthropological sense of a 'social and cultural
issues', I developed an approach that allowed me to incorporate culture and context in ways of understanding learning (see Denzin and Lincoln,
1994). I could use two interviews with all four students – one which foregrounded their experiences as students in the class, while the
other foregrounded their lives outside the class as adults, as practitioners
and as learners. During the first interview, I focused my questions on the
two aims of our course and specifically their experiences of writing assign-
ments, working in groups and relationships with others, both learners and
teachers. While my original study involved four students, for the purposes
of this paper I have selected two which highlighted contrasting patterns of
interaction and meaning-making.

I will present each case separately as I believe this better captures the
specifics of each student's personal experiences. I begin with a brief
biographical synopsis for each. Given that I am interested in the different
ways in which students construct roles and how these shape their perceptions and experiences of writing, my analysis will focus more on
their understanding of writing than on their actual writing practices.
Having grown up in Deep River, her family was moved to Malmuir during the height of the Garoupe trials. When I asked her about the effect of political events in her life, she said that while she was not directly involved in political activities, she was made aware of them through her experiences and her family. After leaving school at the end of second grade, getting married and having a child, Yasmine started working in a clothing factory as a machine operator. Nine years later she had her second child and decided she was not going back. I asked her if this was because she wanted to get involved with helping people:

no, not helping people. Helping myself ... I was fed up with being a number on the factory floor.

At the time of the interview she was employed at a youth volunteer centre as a satellite branch organiser but felt that she would like to start an offer where she could work on her own. Yasmine's experience of learning and the ways in which she dealt with the writing demands of the course was tinged with contradictions and turmoil yet ultimately success. Writing played a big part in her helping her to work through much of this conflict: both inside and outside the course.

The ways in which she dealt with the contradictions and turmoil in her learning is that Yasmine's learning experiences was that of conflict (Kansowa 1999) - she also adopted it as a way of challenging her learning (Lea 1999). However, there is an evidence of withdrawal and accommodation (Kansowa 1999) or reformulation (Lea 1999) in her account. Given strong linkages between her personal and learner identity, Yasmine's experience demonstrated a fairly high sense of anxiety and conflict:

I wanted to give up at some stage.

She felt that she was more on the outside, I think, sort of looking in.

This seemed to be a case of the 'eclipse learner', a pattern of engagement Kansowa argues is indicative of the withdrawal pattern. This was clearly evident in her relations with other students, with the lecturer and with her processes of writing. While the role of lecturers was important in her learning, she felt that:

there'll always be this power thing:
Yasmine spoke of the conflict between herself and the 'professionals', other students on the course, on whom she perceived as thinking they were superior to her because of their formal job status. It appeared that some students were in the 'inclusion' and she was outside it. This relates to Thorne's comments about the different ways in which discourses 'rub up against each other'.

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Nomzi: the multiple roles she play

Nomzi, aged 48, is a single mother of three children. She grew up in Cape Town, one of 12 children. She describes her life as very 'in and out', something she is related to her difficult family relations. Her 'in and out' identity also relates to periods spent in both the urban and rural areas, separated from her mother and brought up by her grandmother. She sees this as an important part of her identity experience; she sees herself as both urban and rural - these identities are balanced for her and help her work with people from different communities:

You must be careful how you work with rural women otherwise they won't come to you. You must be flexible.

This issue of 'flexibility' is important for Nomzi and something which she brings into her learning on the course. Nomzi currently works as a sewing trainer for a large non-governmental organisation. While she loves her job and working close to people, it is also very clear that by doing things for her community she should not create dependency:

you should teach her how to make food, not give her food.

For Nomzi, an important issue on the certificate course was being able to reflect critically on what she was learning. This was important for her as she felt that she could transfer what she had learnt back to work and experiences in life. She felt that independence was important - the course presented a place where it was expected of her to:

think, do your own things.

While she enjoyed the diversity in the class, she often felt that group discussions were minimizing. This emphasis on group work, an important

part of the course and strong feature of the discourse of much adult and experiencal learning, was something that was contrary to her preferred learning environment.

When asked if she felt she was coping with the demands of the course, this interviewee was evident:

yes, I think I am into that ... although I might not be, ... I would put myself in writing, group discussion and reading but ... I don't contribute much in class discussion. I contribute only in writing.

Nomzi's processes of meaning-making and negotiation had, therefore, to take place largely outside the social context of group learning and within her own writing. However, it was not all negative for her. While she found talking in groups difficult, she absorbed their ideas and often found an answer to her own question - she learnt to use the group processes to her advantage and overcome a potential barrier to learning. It is in the minimum of recalling her past experiences - work and life more broadly - that learning really had meaning for her and, I would argue, she used this to negotiate success in her own assessed writing.

According to Kansowa (1999), the primary pattern of interaction is that of transformation and this is the most integrated and well complex pattern of engagement. Students engaging in this way are uniquely situated to broaden understandings concerning the nature of higher education and the undergraduate learning process; they speak to a prominent, definite perspective of their own internal value of learning, their involvement across their life work in learning, and their commitment to learning in a broadening of values, perspectives, and beliefs. Elements of this pattern were strongly visible in Nomzi's account. For her, the importance of the relationship between her identity as adult and community worker, on the one hand, and that of learner, on the other, meant that she constantly made reference to the role that the course played in her own practice, as well as the role that her work of practice played in her learning. Nomzi also showed a high degree of critical reflection on herself as a learner and on how learning related to work and life. As a student, she thus had clear expectations of herself. While she valued lecturers as mediators, she also saw herself and her life experience as important in guiding her learning.

The notion of 'self-reflection' was also present when Nomzi spoke of her assessed writing. She acknowledged that such writing was about argument and that:

you don't write something like a story.

You must argue ... you say what you want to say and then you reflect it in the outline and look at it on the other side ... and you must reflect on your everyday life, your own experience.

