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STUDENT WRITING AND ACADEMIC  
LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION: AN  
INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDY

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PhD

2009

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the School of Arts  
and Social Sciences

January 2009

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to determine how student writing and academic literacy are experienced and perceived in a university by academic staff and students and how pedagogical interactions are influenced by institutional discourses and practices. The research is a form of institutional case study realised through a qualitative, ethnographic-style inquiry. The methodology comprised semi-structured interviews with forty-eight academic staff from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and thirty-five student respondents from diverse areas of study, and discourse-based analyses of textual materials at both the institutional and departmental levels.

The findings of the present research revealed that there is variation in the way academic staff perceive the nature and the learning of student academic literacy and their understanding of the practices which support that learning in a university. Students face significant challenges in adapting to variable expectations and managing the requirements of writing and assessment in the contemporary context. The research also revealed that there are structural aspects of higher education practice which appear to have adverse effects on the learning and development of student academic literacy and the capabilities of academic teaching staff to actively support and foster student learning in that domain. There are implications for the role of writing in learning and teaching and its position in the curriculum. It is argued that a more explicit approach should be taken to student academic literacy by embedding it in disciplinary teaching and learning. A number of ways, based on the evidence of this research, are suggested to advance pedagogical research and develop appropriate practice to that end. The findings are linked to wider debates about teaching, learning and educational reform in higher education.

The thesis concludes by comparing and contrasting two disparate research paradigms for investigating the higher education experience. A new paradigm is conceptualised which draws on existing models theoretically and empirically but adds dimensions which address the exigencies of research in the contemporary context of higher education. It is argued that this reframing has the potential to raise and enhance the profile of pedagogical and student writing research consonant with current higher education policy aims and ambitions.



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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mark Garner for supervising this endeavour from its beginning to its completion. A part-time PhD is a long work in progress and personal and professional circumstances may change. Mark's interest in the research was invaluable in helping me to see it through. I would also like to thank Liz McDowell in the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for her useful supervision support in the later stages. Thanks also to the Study Skills Centres for their very important help with the field work. I have a gratitude to all university staff and all the students who good naturedly supported this research and gave up their time to participate in it. It was a very interesting experience meeting and talking to all of you. Thanks also to the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Northumbria University for making an ambition a reality.

## Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work.

Name: Richard Bailey

Signature: R Bailey

Date: January, 2009



# **Chapter One**

## **Background to the research**

### **1.0 The changing context of higher education: new agendas and new challenges**

Current education policy in the UK is requiring higher education institutions (HEIs) to broaden access and inclusion to a greater range of students in order to augment the participation rate. Policy is driven by the dual agendas of increasing economic competitiveness on the national and world economic stage and promoting greater social equality by extending access to students from under-represented groups. In addition, the importance attached to the ‘knowledge economy’ and to ‘lifelong learning’ is encouraging more mature-age, working students to return to formal education to enhance their professional knowledge. This type of participation is projected to increase well into the next decade. There has been a precipitate increase in participation rates of, hitherto, ‘non-traditional’ students. The agenda to internationalise higher education is also contributing to the heterogeneity of the student body.

Higher education (HE) has moved from an ‘elite’ (a low or restricted participation rate from a narrower social base) to a ‘mass’ system with consequences for its structures, practices and curricula. The Dearing Report (Higher Education and the Learning Society, 1997) emphasised the importance of skills acquisition across higher education programmes. In turn, this has altered the way HEIs describe, promote and teach their courses. It is particularly the case in the ‘new’ universities (the former polytechnics) where provision in professional and vocational study is broadest. There is concomitant emphasis on generic and transferable skills, particularly in applied and vocational fields and a concern with graduate ‘employability’ and how this may be defined and fashioned in concrete terms.

Connected with these changes in access has been a demand for greater accountability in terms of provision, practices and outcomes within higher education. The teaching and learning environment in general has been subject to greater systematisation and audit in order to ‘modernise’ and render it more ‘transparent’ and ‘accountable’ to those both within and outside HE. This is manifest in the

measurement and quantification of information about the sector in the form of performance indicators and tables which are regularly and publicly available. Furthermore, the introduction of fees and the reduction of grants and bursaries for students have created a market economy. HEIs have to be sensitive to demand and to attracting students by the quality of their 'products'. Provision has expanded and curricula are required to be responsive and adaptable. Higher education learning has become commodified to facilitate flexible patterns of participation and study. Students are customers and consumers and increasingly perceived to be instrumental in motives, choices and attitude. This raises questions about student learning, commitment and engagement.

In attracting, welcoming and accommodating greater numbers of students there has been a move to more adaptable curricula: more interdisciplinary courses, modularity and flexibility in course structures and progression with greater diversity in assessment methods. A result of these far-ranging changes in HE is that universities are having to actively implement systems and approaches in teaching and learning environments; for example by means of electronic platforms and applications for course delivery, teaching and learning support. New discipline areas have grown in applied and vocational education. In general these areas are given to disciplinary hybridisation. They are also focused on the formation of professions and are "practice-based " (Baynham, 2000). It is in these areas where widening participation is most discernibly taking place.

There is a concomitant tendency, both in the public domain and within higher education itself, to view widening access and the increased participation of students from a broader social and occupational base as potentially problematic. There is concern over maintaining and safeguarding traditional 'standards' from within and accountability from without (e.g. the requirements of employers). These concerns are associated with debates around falling standards of literacy in education more generally that have percolated up from the compulsory sector. Learning has to be made tangible and specifiable. This influences how issues around student writing and literacy are conceptualised and framed discursively. The situation, therefore, is one of increasing complexity and this is particularly the case with regard to issues concerning assessment and student writing. There is a greater need for research into the question of what constitutes student academic literacy, how it is understood and represented in the discourses and practices of the institution and enacted in

interactions between teachers, students and the institution. These are the concerns which have motivated this research project.

## **2.0 Why research student writing and what is student academic literacy?**

Student writing is more than simply the demonstration of knowledge. Students also need to be 'academically literate'. This is a more encompassing term. After entering their subject areas students will continually need to adapt to new ways of understanding, interpreting and representing knowledge. They are required to extend their knowledge in their areas of study through the processes of reading and writing. They have to assimilate a variety of practices within different discipline areas as well as master ways in which knowledge may be acceptably represented. It is the situated and varied nature of these 'practices' that exist across and within disciplines and departments that are often a source of problems for students as learners and apprentice writers. Success in the academy, in other words, depends on students being able to negotiate and manage a variety of literacy practices (Street, 1984) and engage with the complex demands and varied expectations of location and context. In addition, literacy practices in the academy may cause conflicts for many students at the level of identity – who they are and who they want to be, and power – who they are allowed to be and rewarded for being. This can be an issue for certain students – mature-age, those returning to education from work and students who are broadly categorised as 'non-traditional' in general (Lea, 1994; Lillis, 1997; Ivanič, 1998; Reid, Francis and Robson, 2001).

Student writing is an emerging and developing area of research activity and one which has important implications for teaching and student learning in today's higher education. Yet although student writing and academic literacy development is integral to learning in the university and student academic success, it goes largely unrecognised in discussions around teaching, learning and curriculum development.

It is characteristic of UK universities... that they do not have well developed ways of thinking and talking about writing, what its possibilities are and what role it might play in the learning of their students... *When students do not do well the refrain is that they 'can't write', not that they are struggling with learning.* When

students write well, on the other hand, their writing becomes a transparent conduit to the meanings they have grasped... writing, as an object of discussion, tends to either appear – when it is bad – or to disappear- when it is good. *In each case, the result is to enable subject specialists to disconnect the ‘problems’ of student writing from their responsibilities as disciplinary teachers...* If any action is to be taken to help students with their writing, it is by someone else, generally a language or study skills specialist, who rarely has matching disciplinary background (Mitchell and Evinson, 2006: 68) (Italics added for emphasis)

Discussion and debate surrounding student writing and academic literacy support is predicated on a deficit model of the higher education student. ‘Support’ is focused on remediation rather than development in the learner. Teaching and learning of student academic writing are separated from the development of learning in mainstream study and in isolation from academic departments. There is a pressing need for research that explores ways in which writing and learning can be better integrated in order to inform on-going debates about teaching, learning and higher education reform.

### **3.0 Adjusting the research paradigm**

In the British HE context research into student learning has been driven by the fields of educational and cognitive psychology (e.g. Richardson, et al, 1987). A particular focus within the higher education context has been on differences *between* individuals in terms of underlying cognitive function and development and change *within* individuals over the course of time in order to identify the characteristics of successful students. There is an emphasis on the subjective aspects of student learning, for example how a given phenomenon is experienced and conceptualised. Marton and Säljö (1976) distinguished two types of learning which has become one of the major paradigms for such research. They distinguish “surface-level processing” and “deep-level processing”. The former denotes a pragmatic approach to learning reflecting mainly instrumental motivation and a preoccupation with the reproduction of knowledge for assessment. In contrast deep-level processing is characterised by a desire for greater engagement at the affective level. Later researchers produced a third dimension, one that seems to straddle a fine line between engagement and instrumentalism: ‘strategic learning’.

The strategic approach involves the intention to maximise grades, partly by systematic management of time, effort, and study conditions but also of the manipulation of the assessment system to the student's own advantage (Entwistle, 1987: 17).

These abstract notions have had immense influence on ideas about the nature of student learning in general, student intentions, their success and about ways to foster and induce deeper learning and levels of student engagement. It is the corner stone for wider research where the focus is on 'approaches to' (Marton, et al, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) and 'awareness' of learning (Marton and Booth, 1997): "the perception of the situation, rather than the context itself" (Entwistle, 1987: 20). The emphasis in research has been, and continues to be, on analysing and quantifying student perceptions, responses and strategies with a view to constructively enhancing university teaching-learning environments. The approach was applied to researching student writing with a particular focus on the traditional essay (e.g. Norton, 1990). Within this research paradigm the academy is regarded as a homogeneous entity and its norms and values are givens. Students are meant to enter HE with the capacity to adjust to, and assimilate its value system.