However, it is also important for Nomzi in her writing to reflect on past experience and to express her opinions.
Appendix 1: Question paper for Assignment 4 of the Certificate Programme

CERTIFICATE IN ADULT EDUCATION, TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

CONTEXTUAL STUDIES (EMS186) ASSIGNMENT 4

PLEASE NOTE:
- This assignment should be between 3 and 5 written A4 pages
- YOU MUST CHOOSE EITHER 4A OR 4B
- DUE DATE: 4.00 pm, TUESDAY, AUGUST 15

ASSIGNMENT 4A

What do you think the RPD would look like if it was successfully implemented in your community or workplace?

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:
In order to complete this assignment successfully, we expect you to:
- show that you have a good understanding of the development needs of your community/workplace
- demonstrate that you have some understanding of the underlying principles of the RPD
- show the ability to interpret these principles in relation to the situation in your own community/workplace
- put forward a clear argument of your view on the meaning of the RDP.

ASSIGNMENT 4B

"The RPD means all things to all people.

Do you agree with the above statement? Make a clear argument, backed up by evidence, as to whether this statement is true or not. In order to answer this assignment, you will need to research the different views, understandings and meanings that people bring to the RPD. You should interview a minimum of 5 people and they should be as diverse as possible (in terms of culture, language, class background, occupation, gender, etc.).

Yamini. However, what emerges clearly is that each of them found ways to take action and exhibit agency in their learning which allowed them to successfully negotiate potential boundaries to acquiring the discourse.

Conclusion

In exploring these two students’ experiences of learning and writing, I have argued that the ways in which learner roles are constructed and the contexts within which learning takes place are crucial to understanding success. Success in turn needs to be understood as a process of boundary negotiation and meaning construction. For Yamini, this was through her writing, finding a way to deal with her personal feelings in ways which did not obstruct her learning on the course; for Nomul, this was being able to reflect critically on both her life and student experience, integrating both. While this is a unique process for different learners, it is at the intersection of the individual and the social and through the construction of learner roles that meaning is made and success attained (McMillan 1997).

However, if we acknowledge that learning context involves specific discourse communities, and that both lifeworld and learning experiences impact on opportunities for success, it is clear that success in one context will not necessarily guarantee success across a range of other learning contexts. A key issue, therefore, for further research is assessment and the role such practices play in shaping learning experiences across contexts, particularly if we are serious about widening opportunities for students to access a range of higher education contexts. We need to be mindful of the ‘signals’ that are given out through curricula and pedagogical practices, particularly through assessment tasks. These are the clues that students use in their attempts to engage with otherwise unfamiliar academic literacy practices. Furthermore, if we wish to make ‘challenge’ and not just ‘reformulation’ approaches (Lee 1998) a reality in higher education, as a way of fostering the development of new voices and identities among our students, our approaches to curriculum and pedagogy need to make explicit opportunities for this. So, too, do our assessment tasks and the ways in which we judge student writing. Neglecting to do this could set students up for failure; or at the very least, feelings of disjuncture (Well 1986) which could lead to disappointment and even possible withdrawal from higher education.

Note

1. DEC and DTE are the abbreviations under which the education departments of the apartheid era were known. DEC was the Department of Education and Culture for ‘coloured’ students, and DTE the Department of Education and Training for ‘African’ and ‘white’ students.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:
In order to complete this assignment successfully, we expect you to:
- show that you understand the significance of the issue or question raised by the above quote
- show that you are able to do some simple research, present your findings clearly, and interpret your findings
- argue your own viewpoint on whether the above statement is correct or not
- make a clear argument as to whether your research findings support your own views on the above statement, and if not, why not.
From Personal Experience to Reflective Practitioner: Academic Literacies and Professional Education
Elizabeth Hoadley-Maidment

Introduction
Professional education is an expanding area of university work. As professions such as nursing, physical and social work, and teaching are restructured, the nature of professional education is changing. Professional education is undergoing a transformation through a combination of traditional academic learning and experiential learning gained in the workplace. Areas of interest include the role of mentors, the relation between competence-based outcomes and academic learning, and examining the ways underlying academic disciplines such as biological or social sciences are presented within courses and professional frameworks.

The role of academic literacies in professional education has not been addressed in the same detail as these broader issues. They are important, however, not simply because of the written nature of much academic education, but more particularly because so much assessment in the university system requires students to write. Some disciplines – for example, medicine – minimize the role of written assessment by using systems based on multiple-choice questions, oral examinations and practicals, but many professional programmes use assessment strategies based on those associated with underlying academic disciplines. The social sciences, for example, are core to a range of professional courses including nursing, teaching, social work and management. Social sciences are traditionally assessed through essays, experimental and project work presented in report form, and in some written examinations. When these disciplines are taught within professional courses which aim to develop professional competence, we must consider the relationship between the types of writing required and the aims and objectives of the course. The question for those teaching professional courses is how to ensure that they are designed in ways which will ensure that students learn to make the links between academic concepts and theories and professional practice.

In this chapter I want to examine the connections between models of professional education and academic literacies, as well as the practical implications of these for teaching and assessment. My interest in this area arose from work I undertook while a doctoral student at the School of Social Policy and Social Work at the Open University. The Open University is a distance-learning institution which has been successful in teaching mainly through written texts. It is involved in the potential contrasts between different discourses in academic learning and literacy, and practice-based models of professional education. Although the issues discussed here arise in the context of distance learning, they apply to the field of professional education in which students are engaged in writing at length and are, I would suggest, particularly pertinent to developments in computer-supported learning (CSL) and open learning where students may have less face-to-face contact with their tutors and more demands make on their use of the written word.

The chapter begins by outlining basic ideas of academic literacy and professional education. I then report on how these issues were perceived by a group of academics working in the area of health and social work. The last section considers the implications of my findings for the teaching of academic literacies within professional education.

Academic discourse, academic literacies and professional education

Linguistic approaches

As a writer, ‘academic discourse’ is problematic. It is widely used, but in differing ways by individual disciplines. Any discussion of academic discourse in discipline communities, each using language in particular ways. There are grammatical and lexical features common to such communities are very widespread geographically. The language of a discourse community consists not simply of technical language in the sense of individual words or jargon, but also of rules for using these in spoken and written forms. In this sense each academic discipline – for example, psychology or sociology – is an individual discourse community. However, academic disciplines also share certain linguistic patterns and forms which serve to identify pieces of writing as ‘academic’ regardless of the subject. Although some of these rules are breaking down, academic English is generally marked by an impersonal style created by the use of abstract nouns, passive verbs and a tendency to avoid the use of pronouns such as ‘I’ or ‘we’ which identify the writer. It is also common for sentences to have grammatically simple form, often to include large numbers of nouns and adjectives whose main function is to make meaning more precise. Sentences are often minimally cohesive, relying on linking words and phrases.

In addition to these grammatical features, academic writing adopts easily recognizable forms. These range from academic papers and books aimed at highly knowledgeable members of the discourse community, to apprentice pieces such as essays written by undergraduates. Pieces of writing which share both forms and linguistic features are described as ‘genres’ by some linguists, with different forms of academic writing, such as essays, projects and reports of different kinds referred to as ‘subgenres’. While students are not expected to have the same grasp of the concepts and theories they are writing about (Biber 1988), student writing is still recognizable as academic writing and is unlikely to be confused with vocational writing which makes sense, in particular, may often be written in order because of their previous professional training and experience.

Accordingly, students are generally expected to learn these things linguistically: the language of the subject or subjects they are studying; the rules and conventions used by individual disciplines; and the more general features of academic writing which make it instantly recognizable. As apprentices, students learn the language of subject they are studying as an integral part of learning its concepts and theories, but they also undergo more general socialization into writing in an academic way. They are frequently expected to learn the general conventions of student writing very quickly on the assumption that they have already begun this process at school. But many students on professional courses may have followed vocational rather than academic paths in leaving school and consequently find it difficult to grasp the importance of conventions such as the organization of essays into introduction, body and conclusion, the use of sections with headings in scientific reports, and the rules followed by different disciplines for citing references and attributing quotations. A good example of this is the frequent complaint from lecturers that students fail to give reference lists. This problem is so common that we must ask why it occurs. It would appear that students fail to pick up the functions of a reference list, not simply as an indication that they have read the subject, but also as an indication that they realize the importance of acknowledging sources and not plagiarizing. In other words, learning to write short references is an acceptable form is one of the ‘professional’ skills of a university education which is independent of the discipline or professional course being studied.
Occupational discourses

Finally, when we look at the situation of students on professional courses, particularly mature students who have already undertaken vocational training, we need to consider how the discourses that students bring to their programme of study. Part-time students generally study only one or two subjects at a time, and the course load is relatively lighter. However, the amount of study is often substantial. The students are often motivated by a desire to achieve professional recognition or to gain qualifications that will enhance their career prospects. The courses are designed to provide a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The assessment methods are varied, including assignments, presentations, and practical demonstrations. The students are encouraged to reflect on their own professional experiences and to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations.

Reflecting on personal experience

In developing a theory of professional education, the caring professions have been strongly influenced by the work of scholars such as Kolb (1984). Kolb’s learning cycle focuses on the acquisition of knowledge and provides a model for educational development. The cycle consists of four stages: concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The cycle is repeated until the learner achieves a satisfactory understanding of the material.

Academic attitudes to writing in professional education

The School of Health and Social Welfare at the Open University has developed a range of courses for professionals in the health and social care fields. The courses are designed to enhance the participants’ understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects of their work. The courses are delivered through a combination of face-to-face sessions and online learning modules. The online modules are designed to be accessible to a wide range of learners, including those who may not have access to traditional learning environments.

The development of an introductory course for first-year undergraduate

In 1995, the Open University and Health and Social Welfare began a pilot project on the development of an introductory course for first-year undergraduate

level. There was a lot of informal discussion among academics as to the links between traditional academic assessment and work-based learning. There was a feeling among academics that students with no previous experience of university study found assignments on the School's existing courses hard, and they had the ability to write 'academically', but it was difficult to ascertain what lecturers meant by this. Therefore, they decided to carry out a small survey among academics about the use of personal experience in the School's existing second- and third-year courses, was particularly interested in those responsible for setting assessment topics and examinations and regarded the development of academic setting and its relationship to the assessment strategy in more practical, practice-related courses. The survey was carried out at the end of the 1995 academic year so that respondents were able to draw on the examinations and projects they had just marked when responding.

At that time the School offered eight second-year courses, each worth 30 Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) points. All the courses had a workload of approximately 6-8 hours a week over a 30-week teaching year, during which students completed four written assignments. The assessment period varied, but most courses aimed for three essays and one longer piece of work (an extended essay or project) which provided an opportunity for students to undertake a small research related to their job, or alternatively to pursue a topic through library research. This longer piece varied in length between 1000 and 4000 words. There were some occasional seminars, which were meant to be little more than introduction to the work, rather than that they were assessed. Assignments were set on the students' personal experience and relate it to the academic concepts and theories taught on the courses, and there was also some confusion over the difference between projects and 'extended' essays.

So it was the responsibility of the overall coordinator of individual courses (the School offered eight at the time) completed a questionnaire, designed to elicit the views of the students' strengths and weaknesses in relation to academic setting. The respondents were people with academic expertise in social sciences and professional expertise in health and social care; some of them described themselves as having expertise in academic literacy although, like the majority of Open University teachers, they had experience of working with mature undergraduates who needed support in this area. They were first asked to rank the competence of students as academic writers on a four-point scale, two indicated that most students needed help and four that some students needed help. Three said that most students were at a low level but were fine by the end of the course. Given that help with setting would be provided by part-time tutors, the respondents were not able to indicate whether this was as a result of help from the tutors or, if so, what form this took.

The lecturers were also asked to rank different types of writing competence in order of importance to their course on a three-point scale from very important to not important. This revealed that academic argument was considered to be the most important form of writing, closely followed by the ability to draw on personal (including work) experience and argument - the latter being seen as either 'very important' or 'important'. In most cases there was an assumption that students understood what was expected when asked to comment on their experience and refer it to argument. Five said that students had particular problems with the reflective project. The weaknesses were given as a failure to understand the need to analyse, together with a lack of understanding of the handling and interpretation of data. The latter is not, strictly speaking, an academic writing skill, but it is a distance-learning course the only way students can indicate that they have learnt research skills is through their written work.