The dominant paradigm is now being contested. Haggis (2004) warns against stereotyping students on the basis of research generalisations and calls for critical review of some of the assumptions embedded in the discursive and curricula practices of university teaching. Haggis (2003: 99) draws attention to the lack of critique in the pedagogical literature of higher education in relation to the use of ideas surrounding deep and surface approaches and points out that

while such a model may be successful in creating a generalised description of the elite goals and values of academic culture it says surprisingly little about the majority of students in a mass system

The 'model' is consolidated as normative by policy and funding for higher education research which rewards and promotes this kind of theorising. Haggis proposes an alternative view:

A slightly different way of viewing the model could be as an articulation of the aims and values of higher education, which in turn reflect the value positions of wider class and social structures... In a mass system, however, which has to accommodate a much wider range of students, there is a need for

investigation of, and explicitness about, aims and processes that have in the past been assumed as given.

Haggis argues that whilst the model makes explicit the attributes valued by academic staff it assumes that students are already able to perform in accordance with certain assumptions about what is desirable. If this is not the case then there are environmental factors under the control of the institution which can 'mould' students in this direction. There is a widespread expectation in the academy that the ideal student is capable of attaining the goals within the early stages of study. Haggis claims, however, that in the mass system even for the best students the experience of trying to reach the central goals of the model is one of "struggle, challenge and difficulty" and adds that the traditional paradigm and its implicit values "make more sense to higher education's gate-keepers than they do to many of its new students".

#### **4.0 An academic literacies approach**

An alternative paradigm is the academic literacies approach (Lea, 1994; Street and Lea, 1997, Lea and Street, 1998; Lea and Stierer, 2000) which foregrounds contradictions and inconsistencies in current practice around teaching and learning. Student writing is considered in the institutional, disciplinary and social contexts in which it is produced. Problems students have with writing, and therefore learning, are considered at the level of epistemology, disciplinary practices and discourses rather than as deficits requiring the provision of various kinds of remedial support. Instead it is suggested that academic staff, when faced with different student expectations about appropriate writing practices need to consider how knowledge is constructed in their own fields. This opens up what constitutes disciplinary knowledge and accepted practice to contestation and negotiation. Issues around power and authority are central. A particular feature has been to challenge a narrow conceptualisation of 'literacy' in higher education as a transferable skill and competence which can be applied in virtually any context and the simplistic notion that the problems students have with writing, and their solutions, are textual (Lillis, 2000, 2001). Street and Lea (1997: 3) summarise this position as follows:

Becoming academically literate, we argue, is about engaging with a number of implicit, competing and often contradictory literacy

practices which are embedded within disciplinary, subject, course and unit knowledge bases. For students themselves, writing is inextricably bound up with issues of epistemology and cannot therefore be reduced to a set of transferable cognitive skills. For the institution, the diversity of literacy practices, and the relationships of power and authority within which these are deeply embedded, undermine any attempts to offer a single, technicist view of reading and writing. Examining student writing within both an epistemological and an institutional frame offers, we suggest, a more complex way of addressing what are commonly regarded as 'problems with student writing'

Writing at university and learning what is required and expected is situated and contextualised social practice. Learning is not simply transmitted to the student but is mediated through on-going pedagogical and communicative interactions at different levels - disciplines, departments and the institution. An advantage of this perspective is that the emphasis is moved away from conjecture about the potentially negative consequences of widening participation by non-traditional students (i.e. greater numbers of less well prepared students means more problems with levels of literacy and, consequently, the need to cater for these students in a way which is detached from the established norms and practices of the university) to an examination of institutional practices and the contexts of learning and writing. Lea and Stierer, (2000: 3) refer to what they term 'a social practice and contextual' approach to student writing and learning which takes into account the "important changes in the policy and practice of higher education institutions in recent years", as broadly outlined in section one of this chapter, and places them "at the heart of research...". The present doctoral research project was undertaken in an attempt to expand on these aspects of academic literacies research and add to the findings in teaching, learning and adult literacy understanding which have taken place since the mid nineties.

## **1.5 An overview of the present research**

The aims of this research were to explore how student writing and academic literacy are perceived in a university, how practices and perceptions influence teaching and learning policy and practice and what issues students encounter in this respect. This is examined at the two levels of institutional practices, and disciplinary

teaching. Some of the questions that motivated this study and which it sought to explore are, for example: how far is student writing and academic literacy pedagogy and support an integral and explicit part of teaching in disciplinary contexts? What form, if any, does this take? How do practices vary at the departmental and individual tutor level and to what extent, therefore, is learning and literacy development a question of social practices? Why is explicit attention to student writing and academic literacy development regarded as extraneous to teaching in the disciplines? What are the beliefs of academic teaching staff about student writing and academic literacy more generally? Why do they hold these beliefs and how do perceptions influence their approach to teaching and learning (as manifest in practices around communication, such as feedback and writing textual sources for students)? How is student writing and academic literacy development conceived and projected at the level of institutional practices and discourse and why does this happen? What is the student experience with learning and literacy in higher education in the contemporary context?

The methodological approach taken in conducting the present research emulates, albeit in a modified form, the academic literacies approach. It is an institutional case study realised through a critical ethnographic style methodology comprising interviews with academic staff and student respondents and a critical examination of a range of documentary sources associated with student writing and assessment at the institutional and departmental levels. The thesis underpinning this study is that student writing and academic literacy are best developed as an integral and explicit part of disciplinary teaching. Fostering and developing literacy in higher education should therefore be embedded in disciplinary teaching and part of the curriculum. The research aimed to determine to what extent this is feasible; the extent to which current practices and beliefs are conducive to, or obstruct changes to the curriculum; the problems and challenges faced by students as writers and learners at the levels of disciplinary teaching and institutional practices. The evidence of this research is considered in connection with the wider discussion around teaching, learning, the curriculum and higher education reform.

Chapter two reviews the literature which has informed this study. Chapter three outlines the research methodology. The data are organised into four chapters (four to seven). Each chapter has a separate focus. The data are presented under a number of separate heading and sub-headings in each of the chapters. Following each chapter is



an extended discussion and key findings section. Chapter four focuses on relevant background factors. It describes the university in terms of institutional priorities and established practices with respect to student writing and assessment. A number of documentary sources are critically described. Chapter five focuses on issues, practices, perceptions and beliefs about student writing in the institution. Data are drawn from teacher and student accounts and reflect on teacher practices and perceptions and the understandings and approaches of students. Chapter six focuses on communicative and discursive practices between tutors and student writers in particular around assessment. Institutional practices are described with reference to documentary sources designed for use in feedback and evaluation of students' written work. Tutors and students were asked for their perceptions of the role and effectiveness of current feedback practices. Chapter seven shifts the focus away from disciplinary contexts and direct pedagogical interactions between teachers and student writers and examines extra-curricular support. There is a description of how support is conceived and implemented at the institutional level and how it is perceived and understood by teachers and students. The final chapter summarises and discusses in more depth the findings of this research and considers their implications for practices associated with student writing and academic literacy in particular and teaching and learning in higher education in the contemporary context more generally. A separate section considers the limitations of the study. Finally, a section considers the contribution of this study to student writing, and teaching and learning scholarship at present time and suggests a new paradigm for learning and teaching research that has the potential to effectively embed and democratise it within HEIs.

# **Chapter Two**

## **Literature Review**

### **1.0 The nature and purposes of literacy: new perspectives**

It is assumed the minimum criterion for literacy is simply being able to read and write: decode and encode in psycholinguistic terms. This sort of knowledge is, as a rule, imparted and attained through some sort of intervention in the form of informal teaching or formal schooling rather than through simple acquisition as is the ability to use spoken language (according to the Chomskian/mentalist view of the mind). Literacy is also associated with more advanced or sophisticated level of learning and understanding: being good with words and being able to apply this to problems and manage in a variety of different contexts. The focus is on individual cognitive abilities and the inherent differences between spoken and written language. It is what McKay (1996) refers to as an ‘individual skill perspective’. It assumes a link between literacy and cognitive development. Low levels of literacy in individuals imply less well developed cognitive abilities. Germane is the belief in the power of literacy to be instrumental in fostering progress and growth in communities and societies that are less developed economically. This is functional literacy: the better people are able to read and write the more they will be able to participate productively in society. As Holme (2004: 17) points out, “functional literacy recognises that people will master the skills of literacy to different degrees”. Adults may be ‘illiterate’ in varying degrees according to this conception; hence the notion of ‘functional illiteracy’.

Street (1984, 1988) makes an important distinction between what he coins the ‘autonomous’ and the ‘ideological’ models of literacy. The autonomous model is associated with the cognitive consequences and social determinism conception of literacy outlined above. Literacy can be isolated from its contexts of use and regarded as a neutral medium and defined in terms of technical skills and abilities. In contrast Street posits an ideological model. All literacy practices and written texts are shaped in the wider sociocultural environment in which they happen. What counts as literacy depends on the social institutions in which it is embedded, the processes through which it is learnt and the practices through which it is enacted. One of the major

assumptions challenged here is that literacy is a single variable with a big 'L' and a singular 'y': in place of Literacy there should be 'literacies' (Street, 1993).

Baynham (1995) also sees literacy from a critical perspective, and as a cross-disciplinary area drawing on ideas from linguistics and anthropology, and educational and social theory and informed through research in the literacy development of adults. Critical theory questions the dominance of institutional discourses. Approaching literacy in this way presupposes the following:

- Literacy has developed and is shaped to serve social purposes in creating and exchanging meaning;
- Literacy is best understood in its contexts of use;
- Literacy is ideological: like all uses of language it is not neutral, but shapes and is shaped by deeply held ideological positions, which can be either implicit or explicit;
- Literacy needs to be understood in terms of social power
- Literacy can be critical

Identifying language and literacy as (social) practice entails asking questions:

- Why does this exist/happen?
- What is its purpose?
- Whose interests does it serve?
- Whose interests does it frustrate?
- How does it operate?
- Need it operate like this or could it be done differently?

Literacy is primarily a socio-political and educational construct rather than a linguistic one. Baynham argues that it is not enough to look at spoken and written texts as objective evidence of language, nor is it enough to study the dimension of what people do with texts in context and adds that a dimension of language as social practice is needed to illuminate the ways that language operates to reproduce and maintain institutions and power bases and how discourses and ideologies operate through language. There are a number of key terms which Baynham defines in accordance with his approach:

- Literacy acquisition and use takes place in *social contexts*; without taking into account the influence of context on literacy practices we are missing an important dimension in understanding literacy.