All thought that many of the students were taking the course as their first Open University course and commented on the implications of this. For example:

- we attract people direct from the field. They are often steeped in practice, but unused to academic study and writing.
- the questionnaire provided space for additional comments. Detailed comments were made which showed that many concerns were common ones. Comments such as the following were typical:
  - have difficulty in using personal experience in an appropriate way (in a vehicle to organise course themes and issues, etc.),
  - refer on their experiences, use it to illustrate a point of argument rather than just 'fill the page'.
- the use of personal experience as an exemplar is actually quite a sophisticated process and I don't think that often people can see that the personal experience cited in the course has already been very carefully collected and so we get a lot of streams of consciousness stuff where insights are deeply embedded and not pulled out to support an argument.

In one case, however, those teaching the course had over the years decided that they could not assume students had these skills and had adopted the assessment strategy to take this into account. The difficulty of providing academic socialisation for students in this way was also commented on. One person considered that it was more difficult for students to:
- challenge and innovative in the face of a set of materials as opposed to a person,
and felt that when this was coupled with low levels of experience in presenting arguments, this resided in problems. This respondent was particularly aware of the impact of distance-learning methods on the development of academic literacy and the skills which are associated with 'graduateness'.

Issues raised in the survey

Although the questionnaire was brief and relatively unstructured, the results produced were valuable for the common concerns that they revealed. The importance these academics gave to the development of skills in expressing academic argument reflects the centrality of written academic argument to teaching in the UK university system. In social sciences (and arts and humanities), written academic arguments are regarded as the best way of judging whether a student has understood the concepts and issues of a course and developed higher-order cognitive skills such as analytic and synthetic. At the same time it has been shown that knowledge and argument are differently defined and constructed by different disciplines, and that the relationship between knowledge and argument is largely different, and that the 'new' disciplines in particular such as nursing have been defined as a new discipline (Bowers and Winson 1980). In professional education the emphasis on traditional forms of academic writing, such as the selection of activities designed to increase the interactive nature of study, does not replace the oral practice at using academic discourse which occurs in informal discussions. One teaching issue is therefore how written language is used to provide practice as using academic English and subject-specific discourse.

The challenge is not-based learning of this sort is building up a steady dialogue of reflection with students feedback loops when there are only limited opportunities to use spoken language in the ways described by Mitchell and Shohamy. Because it cannot be assumed that all students will take advantage of the interactive nature of the text (there is evidence that many students skip activities) the only dialogue that is guaranteed is the one between student and tutor. The student's written work. Reflective diaries are useful here because they help students refine their existing professional competence as they make the links between their practice and the theories, concepts and issues contained in the course, within a peer discussion and writing which will be assessed.

Text-based learning must also assume that students are, or will quickly become, confident users of written text. Students who enrol on health and social care courses for work-related reasons often feel they cannot express themselves in writing at the beginning of the course, especially if they have no background of university study. As the results of the importance of the text, they often feel under great pressure to become confident writers quickly. It is not only in order to complete their writing work but also to communicate with tutors and others in writing. In a series of learning sessions, writing to write about personal experience, as opposed to writing it in spoken discussion, becomes a priority. Confidence in writing, especially the use of idiomatic language, makes similar demands.

Additionally, courses frequently ask students to develop higher-order academic competencies while not even explaining the links between these and the professional education and expertise they already have. It is therefore apparent that students need to know at the beginning of the
course what they will be expected to be able to do in written form by the end. This too must influence the assessment strategy. Adopting an approach which develops students’ academic literacy, by building on that they already have, may mean redefining the academic genres in which they are being asked to write early in the course. It also means making sure that students recognize where an academic task such as a project may differ from projects they have done elsewhere. For example, it is not always clear to students how projects differ from essays. Open University students receive assignment booklets containing guidance on completing the written assessments. These often refer to ‘arguments’ while at the same time failing to say explicitly that projects must relate the data collected to the issues and concepts presented in the course. Since many professional students are familiar with descriptive reports and probably write them regularly themselves, they may feel that the only conclusions they have to reach are those drawn from the data themselves. In other words, they approach an academic assignment in the way they would prepare a report for a case conference, without realizing the difference in both discourse and genre.

Another issue which arises in health and social care courses is how students indicate that they have understood the value base of a course. Equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice is central to study in the caring professions. Guidelines are frequently laid down by professional bodies. For example, in the case of the Society for Health and Bond Welfare offered a course, ‘The Disability Sector’, which presented a model of disability expressed through a very specific discourse, based on the politics of equal opportunity. It is easy for students to appear as if they have understood the ideas and concepts being taught because they used the discourse quite confidently in their written work. However, as it was apparent that many of them had understood only at the surface level (Morgan 1993) because when asked to illustrate their answers from their experience they were unable to do so. In other words, the relationship between reflection-ivation and academic understanding was not made.

Practical implications for professional courses

My main concern was initially with distance learning, but I am aware that the rapid growth of open learning and information and communication technology (ICT) means that the issues I identified at the outset are increasingly relevant to all professional university courses. I would particularly draw attention to the following.

There is a need to develop systems for part-time and distance-learning courses which substitute for the kind of communication experienced in a classroom so that students can begin to reform their experience using academic discourse in a less formal way as an assessed assignment. This should begin by being more explicit about the positive value of studying part-time, particularly the opportunity it provides to feed back the academic learning into professional practice on an almost daily basis. Computer conferencing, for example, has potential to serve as a practitioner by providing a ‘protected’ situation in which students communicate with each other and with the issue, learning and practicing the academic discourse. Through the setting of appropriate discussion topics it is possible to provide opportunities for students to relate these to practice in a very immediate way. (See Lee, Chapter 4, for further discussion of the relationship between conferencing and learning.)

It is also important to use written tools for learning rather than conflating the learning and assessment function. Reflective diaries, taping experiences and using questionnaires as frameworks for the analysis of critical incidents can all provide opportunities to practice academic discourse and establish feedback loops between academic concepts and professional practice. Course designers must then consider how the assessment strategy can best evaluate the type of learning, choosing methods of assessment for their ability to link theory and practice, rather than simply using already existing methods which suit institutional systems and regulations.

Finally, there is staff development implications. Tutors on professional courses are generally recruited because they have appropriate academic knowledge and relevant professional experience as well as teaching skills. Few, however, are themselves as language or communications specialists, assuming that students should have learnt such competencies at an earlier stage and often not feeling confident to undertake what is often perceived as remedial teaching. But the increasing emphasis in universities on developing students’ general cognitive skills and the concept of ‘graduateship’ points to a changing role for tutors. This means that tutors must feel confident to teach students how to make the links between practice and academic study. For many years in the United Kingdom there has been a movement concerned with ‘language across the curriculum’. Although roomed in schools, this is equally relevant to university education. While professional education programmes with practice elements are increasingly tackling these issues (Rams and Watson 1992), they must also be addressed in relation to more traditional open and distance-learning courses.

Conclusion

The real challenge for many professional courses, as teaching methods change in response to new technology, is ensuring that the aims and objectives drawn from the professional requirements of the course are amenable within systems designed for academic learning. Courses such as those I have described being together two approaches to learning: ‘traditional’ academic learning of theoretical academic knowledge and ‘reflection-ivation’ wherein the doing informs and is informed by the learning. The first is concerned with developing a range of higher-order cognitive skills such as analysis and synthesis, while the latter focuses on improved performance.
Issues and questions framing the research

The Open University’s MA programme in education is described as follows in the OU’s own prospectus (Open University 1997: 31):

The MA has developed a reputation for being both intellectually challenging and professionally relevant:

- intellectually challenging because you will be asked to address complex issues and come to terms with advanced literature;
- professionally relevant because you will be encouraged continuously to identify the significance of your study for your everyday work and concerns.

This description neatly encapsulates the two traditions, or ‘orders of discourse’ (Foucault 1972; Eличitch 1989), which I would argue are the MA programme — and indeed many MA programmes in education — attempts to incorporate. The first of these places particular value on the traditional intellectual competences of ‘the academic’, at least in the humanities and social sciences: the construction of a coherent, argumentative appropriate use of evidence and argument, and a clear, explicit description of work done; and so on. The latter places particular value on aspects of professional development typically associated with helping the student to effect upon one’s practice, and upon the implications of that reflection for shaping practice the ability to demonstrate the professional relevance of one’s learning, and the need to link the results of study to professional competence and practical outcomes. Whether, and how, these competing discourses can ultimately be reconciled within a single programme of study was one of the main issues in the research. A key assumption underlying the research was that it is within the ‘literary practices’ associated with these courses – and especially in the writing requirements — that these two orders of discourse are most acutely foregrounded.

Most teachers studying within a MA programme are doing so (at least in part) for professional reasons. Moreover, the courses are at least in part about their professional work. Consequently teachers approach the courses – not unexpectedly – with the expectation that their professional experience will provide them with many of the resources needed in order to produce assignments and thereby successfully fulfill assessment requirements. One of the starting points for the research was an observation that many teachers studying within the MA programme experienced considerable confusion over the expectations they were attempting to meet, with respect to writing, sometimes leading to fraught conflicts with their tutors. The research project, despite this fact that the Open University course materials are generally considered to be exceptional in the extent to which they make such expectations explicit. I suspected that this confusion was a part of a confliction of professional discourses and academic discourses in the way writing tasks were described, coupled with a lack of explicitness about the way in which students are expected to negotiate these ways of using language.

Starting points and frames for analysis

The research project represented an attempt to apply some of the theoretical ideas and practical insights arising from recent research into aspects of academic literacy, which has concentrated mainly on undergraduate teaching within traditional academic disciplines, to the comparatively understudied area of professionally oriented teaching at postgraduate level. The project also sought to apply some of the ideas, emerging from research into the nature of professional training and knowledge, to the specific context of writing – an aspect that tends to be overlooked in such research.

With respect to the field of academic literacy, the project is located within, and seeks to make a contribution to, a growing area of research into aspects of academic writing in higher education based on a ‘critical’ perspective on discourse and literary practices, or what Lea and Street (Chapter 2 of this volume) call an ‘academic literacies’ model. Within this perspective, academic writing is conceptualized as a set of social practices embedded in networks of culture and power, rather than viewing academic writing as a transparent medium for representing knowledge, or as a set of rules to which students need to accommodate, this perspective views academic institutions as sites of power, and academic writing as a point where power is exercised and contested. This perspective problematizes these practices, and recognizes that students’ so-called failures in academic writing may be explained by, for example, their struggle to reconcile their own identities, and purposes for writing, with the authority and control of the institution (Bazin 1998). Such a perspective has provided a helpful explanatory framework for research into the academic writing carried out by schoolteachers within master’s level courses in education, for reasons which will be discussed at the end of this chapter. For a more detailed elaboration of this perspective on academic literacy, I shall refer to the editors’ introduction to this volume.

Another field of research and scholarship is pertinent to this investigation, and that is the area of ‘professional knowledge’, or ‘expert knowledge’ – and teachers’ professional knowledge in particular. A lot of work has been done in this area, which is essentially concerned with the relationship between training, conceptual understanding and professional practice (Schön 1983; 1987; Kolb 1984; and Erzen 1994). It is from this body of work that such widely used terms as ‘reflective practice’ and ‘growth orientation’ that the research examines the ways in which professional knowledge is encoded in language (Ginsman et al. 1997), but apparently none has examined the modes of written language which have become associated with professional training. My starting point is that it is in the language practices, within an area of activity such as teachers’ professional development, that the struggles over what constitutes important professional knowledge for teachers are the privileged arena through which teachers will develop their own understanding of their practice and identity and the demands placed upon them. Herein, the present research has drawn from this area of work as its theoretical framework has evolved. The project can be seen as a contribution to this area of research, in the way in which professional knowledge constitutes, and is constituted in, specialized forms of language.