- Secondly, literacy acquisition and use take place in *situated interactions* and so literacy can be conceived of as *situated social practice*. Reading and writing can be *collaboratively achieved* through social interaction with participating others (Lave and Wenger, 1991).
- *Media* is a key area and the term literacy has been pluralized and extended metaphorically to a variety of other forms of literacy.
- *Ideologies* are defined as “a collection of ideas, beliefs and attitudes which, if taken together make up a world view or political position. Ideologies tend to ‘naturalise’ themselves: to behave as if they were the obvious, natural common-sense perspective” (1995: 4-5) (esp. Gramsci, 1971, i.e. the notion of hegemony and hegemonic consent as an instrument of social control in post-industrial society, also; Graff, 1989; Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).
- *Discourses* can be understood semiotically as articulating ideological positions. Literacy uses are not neutral activities but are informed by deeply seated ideological positions. For example, the relative dominance of certain genres of written language as ‘naturalized’ within the education system (cf. Fairclough, 1992, 1996, Gee, 1996).
- Finally, *institutions* are social organisations with power bases. The school is one such institution, hence school-based literacy in the form of essay-text literacy is ideologically inscribed (cf. Farr, 1993; Gee, 1996, above, also Fairclough, 1992; Clark and Ivanič, 1997; Lillis, 2001).

## 1.1 Social theory

At the societal level the notion of “cultural capital” created by the French sociologist of education Pierre Bourdieu, ties in with this perspective. Bourdieu was concerned with how cultural reproduction works in society. The metaphor of ‘capital’ is used to denote the cumulative nature of the right kind of knowledge, values and behaviour achieved through education and which is sustained by the dominant culture. School knowledge and ways of behaving over-ride the everyday ways of behaving, talking and writing that children bring with them to school. However, middle-class children from professional and literate family backgrounds are advantaged in that they are inducted into or simply acquire the right kind of cultural

capital in the home. They are far more likely to see adults writing around them in culturally valued and appropriate ways (Clark and Ivanič, 1997).

In the curriculum this is reinforced with particular ways of writing or literacy practices such as essays, particular ways of using language according to a standard, for example, and pedagogic practices that support these values. The metaphor is consistent: just as material capital earns more material capital so cultural capital leads to assimilation into the dominant culture and greater access to opportunity and life chances. Bourdieu is critical of the crude functional association of education with economic growth:

This typically functionalist definition of the functions of education ignores the contribution which the education system makes to the reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital (1986: 48, reprinted in Richardson (ed.)).

This reproduction influences attitudes in educational environments. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990: 111) point out:

The whole logic of an academic institution based on pedagogic work of the traditional type and ultimately guaranteeing the 'infallibility' of the 'master', finds expression in the professorial ideology of student incapacity... a relationship which inherently implies poor reception of the best messages by the worst receivers.

Connected to this is Bourdieu's (1977) concept of 'habitus': a disposition based on experience and framed by social class, ethnicity or gender which inclines people to perceive of themselves, and think and act, in certain ways. Many working-class students and those from minority social/ethnic groups may not have expectations and an understanding of themselves, inculcated early in life, which prepare them for higher education. This might be prevalent where there is no experience of higher education in the family and little or no value attached to it in the community.

Morley (2003a) notes the effect this has on choice in higher education. Students from middle-class backgrounds whose parents are university educated are more likely to make conscious and strategic decisions about where to study and, in a massified system, to discriminate on the basis of rankings and league tables. On the other hand students from working-class backgrounds are more likely to base their choices on considerations related to their feelings of comfort, contentment, proximity

to family and community. This affects how a 'good' university is conceptualised. The marketisation of higher education masks the extent to which this contributes to (rather than erodes) stratification in higher education along social class and even racial and gender lines.

## **1.2 The New Literacy Studies**

A sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1991) approach to literacy stresses that it is best 'acquired' by one being embedded in, or apprenticed to a social group where people read and talk about texts and generally interact over them in certain ways and hold similar beliefs and values in connection with them. In order to be socialised into this form of shared understanding one needs experience of the settings where practices take place and this involves *social groups* and their *practices* and, crucially, various sorts of *social institutions*. Gee (1996) comments that this perspective allows us to think of literacy not simply as practices but as ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing and believing typical of social institutions and social groups. Gee (1996: 42-5) exemplifies the common objection to a sociocultural view through what he calls "the aspirin bottle problem". Objectors argue that people (of adult age) who are 'challenged' in terms of their literacy abilities need to understand everyday uses of language such as the warning on the back of an aspirin bottle for their own safety (and that of others, such as small children). This is where the emphasis in literacy education should be. Gee offers an alternative critique of the aspirin bottle text. Firstly, he notes how it is in fact written for readers who know what it has to say. It implies, through the use of language and its syntactic structures, that what it says is common knowledge. It is also deliberately oblique in places in order to evade negative associations with drug taking and the inherent dangers of, even with aspirins, over-using or misusing them. It constructs the reader as intelligent and mainstream. In order to understand this label simple decoding is insufficient. Gee's main point is that the way we learn to read things is through being apprenticed into a social group that reads (acts, talks, values) in this way and that we cannot regard texts, like the back of the aspirin bottle, as being neutral, asocial and apolitical. In order to interpret texts in certain ways we need access to, and experience in the social settings where texts are read in those ways. Literacy practices in social

institutions and particularly in educational contexts replicate and reinforce the status quo. This perspective is germane to New Literacy Studies.

New Literacy Studies challenges the view that reading and writing are technical skills to be learned in formal schooling contexts. Street (1993, 1995, 1997) brought the discussion closer to home in response to the ‘literacy debate’ regarding current ‘poor standards’ of literacy in society in general and failing educational standards. Issues that have fanned the debate are perceived deficits in literacy and numeracy among school age children and consequent under-achievement, changes in workplace practices, notions about skill levels and employability, national productivity, widening participation in further and higher education and concerns about ‘falling educational standards’ in general. The slogan has been the familiar and reactionary “back to basics”. This constitutes the dominant discourse on literacy in the public and political domain; broadly it is a discourse of learning deficits, remediation and declining standards.

Baynham and Prinsloo (2001) pointed out that the thrust of New Literacy Studies has opened up new directions and agenda for literacy research. An area that has come into prominence since the late nineties has been academic literacy practices in higher education (e.g. Jones, et al, 1999). The ethical and political commitment of New Literacy Studies makes this an attractive site for research as widening participation raises concerns along these lines. In addition, research on disciplinary communities raises questions about what is involved in disciplinarity and how knowledge is constructed, taught and learnt.

## **2.0 Literacy in Higher Education in the UK**

The discourse of skills and competencies permeates education from primary to tertiary. With regards literacy it is predicated on two perspectives:

- a technical and instrumental approach to reading and writing;
- a deficit and remediation conception of educational standards and reading and writing.

In the further (FE) and, to a large extent, higher education (HE) context the skills agenda is linked to ‘employability’ as a primary aim. It is shaped by perceived changes in the occupational structure of employment in this country over the last

twenty years. As such this discourse has a clearly related value system associated with the nature and outcomes of university education. Democratisation has thrown up concerns associated with 'standards'. Although not explicitly stated this is the concern implied in the Dearing Report on higher education policy of 1997: more students from wider social groups will lead to more issues with standards of student literacy. Furthermore there have been calls for strengthening links between HE, FE and schools and initiatives to encourage school-age children from a wider social spectrum to consider a higher education future.

Universities have differentially adopted key skills into their teaching and learning ethos and their inclusion in the curriculum. Traditionally, the new/post-92 universities have shown more interest in skills to emphasise the practical nature of their educational missions and the qualities of their graduates in this respect. The availability of funding to inaugurate and develop key skills in the curriculum has been an incentive which has induced some HEIs down the skills road more than others. The skills agenda has become a value system in certain institutions permeating discussions around the nature of the curriculum and the qualities of a university education. At the core of this thinking on skills is that they are detachable, quantifiable and measurable and above all, transferable. It is the notion of transferability that sustains and validates the skills agenda as a whole. The very term 'skill' in fact means to separate: to deal with things separately. It allows us to talk about 'this' and 'that' particular skill, to identify its characteristics and to remove it from the context of use.

The taxonomy of skills in educational discourse is shifting. 'Basic skills' in literacy are the technical skills of writing: spelling, punctuation and grammar. They are the most visible and textual manifestations of literacy and can be detached from context: literacy is an autonomous singular construct. They can be used as a threshold against which learners can be tested or perceived to have a literacy deficit. 'Key skills' are similar but are intrinsically about developing competencies that are transferable and integrate reading and writing with IT, numeracy and 'learning to learn'. Literacy, specifically writing, is recast as 'communication' or 'written communication skills'. The Dearing Report singles out 'communication' as the one most frequently emphasised by employers and therefore requiring a higher profile in the curriculum. The notion that there are certain skills which are fundamental to and transferable between all learning contexts complements another key skill area:



learning to learn. If skills are transferable then, implicitly, students can transfer what they learn in one learning context to others. Learning itself becomes a transferable commodity, or rather a set of transferable skills or competencies. The idea that learning is situated and contextualised is elided in this conception.

Hyland and Johnson (1998) are critical of the concept of free-standing, context independent abilities (skills) claiming that they are “illusory” and without philosophical and empirical support. They point out that there is no common understanding of what ‘key/core skills’ are and how they should be taught; that the notion of ‘transferability’ is an assertion rather than empirically proven. They also express the view that to teach skills as free-standing and generalisable is less effective than for them to be integrated and domain or programme dependent. They refer to “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” surrounding both the discourse and thinking on this subject. Fairclough (1999) problematises the notion of communication as a ‘key/transferable skill’. He points out that this conception lends itself to a view of teaching and learning as ‘transmission’ and therefore ‘determinate, uncontested and given externally to the learner’. There needs to be a critical dimension to facilitate a level of questioning and contestation over what counts as knowledge or skill. In the contemporary ethos of ‘life-long learning’ and ‘skills for life’ the purposes of education are narrowing down to serve the needs of the economy. However, education is also about social relationships and the positioning of teachers and learners rather than narrow vocationalism.