The other starting point for this research is that this is a form of ‘practitioner research’ for me. Most of my own professional practice over the past ten years has been located within the OU’s MA in Education programme. In professional terms, I was trying to gain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding academic writing for MA students in my own institution, in order to improve both the advice we give to students and the professional development we offer to tutors.

The Open University MA in education

At any one time there are about 4000 students in the OU’s MA in Education programme in the UK, Ireland and continental western Europe. They are distance learners, working in comparative isolation with multimedia material, and submitting written assignments to a tutor, where they are at fairly infrequent (optional) group tutorials. The programme is modular; students typically choose any three modules in order to complete their degrees. In 1995 there were 18 modules in the programme (see Table 11.1). Each module differs in the way it organizes its materials, and in the way students...

### Table 11.1 Modules in the Open University’s MA in Education programme, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Module Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E425</td>
<td>Language and literacy in social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E103</td>
<td>Curriculum, learning and assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E120</td>
<td>Child development in social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E293</td>
<td>Gender issues in education: equality and difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E294</td>
<td>Adult learners and curriculum development in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E200</td>
<td>Primary education: the basic curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E300</td>
<td>Early education: assessing and planning learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E312</td>
<td>Science education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E311</td>
<td>Technology education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E375</td>
<td>Mathematics classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E376</td>
<td>Adult learners and learning to teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E117</td>
<td>Education, training and employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E392</td>
<td>Manning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E393</td>
<td>Educational management in action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E394</td>
<td>Understanding school management and administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E395</td>
<td>Effective leadership and management in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E396</td>
<td>Action research: the methods of action research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E397</td>
<td>Educational research in action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

 progress is assessed. Some modules require students to carry out practical activities in schools; some place greater weight upon students’ understanding and analysis of issues and concepts discussed in the course materials. Some require students to take a formal final examination, and all of them contain some element of research.

An analysis of specifications for written assignments

Most of the chapter reports on the results of one of the main strands in the research project – that being an analysis of the specifications for written assignments in the OU’s MA in Education programme. This involved a careful analysis of each assignment booklet for the 18 modules in the programme in 1995. Each assignment booklets are key documents, since they contain detailed specifications for each assignment a student is required to submit. The assignment specifications sometimes include general advice on writing assignments for the module, as well as guidance notes on each question which aim to help the student (and indeed the tutor) to understand what they assignment expects them to do. The specifications are standard for every student taking the course, no matter where in the world they live; the role of the tutor is therefore to interpret and mediate these requirements rather than to set questions themselves.

### Inventory of types of writing across the programme

One element of my research involved compiling an inventory of the types of writing required across the MA programme by analysing the way each assignment on each module was represented in the assignment booklets. This required an analysis of over 100 specifications for written assignments across the programme. The analysis revealed that, regardless of the three modules a student chooses to study, they will be expected to produce a very wide range of types of writing. Table 11.2 provides a list of these types of writing across the different modules, required for written assignments across the 18 modules in the programme. These are very superficial analyses of the diversity of types of writing students are required to carry out within the programme. Nevertheless, from this it is clear that an individual student’s programme across these three modules could require them to produce as many as a dozen different types of writing. The meaning of these labels, like ‘essay’ or ‘project report’, varies from module to module, and even within individual modules, even when the same generic label is used. So it is only really by looking at individual assignment specifications that the meaning of these labels becomes clear. Nevertheless, with such an array of writing types across the programme – with some students only encountering certain genre categories once or twice...
Text analysis of individual assignment specifications

Following the ‘inventory’ of the assignment specifications, a text analysis was carried out on the wording of each assignment question in the assignment booklets for the 18 modules in the programme, as well as any guidance notes produced by course teams designed to help students ‘unpack’ the question. After a preliminary analysis of these texts, four categories of text features were identified as significant:

1. Any explicit explanation of the expectations the student is expected to use.
2. Ways in which students’ professional work as teachers is referred to, and ways in which students are advised to refer to their own professional work.
3. Ways in which the questions appear to ‘position’ students with respect to ideas in the course.
4. Uses of imperative.

Explicit explanations of the expectations the student is expected to use. The analysis revealed that most advice on writing was concerned with structure (for example, suggestions on how to sequence elements of the text) and coverage (which readings should be drawn upon in answering the question) rather than on appropriate forms and uses of language for the piece of writing in question. With one or two exceptions no attempt was made to describe and account for the course team’s notion of ‘good writing’ – let alone to problematise it. A small number of exceptions to this pattern were found. For example, the Child Development team attempted to define its expectations in the following way:

Assignments 01, 02 and 05 are conventional essay questions.

Not being simply descriptive or prescriptive. This is an MA course, which demands critical analysis as well as a display of understanding of the course material. A writing of summaries of relevant bits of the Study Guide and readings is not acceptable.

Although the meanings of the key terms in this passage (‘descriptive’, ‘prescriptive’, ‘critical’, ‘analysis’) are not defined or illustrated, this is one of the very few attempts made by a course team to make explicit the expectations students should meet.

On another issue, that of whether to use the ‘first person’ voice in assignments, the Child Development team explicitly favours a more detached writing style:

Write impersonally as far as possible avoid first person pronouns.

The Adult Learning team adopts a contrasting position:

It is quite acceptable to write in the first person, but you should avoid personalised anecdotes, and will be penalised for rambling or unclear passages.

It should be emphasized that, while the contrast between these two pieces of advice may be noteworthy, they are the only two instances across the 18 modules where the question of ‘voice’ is explicitly considered at all.

Finally, with only one exception there was no acknowledgement of the differences between course teams in what they expect in this respect. The Educational Management team offers this advice to students about the important differences between the writing style expected for ‘management reports’ and the kinds of academic writing students may have been required to produce on other courses:

It is important to understand that the E888 assignments are reports on management rather than academic essays. We have found from past experience that some students do not achieve as high a grade as they might have, had they appreciated the difference between these two types of writing. When writing on academic essays, students are sometimes tempted to display their erudition by splicing together numerous quotations from academic authors and using a lot of academic jargon. This style presents the writer from developing and communicating his or her own ideas in a clear and logical structure. It is not suited to the intended audience for a management report, and should be avoided. It should be noted in passing that this advice could be accused of lampooning to some extent the expectations conventionally associated with academic essay writing. The sarcastic tone adopted when describing the way students are ‘sometimes tempted to display their erudition’ is not a description that would be universally recognized as one of ‘best practice’, even for academic essays. Moreover, there is an assumption that achieving clarity and logic is merely a matter of avoiding an over-dependence on quotations and the use of academic jargon, and that students will have been helped to understand what is expected of them by being told what is not expected of them. This point notwithstanding, the passage is significant for the purposes of this analysis, in the sense that it represents the only attempt in any of the 18 assignment booklets to recognize explicitly the fact that students may be approaching the course with a set of assumptions about academic writing that differ from the expectations for E888, based on their previous experience of study, and to point out some of the differences between management reports and academic essays.

Ways in which students’ professional work as teachers is referred to, and ways in which students are advised to refer to their own professional work.
experience when answering the question or completing the task assigned. This is a necessary indication of how students should or should not identify the implications of their argument or analysis for their own professional work. Analyzing instances of this feature was seen as one way of examining the way in which professional and academic traditions are played through in the requirements for writing. This feature of the language was examined in order to see how different course teams handled the tension between these two traditions.

Analysis of this feature of assignment questions revealed wide variations between modules (and to some extent within modules) in the way students are expected to represent their professional work when setting assignments. In some modules (notably Education, Training, and Employability, ‘Child Development’, ‘Language and Literacy’, and ‘Gender Issues in Education’) students are expected to keep to a minimum any discussion of professional circumstances, or of the professional development achieved as a result of study – though no advice is given on how to construct this linguistically. The examples of essay-style questions given in Table 11.5 provide an indication of the way students’ professional work is referred to (if at all) in these modules. There is clearly an expectation underlying these assignments that students are expected to write in a professional style rather than to document their professional experience as teachers in order to attempt, and succeed at, the writing task. Indeed, for most modules in this category there is an implication that students would be penalized if they include more than a passing reference to their professional work when constructing their assignments.

In steps 1-4 you are asked to provide a critical review of the mentoring programme you have been involved in from the perspective of the institution, the mentors, and yourself, and from your own professional development. In step 5 you are asked to examine the concept of the ‘mentoring school’, explain the potential for mentoring in other staff development processes within your institution.

You are required to locate an appropriate discussion within the wider educational debates on mentoring by referring to the research and literature in the field, such as are indicated in the Study Guide. In addition, you are encouraged to provide evidence of your own assimilation, experience in support of your conclusions.

 leasing students understandably uncertain about their personal position in relation to issues in the course. A further assumption was that assignments which demanded detachment were located in a more ‘academic’ tradition, and the assignments which demanded involvement were located in a more ‘professional’ tradition. Findlay (1988; 1990) explores for describing and analyzing discourse was used in order to identify key features which encoded these ideas, such as normalization (that is, using noun forms rather than more active verb forms, denote objectification and detachment), modality (that is, the degree of tentativeness or certainty expressed in a proposition, voice, tense or past tense) and agency (that is, how clearly the person being referred to is identified).

Here, too, there were wide variations between modules (and to some extent within modules) in the way students are expected to position themselves vis-à-vis the topic in the course. Perhaps predictably, there was a close correspondence between the way module titles in the ‘academic-professional’ distinction above, and the way they are divided in the ‘detachment-involvement’ distinction here. The same modules identified in the preceding section, which expected students to keep to a minimum any discussion of professional development achievement, were a result of study, showed significantly more usage of normalization, passive voice, indirect address to the student (that is, no attempt to indicate subjectivity or agency) and (possibly surprisingly) enormous forms of modality (‘perhaps’, ‘might’). However, the modules identified in the preceding section, which expected students to make viable the professional knowledge they have achieved through their study of the course, used fewer normalizations, more active voice, more explicit agency in the way the student is addressed (‘you’, ‘your’) and more assertive forms of modality (‘you should’) (please refer to the examples provided in the preceding section for illustrations of these points). Although this result may suggest that the two categories of analysis could be correlated in future analyses, it is nevertheless noteworthy that there should be a close correspondence between the way course teams refer to students’ professional work and the way students are positioned, within specifications for written assignments, with respect to ideas in the course.