Orr (2002) investigated literacy practitioners’ (dyslexia support specialists, study skills and basic skills lecturers) conceptions of students with writing difficulties in further and higher education. She focused on two models: basic skills and dyslexia. The latter is well understood in both contexts. Students screened for dyslexia in HE can claim an allowance from local authorities. However, students with ‘garden variety’ literacy difficulties have to be provided for within the institution. If the institution does not supply this sort of support either for mainly fiscal reasons or because they believe students with literacy difficulties should not be in tertiary/higher education (Orr refers to this as the ‘moral outrage’ paradigm) then there is little support available apart from generic study skills provision in the form of manuals within departments, electronically based ‘support’ programmes and study skills centres where students can go for remedial help. Orr’s research also indicated that there is a greater association of literacy difficulties with dyslexia in HE whereas the

association is with poor basic skills in the FE. This suggests a discrepancy that potentially disadvantages students whose problems are 'environmental' rather than 'clinical': there is a tendency to regard the former as less able in general and less suited to higher education. Widening participation is not a new phenomenon in tertiary education. FE colleges began to accept students from wider social and educational backgrounds in the 1980s. Blythman and Orr (2003) point out that many of the new types of student in higher education today are the traditional learners in further education. They contend that the lessons learnt in further education about institutional responses to 'non-traditional' students can benefit the way higher education responds to the current situation.

Crene and Lea (1999) point out that a deficit in 'basic skills' conceived in terms of technical or surface features (grammar, punctuation, spelling) is by far the commonest (mis)conception about student literacy in higher education. It is informed almost exclusively by the falling standards paradigm and relies on surveys of student writers' technical abilities. Problems with writing are seen as a deficit in the student (they lack basic skills) rather than arising from any other source: literacy is a 'skill' that is in decline. They point out that "little account appears to be taken of how or why these difficulties might occur" (p.3). Lea and Street (1998) approach the question by looking at student writing from the point of view of academic literacy practices (Street, 1995; Baynham, 1995). Learning in higher education requires students to adapt to "new ways of knowing": understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge. The emphasis is on the cultural and contextual dimensions of reading and writing practices and learning and literacy development. Lea and Street refer to this as "an academic literacies approach" which has developed from the new thinking associated with New Literacy Studies. Referring to research done in 1995-96 involving two UK universities (one traditional university and one 'new' university) they state:

Set against a background of numerous changes in higher education in the UK and increasing numbers of non-traditional entrants, this research has been concerned with a wider institutional approach to student writing... One of the main purposes of the research has been a move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and to consider the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at degree level in universities. (p. 157)

They point out that understanding how learning takes place and in casting light on student success and failure, progress and non-completion, it is important to investigate the understandings that both academic staff and students have about their own literacy practices and how meanings are contested at the level of the institution. Lea and Street (1997, 1998) argue that there are three main models of student writing in higher education:

- study skills;
- academic socialisation;
- academic literacies.

The study skills model treats literacy as a set of atomised, transferable skills. The medical pathology metaphor comes into operation: students have writing ‘problems’ that need ‘fixing’. It is based on deficits, deficiencies and low standards and trying to rectify them. Language is seen in superficial terms as technical knowledge - spelling, punctuation, grammar, and in terms of the most visible and generic conventions that apply to formal written texts. The academic socialisation paradigm is more contextualised. The emphasis is on inducting the student into the academy and its cultural norms and values. In terms of learning students are orientated to tasks and ways of interpreting and understanding. It is rooted in social psychology and constructivist education. Lea and Street regard this as a more encompassing approach but point out:

It appears to assume the academy is a relatively homogeneous culture, whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution. ...institutional practices, including the processes of change and the exercise of power, do not seem to be sufficiently theorised. ...this approach tends to treat writing as a transparent medium of representation and so fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning (1998: 159)

The academic literacies approach is described as follows:

It views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation. An academic literacies approach views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power. It sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including, genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a

dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. ...

Lea and Street used an ethnographic style approach to the research. Their methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff and students, participant observation of group sessions and attention to samples of students' writing, written feedback on students' work and handouts on 'essay writing'. They included a linguistically based analysis of this textual material as they realised this was an important source of data to be considered in relation to the interview data. Lea and Street describe this ethnographic work as 'analytical' rather than 'enumerative'. The interviews with teachers and students and the textual sources examined represent different perspectives on academic literacies. Data on the beliefs and practices of tutors constitute a new kind of evidence that can throw light on differing understandings of the writing process "at levels of epistemology, authority, and contestation over knowledge rather than at the level of technical skill, surface linguistic competence or cultural assimilation" (p: 160).

Lillis (2000, 2001) challenges the idea that student writing in higher education is a 'problem' in the everyday sense and the one which is central to official, public and pedagogic (study skills guides, etc) discourses. There are two central concerns with the current framing: one is the overwhelmingly textual way in which it is conceptualised; the second is that it is a straight-forward 'problem', easy to identify and remedy. Instead student writing is a "phenomenon to be explored". Lillis itemises three significant shifts in research on student writing that support this change of conceptualisation: student writers' texts are a worthy topic of research; academic discourses/texts should be explored rather than taken as 'givens'; academic discourses/texts are about sets of social relationships as much as propositional content. Student academic writing is therefore a social act which is situated and contextualised or as Lillis (2000:20) points out takes place within a particular institution which has a particular culture, values and practices (cf. Baynham, 1995; Gee, 1996) In addition, a social practices approach offers a way of exploring and making sense of the complexities that surround student writing more fully as is demonstrated below.

Table 1. Comparing a 'skills' with a 'practices' approach to student writing (Lillis, 2000: 26)

A skills approach emphasises...	A practices approach emphasises...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student writing as primarily an individual act</li> <li>• Language as a transparent medium of communication</li> <li>• Literacy as autonomous and universal</li> <li>• Homogeneity across disciplines, departments, institutions, tutors</li> <li>• The appropriateness of homogeneity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student writing as a social act</li> <li>• Language as constructing meanings/identities</li> <li>• Literacies as numerous, varied and socially situated</li> <li>• Diversity across disciplines, institutions, tutors</li> <li>• The contested nature of dominant academic conventions</li> </ul>

### 3.0 Background to student writing research

#### 3.1 Student writing research in the US

In the North American context there has been an open-admissions policy in higher education since the mid 1960s and a general consensus within higher education that student writers need help in writing university level texts. Institutional provision is in two principal forms: freshman composition to help undergraduates with general writing and 'basic writing' courses for remedial needs. A third form known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) also exists but is less widespread and is aimed at teaching writing within subject areas. As a result of this established focus on pedagogy there has emerged a well developed research field in student writing going back to the 1970s with a shift to the concerns given by Lillis above: that student writers' texts are worthy of research (e.g. Shaughnessy, 1977, Bizzel, 1982); that academic discourse should be explored (e.g. Bazerman, 1981, Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995); and that discourses are about social identities and relations (e.g. Lu, 1987). A good example of relatively early research reflecting the shifts which took

place is Bartholomae (1985) who considers the challenges faced by “basic writers” (in the US context these are ‘freshman’ (first year) students):

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it... The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community... he has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other. He must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is “learned”. And this, understandably causes problems (pp.134-5)

Bartholomae analysed 500 ‘freshman’ essays in order to consider where it goes wrong for these students as they “try to write their way into the university” (p. 147). This seems to be an early example of the shifts mentioned by Lillis above on student writing research challenging the academic text as ‘given’ and drawing out the perspective of the student writer and the social relationships implicit. For example it is difficult for ‘basic writers’ to take on a voice, persona and authority (of the academy) that are unfamiliar to them. They are more comfortable with a “more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of the teacher giving a lesson or the voice of the parent lecturing at the dinner table” (p. 136). Student writers may feel alienated from one of the “privileged languages of public life” that they are “aware of but cannot control” (p. 139). He identifies “the central problem of academic writing” for the student: the writer must assume the right to speak to someone who knows more about the subject with more authority than themselves. Student writers have to adopt an identity which is not their own. The reader maybe fictionalised but the power differential between reader/writer is obscured not changed. Student essays contain writing that is “approximate”. This is not the same as “wrong or invalid”. As student writers become socialised into the disciplinary culture and practices they learn to extend themselves by “successive approximations”. Student writers don’t invent the language used by the discipline but are themselves invented by it: “They begin with a moment of appropriation, a moment when they can offer up a sentence that is not theirs as though it were their own” (p.145); they become subordinate to the genres they are required (and struggle)

to adopt. Bartholomae calls for the conventions of the academic community to be “demystified” – in other, words teachers “could be more precise and helpful when they ask student to ‘think’, ‘argue’, ‘describe’ or ‘define’.” (p.147). The questions of identities, voice, primary and ‘privileged’ or dominant discourses, meaning making and contestation, social relations and pedagogy resonate through the contemporary literature on student learning and writing as social practice in higher education. However, as Lillis (2000: 25) points out:

Students’ efforts at imagining, or... “inventing the university” are not always successful because of the diversity across institutions, disciplines and tutors. What one tutor may expect and accept may differ from another tutor – according, not least, to individual beliefs, differences in academic disciplines and institutional practices

### **3.2. The tradition in British and Australian higher education**

In Britain, early research took place within the fields of cognitive and educational psychology or what is known as the phenomenographic (Marton and Säljö, 1976; Marton, 1981) tradition. Hounsell (1997a) enumerates important contextual features and tensions around students’ essay writing. One is the instrumental pursuit of grades which may jar with learning in a personally satisfying way; another is the idiosyncrasy of essay-writing where the student is writing for a more knowledgeable tutor and therefore the activity becomes a display of knowledge and validation of views already familiar to the tutor. In addition, “the initial stimulus comes from outside, not from within” (p. 107). Students have to write according to course requirements and that includes them being presented with titles and topics and there being specifications about how they write, use sources and treat the subject. Hounsell noted, at the time of writing: “As a learning activity essay writing remains virtually uncharted territory” (p. 109).

Hounsell used an exploratory, phenomenographic methodology: two sets of semi-structured interviews with second year history and psychology undergraduates focusing on an essay they had recently prepared. The interviews revealed that students rarely discuss their essays among themselves and, whenever essays are talked about, it is likely to be more about getting marks rather than on content. Essay

writing is largely an individual and private activity for the student. The study identified three qualitatively distinct student conceptions of essay writing in History:

- the essay as arrangement;
- the essay as viewpoint, and;
- the essay as argument.

In the first case the student writer engages in “passively restating and regurgitating what has been gleaned from source materials rather than attempting to make coherent sense of them” (p.123). These writers are, typically, only able to make weak links between the component parts of the essay and conclude by reiterating the title set rather than challenging. The essay as viewpoint is driven by a pre-conceived notion as to the line the essay will take. Writers tend to make the ‘facts’ fit the (their) argument(s); they are able to use evidence and order their arguments but demonstrate little concern with different interpretative options. Students who approach writing as argument are able to draw out the inter-relatedness of data and interpretation, are more objective about the arguments they present and see essays as integral wholes. This is the conception valued by tutors in the discipline. Hounsell points out how the differences in conceptions were reflected in marks: the students who participated in the research and who had an arrangement conception had marks below 60%; those with a viewpoint conception average 60% or slightly above; but those with the more sophisticated argument conception achieved the highest marks. In terms of the experience of learning Hounsell uses this evidence to posit a dichotomy of ‘learning as studying’ and ‘learning as understanding’ in accordance with the ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ constructs (Marton and Säljö, 1976). He also asks how it is that these different student conceptions persist.

McCune (2004) interviewed students at different stages in the first year to reveal how they progressed to more sophisticated conceptions of essay writing. Tutor feedback on student essays emphasised appropriate ways of thinking but seemed to have only limited impact on development. The study threw up a number of contextual variables and the research was continued using case studies. They revealed disparities in student experiences between university and prior learning environments, a tendency of first year students to focus on minor errors in tutor feedback rather than main limitations of their work and a reluctance to change their existing methods and approaches as factors affecting learning and the improvement of grades. McCune



concludes that one factor in particular contributes to the considerable difficulty (first year) students have in developing their conceptions of essay writing: problems in accessing discipline-specific discourses.

Taylor (1988: 3), as editor of a collection of papers on the issues surrounding student literacy in higher education in the Australian context, pointed out:

Many academic staff in our universities see the literacy of their students to be a major 'problem' quite separate from their own disciplinary interests and pursuits...If there is a 'problem' it will not go away until language is restored to a central place in the intellectual life of the university.

Ballard and Clanchy (1988) describe the language used at disciplinary levels as "dialects" worthy of exploration. It is the relationship between this culture of knowledge and the language through which it is maintained and expressed that provides the key for addressing issues surrounding student literacy. In order to successfully integrate learners into the academic culture its rules and values need to be made explicit. To be literate in the university students need to be able to 'read' the culture "learning to come to terms with its distinctive rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour" (p: 8). Ballard and Clanchy point out there is one context in particular where academics provide students with guidelines about the rules and conventions implicit: comments in the margins of essays. Instruction of this kind is rarely systematic but this is sometimes the only guidance students receive. They also point out another problem overlooked by many academics: there are other cultures of literacy most of which "fly in the face of the rules by which the university culture is bound" (p.12). Teachers are likely to dismiss a student's inappropriate use of language in a formal essay as being to do with laziness or the quality of schooling instead of seeing it in terms of "an unsteady transition between cultures...where the 'deep' rules are rarely made explicit" (p.13). Learning in the university is one of gradual socialisation into the distinctive, disciplinary cultures of knowledge.

Hounsell (1987) turned his attention to the quality of feedback in student essay writing. Based on the same phenomenographic study involving history and psychology students he focused on students' understandings of tutor marks and comments on returned essays and the contribution of essay writing to their learning. Hounsell noted that: "traffic of comments on essays was almost overwhelmingly from tutor to student and in written form" (p.113). He also noted that students were

given copious written guidelines on departmental expectations and received general and specific comments on individual pieces of work. The answer proposed as to why students misconstrue tutor comments and guidance is “because they do not have a grasp of the assumptions about the nature of academic discourse underlying what is being conveyed to them” (p.114). Hounsell provided examples: in one case a student is shown as misunderstanding ‘argument’ which is interpreted in a literal and everyday sense rather than an academic one. Another student failed to demonstrate an understanding that disciplines have characteristic modes of discourse related to their epistemological bases so that a question involving ‘what’ also requires the writer address ‘how’ and ‘why’ and was surprised by tutor comments to that effect along with a low mark. Hounsell also points out the “dysfunctional side effects of feedback” (p.116) in cases where these discrepancies clearly exist. Students may see tutor feedback as marginal or applicable to only to the piece of work it is related to. In these cases students “may be locked into a cycle of deprivation as far as constructive feedback is concerned” (p.117) and regard tutor comments as insignificant or invalid because they fail to connect with the student’s own conceptualisations not only of particular requirements but of essay writing more generally. In conclusion Hounsell returns to what appears to be the central concern of these findings: the nature of academic discourse and the primacy of meaning making. He sees “the nub of the problem” (p.118) as follows:

Such characteristic comments by tutors as ‘you don’t make your points clearly enough’, ‘this essay lacks structure’ or ‘too much irrelevant detail’, do not have a meaning which is self-evident. They are best seen as connotative not denotative, and thus not as particularised observations but as invocations of norms. Such comments allude to a mode of discourse which is largely tacit and so invisible to students who have not already grasped its contours.

Hounsell (1988:173) claims that an important pedagogical step would be “to lay bare the anatomy of academic discourse and so to explicate as fully as possible what is at present largely tacit”. But there is a note of caution: while dissection and differentiation of discourse might narrow the communication gap between tutors and students it does not ensure that the discourse will be grasped by learners. The pedagogical challenge here is to create a learning environment in which the latter is vigorously fostered.

Prosser and Webb (1994) consider the process and product of student essay writing at the undergraduate level which they investigate from two different theoretical perspectives: phenomenographic research on student learning and systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1985) research on student writing. The latter focus is what distinguishes this study from Hounsell's work. The theory of systemic functional grammar provides for a systematic analysis of text in terms of its context. They justify this dual approach by pointing out that both are concerned with the influence of context on learning although phenomenography has not looked at the whole text (the product of student writing) and systemic functional linguistics has not been concerned with 'approaches' to, or intentions in writing adopted by students. The combination of phenomenographic analysis of students' conceptions of tasks and the form of written texts represents a more holistic approach to researching student writing in the academy. However, this has to be done with writers engaged in writing in disciplinary contexts. A second conclusion they draw, and one that has clear implications for teachers of academic literacy, is that writing instruction needs to be embedded in disciplinary contexts and not relegated to the periphery. Writing development is fundamental to learning a new discipline and most effectively fostered within that context.

### **3.3 Student writing research within the 'academic literacies' paradigm**

In the course of their field work research in two universities Lea and Street (1998) investigated how staff and students, respectively, interpret the requirements of student writing. A key finding was the challenges students face in 'course switching' which requires students to interpret writing requirements at different levels: between disciplines, at the level of individual modules and specific modules within 'fields of study'. Students are perplexed by variations in knowledge at the deeper level and how to go about writing them. A complication is knowing how to adapt previous knowledge about writing practices, in academic contexts and more generally, to varied university settings. Students made comments such as "everybody wants something different" emphasising the contrast with prior experience (A-level, Access, etc) and the diversity facing them. Their approaches to writing essays met with success for one tutor but disapproval from another. Although students may receive handouts on what is expected in writing it is difficult for them to 'read off' the

specific writing requirements of a given context. Guidelines were inadequate for the variety of writing required of them because they were too broadly defined and rarely dealt with issues that students reported they had most difficulty grasping – for example, how to write specific, course-based knowledge for a particular tutor or field of study (1998: 164). Advice across courses can be conflicting. For example, not all tutors adhered to the same ‘common sense’ notions of how to structure the introduction to an essay and freedoms and prescriptions regarding the use of the first person varied. Such variations could be found within courses and departments as well as across them. Students adopt different strategies to cope with the course switching challenges. A typical approach is to see it as a kind of game, trying to work out the rules and second guess for particular courses and assignments and even for particular tutors. In their written expression students may mimic certain conventions to mask their own views (‘It may be said...’, etc) and many feel constrained and frustrated by the restrictions on expressing their own viewpoint or bringing their own voice into their writing.

Staff often found themselves teaching within programmes that integrated a number of disciplinary approaches. Another complexity is that in many multi-disciplinary degree programmes writing requirements varied in terms of mode: teachers were not always marking essay-text forms of writing with which they are most familiar but often innovative types of assessment. When probed on the types of descriptive tools used to assess student writing – ‘critically analyse’, ‘evaluate’, ‘synthesise’, etc - these could not be explicated clearly. In particular when teachers are faced with writing that does not make sense within their own academic knowledge framework they are apt to fall back on familiar forms of expression in feedback. Lea and Street describe the example of a first year student writing in anthropology and history. The student was able to attain satisfactory and above marks for history essays whereas he could not achieve the same for an essay in anthropology. The tutors’ comments in the latter case highlighted a perceived deficit in ‘structure’ and ‘argument’. The student could not understand as he had approached the anthropology essay using the same tools and strategies and felt he had produced a ‘coherent argument’. The anthropology tutor pointed out, in comments in the margin, that there was no clear ‘linkage’ between the facts and consequently this impaired cohesion. The student’s greater experience of writing in history (A-level) led him to conceive ‘structure/argument’ and ‘coherence’ in ways that were incompatible with

the implicit ways of writing knowledge in anthropology. At issue here is a tension between the surface features of 'literacy' and the deeper features of epistemology and authority which the anthropology tutor's attention to 'writing problems' hides. Ultimately the student is given the following advice: "May I suggest very strongly that you go to the study skills centre and make more enquiries about essay-writing clinics" (p. 167).

Lea and Street pose the question: how is feedback being used to direct students to develop and write their academic knowledge in very specific ways within particular courses which are implicitly presented as 'common-sense ways of knowing'? Descriptive categories such as 'argument' and 'structure' constitute a particular feedback genre but "may embed contrasting conceptual understandings" (p. 168). In such cases written feedback acts as a "marker of difference and sustainer of boundaries" (Lea and Street, 2000: 44). One way the dynamic of feedback may be changed is through the use of modal forms of language in comments. These may be in the form of 'categorical modalities' such as imperatives or assertions and the use of orthographic devices such as exclamation marks or question marks. In such cases the comment (it may be a one word indication of a perceived problem such as: 'meaning! (?)') is categorical rather than one implying dialogic engagement. Other forms of modality are "provisional or mitigated" ('have you thought about', 'perhaps', 'what about..', etc) and invoke a different interpersonal relationship between parties. Written feedback is not merely a means to communicate but is intrinsic to relations around authority. A further complication in the student experience pointed out by Lea and Street (1997, 1998) is the effects of modularisation. Institutional procedures associated with modularised degree courses often result in students receiving course work feedback long after completion of the modules: where students perceive feedback to be peculiar to a particular piece of work and not relevant to a subsequent module there is a deleterious effect on the feedback process. The issues surrounding student writing, therefore, are not simply between participants but exist at the institutional level.