U.S. constraints were the way instructions were expressed by course teams – these being indications of the way in which the assignment task is perceived. At issue here was whether assignment booklets made use of imperative forms (they did) or indicative forms (they did not), but the specific kinds of imperatives adopted. Table 11.4 gives a selection from the 36 different imperative forms found in the 19 assignment booklets. These kinds of instructions will typically appear either within the main rubric of the assignment question, or within subquestions or notes accompanying the question. No pattern could be found in the way these imperatives were distributed across the modules, although the more formally ‘professional’ modules showed a slight tendency to use a wider range of imperatives than the ‘academic’
teachers are expected to demonstrate by means of these highly stylized writing forms. The rebuff of course tries to make explicit the kinds of professional knowledge they aim to promote through written assignments suggests that these students have either not given adequate consideration to this question, or have not developed a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of the kinds of professional knowledge they aim to promote through written assignments. Many of the privileged genres of writing in the programme have been externally imposed — possibly without conscious deliberation — from traditional academic disciplines such as sociology and psychology, and may therefore not be appropriate for promoting the professional knowledge that is (implicitly) sustained within these courses. These findings are illuminated by data from the interviews with students: most of whom placed paramount importance upon the practical and professional dimensions of their MA studies, rather than upon their ability to engage with academic debates or to handle theoretical concepts perspicuously in their writing. In this sense, the predominance of imperious and traditional academic writing genres within a number of modules accounts for their sense of uncertainty and frustration — especially since the relevance of such genres in relation to their professional aspirations is so rarely articulated within course materials. The analysis also revealed extreme variation within and between modules, in the styles of writing required, in the kind of advice given to students, and in the student’s professional experience and expertise, and in the way students were positioned with respect to ideas in the course. These findings help to explain why, through the interview strand of the research, it became clear that the most successful students started from scratch, in an attempt to puzzle out the ground rules for academic writing, each time they moved to a new module. Less successful students tried to apply the approaches they developed in one module to subsequent modules. Students had little sense of cumulative ‘progress’ in their development as academic writers, except on a very general level of ‘confidence’ and ‘practice’. The findings from the analysis of tutors’ written feedback on students’ assignments also reinforced much of the insight emerging from the analysis of the assignment booklet. That analysis revealed how constructively tutors use their feedback to try to induct their students into a way of using language, which is considered by tutors not only to be unfamiliar to students but also to be an essential part of learning within their field of study. This process mirrors the function performed by specifications for written assignments, which appear to call for genres of academic writing imported from traditional academic disciplines such as sociology and psychology, rather than genres of writing which have been deliberately adopted, or developed, in order to support the formation of professional knowledge deemed by course teams, and indeed by students, as important. At the same time, taken together these results suggest that the writing assigned to teachers as part of their MA studies constitutes significantly to the way the programme positions MA students as novice. This does not live easily with the professional experiences these students bring to the process of study, or with the professional purposes many of them have for studying. They are, almost without exception, experienced professionals, studying for largely professional reasons. They fully expect to be somewhat disillusioned when they start. They struggle to identify, and learn how to use, specialized professional forms in order to succeed in what for many of them is a new field of activity. This in itself does not surprise them, though they may not articulate it this way, that is they sign up for the MA for professional reasons, and suddenly find that they are positioned in a novice audience rather than in, say, novice inductees. Much of the language used in the assignment booklet, and the feedback students receive from tutors on assignments, is framed in terms of inducing students into a specialized community of academic discourse. At best the rhetorical message is: here is how to be a sociologist, or an applied critical linguist, or a psychologist, or a management theorist. The assumption is nearly, but not quite, that these students aspire to be professional academics like members of the course teams and like their own tutors, rather than better informed or more effective professional colleagues. Viewed in this way, the problem can be recast as one of competing conceptions of ‘the novice’, rather than one of competing orders of discourse — which are ultimately linguistic manifestations of this more fundamental tension. Teachers have already gone through a process of induction into a new community of discourse once before in their career. This involves, that is the professional culture with which they identify, and it is from the perspective of experienced teachers to study for an MA. They do not embark on their MA studies as the first step in a career change from professional teachers to professional academics, and yet many of the literacy practices in these programmes seem to be predicated on an assumption that they are doing just that. In this sense, the academic-professional divide is inappropriately: both orders of discourse are professional. The issue, therefore, is one of two professional cultures clashing: the professional culture of schoolteaching and the (higher-salaried) professional culture of the academy. Whereas schoolteachers embark on their studies in order to enhance their effectiveness and/or status within the professional culture of schoolteaching, the discursive practices of the academy position them as novice academics. Part of the explanation for this must lie in the way that institutions of higher education use language to legitimate and legitimate the epistemological status of their staff, i.e., an ideology which positions students of any type as relatively powerless (Booth and Fiske, 1998). This indeed the problem of how to bring to their studies, and indeed the discourse and knowledge that schoolteachers manage to construct for themselves as professionals as a result of their studies, are often sanctioned by the institution when they can easily be realized in the language of the novice academic. I would speculate that the literacy practices that have grown up around the study of education originated in contexts where people studying education appeared to have a ‘metalinguage for discussing vital aspects of academic writing. Terms such as ‘argument’, ‘critical’ and ‘analysis’, which were often used in course materials and by their tutors in feedback, were still largely mysterious to them. This problem might be especially acute for those students who do not bring with them to their study of these courses the particular forms of cultural capital that enable other students quickly to identify the discursive ground rules governing within their courses, and in turn produce forms of writing which sustain these already established ground rules. Nevertheless, it is an enterprise with which all students on such programmes could produce powerful forms of writing. The second implication for practice is the need for a robust and self-conscious debate among academics about the most appropriate forms of writing for helping teachers to develop professional knowledge within master level programmes in education. This debate should begin with a comprehensive examination of the kinds of professional knowledge which such programmes ought to foster, rather than with the forms of writing conventionally associated with the kinds of professional knowledge which such programmes have evolved. We need to think more imaginatively, in order to offer genres of academic writing to MA students which provide support for professional learning, and to problematize the assumptions about academic writing which underpin our advice to students and our work with fellow tutors. Implications for theory Although the analysis is still at an early stage, the project has already been able to provide significant theoretical understanding of academic literacy practices, introduced at the beginning of this chapter (and more fully in the Editors’ Introduction to this volume), and at the same time contributed in a small way to the further elaboration of a more pluralistic and culturally sensitive perspective on the study of writing in higher education. The considerable range of genres of academic writing which confront MA students in the course of their studies, and the variety of ways students are expected to write, are both implicit in the study of developing professional knowledge, demonstrate that this is a fruitful explanatory framework for research of this kind. Implications for practice At this stage of the research, two main implications for practice are suggested by the analysis. The first is the need for a more explicit and systematic approach for helping students to identify and to critique the kinds of expectations they are expected to fulfill in relation to written assignments. The analysis of specifications for written assignments in this chapter demonstrates the need for some overarching framework and language to help students to understand the kinds of writing expected of them within MA modules. An adaptation of Fitchett’s (1995) approach to critical language study might provide students with the tools to interpret the assumptions underlying the written assignments, and to gain a greater understanding of the subject positions such specifications create for them. Evidence from the interviews with students reinforced this finding: none of the students interviewed.
The Society for Research into Higher Education

The Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) exists to stimulate and coordinate research into all aspects of higher education. It aims to improve the quality of higher education through the encouragement of debate and publication on issues of policy, on the organization and management of higher education institutions, and on the curriculum, teaching and learning methods. The society is entirely independent and receives no subsidies, although individual events often receive sponsorship from business or industry. The society is financed through corporate and individual subscriptions and has members from many parts of the world.

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