### **3.4 Texts and knowledge: an academic literacies frame**

Lea and Street (1999) noted that practices - at the institutional, disciplinary and individual (tutor) levels - come together in a range of texts for staff and students

concerning the writing process in the form of handbooks, guidelines and study manuals. By contrasting these texts in and across different fields and disciplines it is possible to deduce the implicit conceptions of what constitutes writing even though these texts are written as if to be transparent or 'common sense' views. The aim is to understand how such texts appear to the student. There are two initial concerns: why is it that in spite of these documents students rarely follow them (or profess to find them useful); secondly, this problem is one seen to be located in the student (not the institution). To do this it is necessary to critically analyse texts ("disrupt their innocence").

Commentaries upon these texts were sought from tutors themselves. They took as a first example an 'English Coursework Assessment Form' and noted, initially, how it is divided into two main sections: 'general' criteria and 'literacy' criteria; formal technical features of writing and the subject-specific language capacities that are required for 'critical argument', respectively. Accompanying this form, and directed to teaching staff was a qualification for the use of the term 'literacy' which indicated that while the main task of the department is in facilitating critical and conceptual abilities in students this is impeded by their poor formal language abilities. In deconstructing this example Lea and Street noted both the highly prescriptive discourse on student writing issues (a clear deficit model) and the contested nature of this discourse. Students, on the other hand, were given a document that simply itemises and numbers the criteria in a prescriptive form as if these were self-evident.

Another example focused on a document produced by a tutor involved in inter-disciplinary teaching. The tutor in question had misgivings about this approach to student writing. Nevertheless, he produced a document set out in the familiar way with headings and sub-headings. In this case they were more broadly conceived categories: planning, essay length, plagiarism, etc; institutional requirements at the formal prescriptive level but different again from the 'Form' created in the English department. It was noticed that documents in question, typically differ amongst themselves implying that they are derived "from implicit ideological and conceptual contests" (p. 66). The difficulty for the student is knowing how to interpret them: are they institutional, subject or tutor specific? Lea and Street characterise this in terms of inclusion and exclusion as follows:

The 'inclusive' approach draws in the student particularly at the departmental level – in a sense as a novice member of the university – attempting to address some of the difficulties students might experience with their writing... In contrast the 'exclusive' approach evident in the texts appears to unwittingly operate to exclude the student through recourse to particular text types and configurations of textual information which suggest a deficit model on the part of the writer (pp. 67/8)

Lea and Street claim that the way in which these documents are typically constructed amounts to the reification of the autonomous model of literacy. Texts are written and embed practices at a variety of levels: institution, department, course tutor and between different levels and genres of writing in the university. The problem is not simply one located in the student but in the practices and discourse of the institution itself.

Lea (1998) conducted research on the experience of adult distance learners and the extent to which students, in this context, construct their knowledge through writing and reading. The focus was on the role of structured course materials and extensive written tutor feedback. The latter is implicated in students' perceptions of what constitutes valid knowledge and the construction of academic genres in their teacher marked assignments. Lea takes issue with the notion of academic discourses as discrete categories that can be taught to, and/or mastered by learners (Bazerman, 1981, Berkenhotter and Huckin, 1995) emphasising that more account should be taken of writer identity, language use, social context and literacy practices in the broader context. Students embark on their studies with other, more familiar but frequently contrasting practices of literacy. They attempt, not always successfully, to adapt these to their studies. These practices may be integral to other aspects of their lives such as the workplace and may be influenced by previous experience of education. Lea identifies two distinct approaches to constructing knowledge through writing:

- learning as reformulation of texts and;
- learning as challenging texts.

She considers these in relation to the process of assessment. In the former students engage in writing which replicates the authority and genres of the course materials. They say and write things in ways which are designed to convince the tutor they have engaged with and grasped the course content. To this end, students may focus on the

use of certain terminology to express ideas, rather than on the use of other language forms. Tutor feedback, concerned with looking for understanding of the course materials, often reinforces this process by rephrasing student writing hence actively encouraging the reformulation approach to written assessment. Learning as challenging texts involves students bringing their own personal perspectives and textual interpretations. Lea maintains that this approach to learning is intrinsically dialogic: it involves students asking questions about what they can do in their writing or what is acceptable and valid. It is central to adult learning because it is concerned with issues of confidence, power and identity in the setting of higher education. However, students writing in this way may often find themselves failing in terms of tutor expectations and assessment requirements. In feedback they are likely to experience criticism for not demonstrating an understanding of course materials in the particular way that individual tutors had read these.

Lea (2004b) turns her attention to course design: 'content' items of a course (reading lists, lecture notes and course materials) "can easily become reified as repositories of received knowledge" (p.747) ignoring the mediating and dialogic aspect in the construction of knowledge that adult learners bring to the learning context. The interdisciplinary and hybrid nature of many courses mean that they are likely to be less informed by a single defined disciplinary frame but by contrasting disciplinary ways of knowing. Course designers need to be explicit about this and be aware what experiences students are bringing to their study. In practical terms Lea concedes that there are advantages and limitations to this approach to design in the current context. Teachers may be required to use a departmental feedback sheet (pro-forma) with words like 'structure' and 'argument' and tick boxes aimed at systematising marking procedures and make things more 'transparent' to the student. However, the system does not provide time for the exploration of the deeper epistemological issues associated with this practice between tutors and tutors and tutors and students. Where texts become the basis for written dialogue students can indicate where there is a lack of understanding and ask for further clarification; "The document then forms the basis for a very different kind of conversation than that required for the purposes of departmental audit" (p. 752). On the other hand, curricula which emphasise outcomes at every stage of the design, delivery and assessment process could be a hindrance to implementing a design which focuses on the contested nature of knowledge, the construction of meaning through textual practices



and issues of student identity. Lea calls for course designers to adopt a more contested approach to course design in which “students themselves are drawn into this space in the construction of knowledge”. This can, ultimately, “enhance learning for all concerned” (p. 754).

## **4.0 Student academic literacy and pedagogical research**

### **4.1 Traditional practices, new concerns**

The contexts for teaching and learning are changing. A consequence in many institutions has been the decline of small group teaching and the tutorial. Lecturers have less time to comment on students’ written work: students have fewer opportunities to speak with teachers directly. Coffin, et al, (2003:3) point to the pressures on student writers and the writing process in the contemporary context:

Student academic writing continues to be at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, but is often an invisible dimension of the curriculum; that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to be part of the ‘common sense’ knowledge students have, and are thus not explicitly taught within disciplinary courses. If students lack familiarity with these conventions, the assumption is often held that they will ‘pick it up’ as part of learning their subject knowledge

Lillis (2001: 54) specifically refers to this as “a model of learning as implicit induction”. It is based on the traditional practice of inducting small numbers of privileged students into the ways of the academy “through close and regular contact between teachers and students within the context of a relatively small and homogeneous social and cultural community”. Lillis also states that a very particular type of writing continues to be the mainstay within many subject areas: the ‘essay’.

it would be wrong to think of the ‘essay’ as a clearly defined genre if by ‘genre’ we mean something like a text type. For ‘essay (and hence the scare quotes) is really institutionalised shorthand for a particular way of constructing knowledge which has come to be privileged within the academy... *essayist literacy*.. (p. 20)

Lillis (2006) claims what is deemed ‘common-sense’ in student academic writing is embedded and implicit, rather than explicitly taught. The mediating potential of talk contributes to making practices and the language associated with them visible to student writers as well as exploring the possibilities and boundaries of meaning making.

Womack (1993) refers to the essay as the ‘default genre’ in academic writing. It is the one that everyone returns to other than in exceptional circumstances when innovative assessment practices are implemented. The higher up the education system a student goes the stronger its grip. This inevitability makes the form seem natural. Another issue is the assumption that the essay is a fair medium for assessment: it is accessible to everybody who can think in and use English. However, Womack points out an inherent contradiction: it is valued because of this assumed universality but also because a (privileged) few of us can do it. The student writer is faced with a mixed message: conform to the code of practice intrinsic to essay writing (support each and every assertion with evidence, use appropriate written style and handle all points of argument in a balanced way, etc) and the demand for fresh, independent and original thought to warrant high grades. The stress signal for this tension is plagiarism. Student writers experience a disjunction between being themselves and having to conform to a model outside of themselves. In order to do that they adopt the voice of another and construct themselves within an approved and elitist form of discourse. The emphasis on individual authorship integral to ‘essayist literacy’ is what distinguishes the ‘essay’ from so many other literary forms. This remains current in British higher education. Womack expresses concern about a pedagogy which denies students access to its own metalanguage and withdraws from finding a way to write academic texts, in every forum – from the classroom assignment to the research seminar – together.

#### **4.2 ‘Mystery’ and ‘transparency’**

Turner (1999a) points out that there is a strong association between language, academic discourse, logic and rationality in the western academic tradition; poor language is also deemed an indication of deficiency in the latter two areas. Academic discourse is closely bound to academic thinking and clarity in the representation of

knowledge. Turner points out that this is intrinsic to the value system of the academy and manifest in the comments tutors habitually make ('you do not focus your ideas clearly enough', 'this is all over the place' 'more attention to structure', 'good concise analysis' 'well structured'). These comments under-specify and remain implicit (cf. Hounsell, 1987). Turner (1999b) calls for change to an institutionalised discourse which eschews the explicit teaching of writing, positions students who fall outside its implicit value system as deficient and literacy support specialists as "repairmen or mechanics rather than educators in their own right" (p. 36). Lillis and Turner (2001) critique the historical-cultural tradition of transparency and assumptions about the inter-relatedness of language and thought as the expectations of a socioculturally different period. They conclude with a plea for:

the formation of new pedagogies that better engage with students, who are welcomed into the academy by the rhetoric of widening participation, but at the same time denied an adequate participation by the taken-for-granted assumptions about academic conventions (p. 66).

Garner (1995) draws attention to the conduit metaphor (Reddy 1979) inherent to thought on the way language and communication work. The danger in learning and teaching contexts is that communication is often seen only in transmission terms. Garner recognises the dialogic nature in the process of knowledge construction: the student is, by taking a subject, entering a state of dialogue with the teacher and needs to construct meanings from a variety of interactions (face to face, through texts, etc). Some students assimilate, others need advice and assistance. The socio-discursive space between tutors and students provides the opportunity to research questions such as what sorts of mismatches in interpretation occur, with what sorts of students and in what contexts.

The converse of transparency is what Lillis (1999; 2001) refers to as the 'institutional practice of mystery'. Lillis (2001: 168) states that there needs to be an explicit acknowledgement in higher education of the limitations of the conduit model of communication in both pedagogy and the way student writing is conceptualised. She points out that the extensive use of written guidelines across institutions has only limited value as a means for teaching and learning 'essayist literacy': guidelines are meaningful to students only when they are familiar with this practice. The institutional perspective is to regard these conventions as 'common sense'. Lillis

illustrates how the institutional practice of mystery is enacted by analysing the injunction to 'be explicit'. Lillis teased out as many as ten potential meanings in a given context, many of which, in turn, raise further questions depending on the student's familiarity with 'essayist literacy'. A problem facing the student writer is uncertainty about what tutors say they want and mean and what in fact they mean and the criteria they use. Lillis describes case-studies with ten students, where the meaning and demands of the essay question are examined. Confusion manifests itself in various ways: over the meaning of essay questions (what is to be 'discussed' and what is to be 'taken as a given'), knowing what tutors want/expect (trying to guess what tutors want/writing for different tutors with different views about the nature of a task), the meaning of tutors' comments and the implicit nature of requirements ('describe' invariably requires analysis, for example).

Lillis (2001) draws on Bakhtin's (1981) notion of monologic 'addressivity' and links it with Bartholomae's notion of the student 'inventing the university'. As outsiders students have to invent the voices of institutionally acceptable content and wording. It is invention – the language they bring from other socio-cultural domains more familiar to them - rather than negotiation that determines how they make meaning and understand academic writing. Based on her research with 'non-traditional' students from socially excluded groups, Lillis (2003) claims that these students desire a focus on meaning making rather than one which is "monologic-dialectic" (the tutor's voice is dominant). In such dialogic encounters 'talkback' is advocated over traditional feedback as a way of inducting students unfamiliar with essayist literacy into higher education practices and making language visible. A student's work is a text in process and the student writer is invited into the process of exploring potential meanings from their own perspective during tutorial interactions through 'dialogues of participation'. Disciplinary content is opened up to accommodate other cultural perspectives and challenge what counts as relevant knowledge.

Northedge (2003a) considers the challenges students face when confronted by the specialist discourse of the disciplinary/knowledge community. There is a transition from everyday understandings of things to the ways in which knowledge is spoken and written about in the discourse community. Participation is engendered by enabling students, through teaching, to use the discourse and by making more explicit the frames of reference in which that discourse is made meaningful. The role of the

teacher as an insider and specialist is to facilitate the capacity in students to share in meaning making using the specialist discourse within the implicit frames of reference; otherwise students find themselves:

‘locked out’ – unable to make sense of the utterances they encounter because they cannot place them within implicit frames of reference, but equally unable to make progress with internalising these frames because they cannot engage with the utterances through which the frames are made manifest. This is why students need teachers (p. 172).

Northedge (2003b: 23) claims “the role of education... is to support participation in the role of unfamiliar knowledge communities”. Discourse is key as many students, especially those coming from diverse backgrounds experience new knowledge as often “discordant and unsettling” (cf. Ballard and Clanchy, 1988; Hounsell, 1987, 1988). He enumerates the social challenges for such students as finding voice and identity within the ‘discourse community’ by learning to ‘think’ and ‘speak’ its discourse; challenging accepted norms and engaging in debate; and switching between discursive worlds – the everyday, the professional and the academic.

Scott (2000a) draws attention to the fact that students bring with them to university assumptions and understandings from their past learning which may fail to match the expectations of teachers. What is missing is awareness and the ability to talk about the specificities associated with meanings in particular fields. The pedagogical implications are that tutors need to consider the role they play in teaching by recognising where the student is coming from and making appropriate interventions to facilitate understanding.

### **4.3. Feedback, assessment and learning research**

Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002a) researched how students may ‘read’ tutor comments but have difficulty in interpreting them. The researchers drew on Biggs’ (1999, 2003) notion of ‘constructive alignment’ and ‘deep learning’ (Marton and Säljö, 1976). Biggs emphasises a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in which meanings are constructed through learning activities. In this way teaching and learning are about conceptual change. This is based on the notion that there are ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ students. A characteristic of the latter is a lack of

engagement. Teaching, curriculum and assessment methods are 'aligned' to specific objectives which define the 'what' and 'how' of teaching and how learning should be assessed. The objectives are expressed in terms of particular criteria - largely abstract verbs such as 'analyse', 'hypothesise', 'theorise', etc - to indicate higher levels of thinking and the level of understanding required by students. Teaching must be active in helping students internalise these sufficiently: in effect, rendering them more tangible, transparent and meaningful. Learning activities evaluate how well objectives have been met. Feedback practices are also aligned so that the language used reflects and includes the types of verbs indicated above. It is "a criterion-referenced system" (Biggs 1999). It is also consistent with the QAA's code of practice for assessment and feedback which supports greater transparency and specificity in assessment criteria (QAA, 2000).

Higgins, et al (2002a) point out that for alignment to be successful students must be able to grasp the language of assessment on which feedback comments are based. The role of the tutor is a central factor. Typically, students understand and identify the subject through their tutors. For the 'academic' student, on the other hand, the connection with the subject is stronger than it is for 'non-academic'. This represents how students position or perceive themselves in the learning context. The 'academic' engages more with the subject, has his own opinions and regards the tutor not as a transmitter of knowledge but as a source of informed interpretation and a support for his learning and academic development. In contrast the non-academic is more dependent: tutors are experts. In order to write assignments correctly in each subject/topic context it is important to know what the 'rules' are by consulting different tutors. The 'academic' will go on learning in a 'deep way'. He is better able to access the particular, tacit discourses necessary for success. The 'non-academic' will remain dependent and this will stifle his understanding of feedback terms. The ideal student should be independent and self-sufficient; if they are not then the task is to alter that state of affairs by somehow altering the student. This is the fundamental premise of a constructivist/aligned approach to teaching and learning.

The same researchers (Higgins, et al, 2002b) take their study of the impact of assessment feedback a stage further. Students are considered to be either extrinsically or intrinsically motivated to read feedback comments: they are instrumental consumers of education driven by marks (and)/or they value help to engage with their subject in a deep way as explained above. Higgins, et al, (2002b) 'set the scene' by

mentioning that in the current context of education the conditions for feedback to work optimally may not be in place. They point to heavy student workloads, delays in students receiving feedback in modularised structures, the perceived relevance to new areas of study when feedback is subject specific and the nature of feedback (authoritarian, judgemental, empathetic, etc). In other words students perceive feedback negatively if it does not provide enough information to be helpful; it is too impersonal, and: if it is too general and vague to be used formatively. Tutor perceptions play an important part. For example tutors may be sceptical or cynical about whether feedback is ever 'read'. However, the responses from students indicated that they regularly and increasingly failed to understand the tacit nature of academic discourses underpinning assessment criteria and the language of feedback. Higgins, et al, (2002b) point out that while feedback comments employ the language used to express assessment criteria only 33% of their respondents claimed to understand that language. Nonetheless, students were interested in and concerned about the intrinsic value of learning in higher education: they rated highly comments by tutors that focus on generic, 'deep skills' such as "critical analysis" and "argument". The researchers conclude that feedback is largely based on values and vocabulary that may mean nothing to students. They suggest (2001) that discussion between tutors and students may help to open up dialogue between tutors themselves on the conflicting nature of advice based on different meanings across disciplines.

Orr (2005) views assessment as a social practice and challenges the technorationalism in contemporary discourse and research. The concept of transparency is a key technology of accountability and integral to quality assurance (QAA 2000). It is also seen as compatible with 'fairness' and 'clarity' around assessment, grading criteria, outcomes and feedback. This is popular in the current context of higher education, especially with academic managers because it renders the curriculum transportable. In these circumstances full-time academics can be replaced by part-time teaching staff. Transparency also contributes to the power base of the university by insulating the institution from student appeals (Becher and Trowler, 2001) and a shared language which enhances the potential for pedagogical discussion among teaching staff. Orr contends that transparency is a more complex and contested concept than it seems. Firstly, it supports a perception that difficulties in the assessment relationship are mainly in the student and fails to recognise the relational nature of learning and power. Secondly, lecturers frequently subscribe to tacit or

hidden beliefs and attitudes which limit transparency in practice. Thirdly, language is treated as a conduit where meanings are transmitted rather than constructed. In addition transparency is used to propagate higher education agendas. The concept of learning outcomes commodifies learning; commodification makes 'accountability' easier. Orr points out (p.180) that this incurs "opportunity costs" where time and energy is focused on a parallel documented world rather than the real one of student learning:

Contemporary focus is only on the learning outcomes *produced* by such deliberation but the *process* of writing and agreeing learning outcomes can contribute to the formation of an assessment community. This maximises dialogic opportunities... (Italics in original) (p.183)

Chanock (2000) focused on two terms that occur time and again in tutors' comments on student written work: 'analysis' and 'description', and the specific comment: 'too much description, not enough analysis'. Chanock surveyed some classes to explore what tutors thought these comments meant, what students thought they meant, how far they coincide and whether or how the comment is explained to students. The empirical data did not answer the question so Chanock hypothesised. One possibility is that students are aware of deficiencies in their written work and interpret tutor comments subjectively (Chanock mentioned a student who uses too many quotes and interpreted 'not enough analysis' in this way). Another possibility is that students read the comment ambiguously because they are thrown by the unexplicated quality of many similar type comments. Overall the results revealed a lack of precision over the communication and understanding of 'analysis' begging the question: to what extent could students satisfactorily write an 'analysis'? Staff responded that they were never asked to explain the comment and some felt that students should understand it anyway. Interestingly, one respondent sought to explain the comment through an analogy with sports writing. This evokes Lea and Street's (1998) observations on tutors' abilities to explicate clearly their metalanguage. Chanock calls for discussion of meanings at the departmental level for the sake of consistency.

Carless (2006) considered how perceptions of the feedback process differ between tutors and students. He unpacks the student response to feedback by linking three components: discourse, power and emotion. Students are mystified by the first, feel vulnerable and unclear in relation to the second - for example perceptions of



tutors' biases and uncertainty about formal procedures such as second marking and moderation, and the third, arguably a corollary of the second, can (if negative) form a barrier to learning. Carless includes such emotions as aversion to being 'judged' and a sense of 'inferiority'. This seems pertinent in considering the sensibilities and experiences of non-traditional students in particular.

Ivanič, et al, (2000) point out that the language used in feedback determines the nature of the relationship and the possible messages students receive. These messages position students as individuals in relation to the academy –its values and practices and how they stand in this respect (are they excluded and marginalised, or included and valued?); about academic writing – its value and function; and about the values and beliefs of the university – is it monolithically authoritative or open to challenge and change? Highly didactic language emphasises the power differential. Alternatively, feedback “which builds students sense of membership of the academic community” (p. 61) promotes a relationship based on collegiality and affect. The important point is that feedback is communication that presupposes a relationship between the reader and writer (cf. Lea and Street, 1998).

Hounsell (2003, 2007), consistent with an aligned/constructivist perspective, calls for feedback to be considered within a framework for cooperative learning stressing collaborative and innovative techniques around peer assessment and open displays of student work. Hounsell calls for more attention to be given to the 'intrinsic' nature of feedback as an implicit yet concurrent aspect of teaching and learning interactions and for feedback as (written) communication to be 'congruent' (Biggs, 2003) with curriculum goals, teaching, learning and assessment strategies. Hounsell also highlights feedback's 'Cinderella status' in research and notes that the quality of feedback goes undervalued in module questionnaires, unmonitored in course and programme reviews and unscrutinised by external examiners. This state of affairs negates the potential of feedback research to contribute to the development of expertise and reflection in both new and more experienced lecturers.

Coffin, et al, (2003) mention the importance of feedback dialogues: in written form, face-to-face or on-line. This both encourages students to read feedback and forms a bridge for checking and communicating understandings. Feedback is not an end in itself but a beginning for on-going development in the learner. It is a scaffolded or staged approach (Bruner, 1966, 1975; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978) where, in due course, the expert tutor/writer hands over responsibility to the student. Students then

understand the choices they can make in academia and gain in autonomy and critical awareness. For many students unfamiliar with the literacy practice of ‘essays’ it is the point where they can move beyond ‘giving the tutor what he/she wants’ and ‘playing the game’ (p. 127).

#### **4.4 Academic literacies: strengths and weaknesses**

Lea (2004) identified that the strength of the academic literacies approach has been that it does not assume that students are acculturated unproblematically into the academic culture simply through engaging with the discourses and practices of established practitioners. She contrasts this with the phenomenographic tradition focused on the student experience of learning (e.g. Marton and Booth, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Biggs, 1999, 2003) and the communities of practice notion (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The former is predominantly concerned with student learning and more specifically the interpretation and understanding of learning tasks. Teaching is about ‘articulated views’, ‘planned outcomes’, ‘prior experience’, altering ‘perceptions’ and moulding students ‘understanding’ and ‘intentions’ accordingly. There is little acknowledgement in this tradition of cultural heterogeneity in the academy, diversity of practices and the nature of language is not fully challenged or explored (an exception to the latter is Hounsell’s work outlined earlier). As such academic literacies research offers an additional and contrastive perspective to the psychological approaches associated with the ‘student experience’ research (Ivanič and Lea, 2006)

The concept of communities of practice is central to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). A core notion is the idea of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ which is used to explain how novices joining the community ‘acquire’ appropriate and valued skills. However, Lave and Wenger’s ideas were developed to describe learning in everyday or work-based contexts and have been adapted to education (refer to the ideas of Northedge in the previous section). While this notion emphasises the novice student in the role of ‘apprentice’ gradually attaining full membership of the wider university community it fails, according to Lea, to recognise the complex nature and multiplicity of practices that exist in today’s higher education environment. Lea (2005: 181) is sceptical about its application as a “top down educational model” to justify design and implementation in teaching and learning. The model’s heuristic

qualities – as a means of asking questions about and understanding more critically learning and teaching as contextualised practice – are under-explored. As such it is invoked to emphasise acculturation into new ‘communities’ but critique is omitted.

Academic literacies research has also provided a framework for theorising student writing in HE and increasing awareness of approaches to writing pedagogy (Ivanič: 2004). Lillis (2003, 2006) constructs a multi-levelled model to this effect, adapting and extending Lea and Street’s typology of skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies. On each side is a continuum indicating, on one side, the status of practices within HE from ‘dominant’ to ‘oppositional’ and, on the other, the ‘goals of higher education’ moving from ‘monologic’ practice to ‘dialogic’ practices at the level of academic literacies. Lillis leaves a question mark at this juncture to infer that pedagogy is an open and unresolved matter. Lillis (2003: 192) notes:

Whilst powerful as an oppositional frame, that is as a *critique* of current conceptualisations and practices surrounding student writing, academic literacies has yet to be developed as a *design* [i.e. pedagogical] frame... (Italics in original: brackets added)

Lea (2007) noted that the term ‘academic literacies’ has entered institutional discourse associated with learning and study support but with little real impact on the nature and status of that provision both inside and outside the curriculum. On the other hand, there is evidence that academic literacies theorising and research is contributing to mainstream educational debates about approaches to pedagogy (e.g. Haggis, 2006), assessment and feedback (e.g. Bloxham and West, 2007), at the level of institutional pedagogical initiatives (e.g. Ganobscik-Williams (ed), 2006) and in coalescing research perspectives (e.g. Ashwin and McLean, 2005). Furthermore, academic literacies research is widening its field of enquiry to include objects of study other than student writing (e.g. the writing practices of academics and writing practices in diverse educational domains outside higher education). While this widening continues to emphasise the critical nature of academic literacies research and contestation around power, authority and identity in writing it is distancing itself from a ‘normative’ conception in the applied domain of student writing and learning in higher education (Lillis and Scott, 2007). Lea (2007), nevertheless, calls for a more critically ethnographic stance and a broadening of contexts for academic literacies research in the domain of student writing and learning to include a range of texts involved in course design such as course materials, guidance notes for students, web-

based resources, feedback sheets and even policy documents concerned with quality assessment procedures. What is missing in research into student academic literacy development in the contemporary context of higher education is the sort of fine-grained, thick-description (Geertz, 1973) that was a feature Lea and Street's original ethnographic style work. Academic literacies research needs to engage anew with context to bring analysis up-to-date and reinvigorate research. More recently, research and critical debate in teaching and learning in higher education has begun to move away from a focus on abstract critique and theorising to engage more critically with higher education practices and agendas in the current context. Academic literacies research and theorising is one strand in a diverse research endeavour and developing mainstream debate within a shifting higher education context which is the focus of the next section in this review.

## **5.0 The British university in the twenty-first century**

### **5.1 Change and continuity**

The last twenty years have witnessed the greatest period of change in higher education in its size, structure, curricula and learning and teaching methods. In the early 1980s Britain had one of the lowest age participation rates among developed countries. Universities were almost entirely supplier-led and the following characteristics were typical:

- insistence on standard forms of knowledge and certification on entry;
- entry immediately after school (A-levels, hence the notion of the 'traditional student');
- curriculum provision predominantly and narrowly focused on single discipline study;
- study away from home, family and community;
- expert/novice forms of teaching (lectures and unseen examinations, etc);
- costs (fees and, to a large extent, maintenance) borne mainly by the state.

In the space of twenty years none of the aforementioned is in fact 'typical' of higher education (in England) any longer.

Tight (1989) identified five main purposes (ideologies) for higher education:

- Selection – identifying and accrediting individuals with higher level abilities of certain kinds
- Socialisation – participants are prepared for their future roles, reinforcing and forming appropriate values and behaviour
- Scholarship – the advancement of learning
- Skills development – the aim to develop skills in participants which are of value to the individual, potential or actual employers and society as a whole
- Service – the responsibility to serve industry and community and integrate with wider society rather than be separate from it

In the past, even before the abolition of the binary (university/polytechnic) system, the first two, arguably three, were the core concerns and values of higher education. Skills and vocational training were only marginal to the university remit and were located in other public sector institutions. This provision is now fully integrated. There was a clear demarcation of boundaries between higher education and the outside world. The balance has significantly altered and higher education has experienced a paradigm shift.

A historical perspective is important in understanding the values, priorities and practices of the present. Writing almost twenty years ago, Wright (1989: 105) called for ‘putting learning at the centre of higher education’ through greater accountability and the inclusion of explicit yardsticks by which outsiders might judge the quality of what the academy does. In order to increase accessibility it was desirable to change features of the environment (beyond access mechanisms) which made it remote and unattractive to a wider range of potential entrants and stakeholders:

- a more explicit, transparent and detailed consideration of the aims and objectives of courses and how these relate to the needs, capacities, skills and knowledge of target students;
- making this explicit in the monitoring, review and validation processes for courses;
- define learning at various points in degree study in terms of explicit and relatively specific outcomes and fashioning assessment practices to that end;
- rethinking the content and form of courses in accordance with planned outcomes;
- engaging in consultation with other parties (clients and stakeholders) about the qualities of graduates;

- on the basis of the foregoing to consider different entry points and shorter course structures so that not all students come in at the same point;
- engage employers to a greater extent in the design and assessment of courses;
- increase connections and collaboration with feeder institutions (schools and colleges) to aid the transition of young people into higher education.

This thinking culminated in the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and the publication of the Dearing Report (1997). ‘Dearing’ (as it is more commonly known) emphasised the importance of higher education in equipping society for the challenges and vicissitudes of the modern era. The core concepts are the promotion of a “learning society” and the fostering of “life-long learning”. Both notions are primarily linked to economic growth and productivity but Dearing also emphasises a democratic conception aimed at widening participation in HE and the opening up life chances for more people from a broader educational, occupational and social base.

Teaching, learning and course provision are central concerns and Dearing consists of a series of ‘recommendations’ suggesting how its ideals can be met while maintaining UK higher education as a world leader in teaching and learning. One of the core recommendations is the promotion of student learning and its maximisation through the teaching function. Teaching became open to scrutiny and a call for modernisation. According to Dearing ‘effective’ teaching could be engendered through the greater use of information technology, more explicit training for academic staff and practical research into learning and teaching processes with a view to “placing higher education teaching on a more professional basis” (Recommendation 8). To that end The Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) were established. Intrinsic to ‘life-long learning’ and the future success of graduates was embedding Key Skills in the teaching of programmes. Barnett (1998: 13) describes this as “an assault on the discipline-bound curriculum which has structured Western higher education for much of its history”.

The curriculum has changed in its content, its degree of specialisation and its relationship to the world and experience of students. Change is manifest in the proliferation of multi-disciplinary and modularised degree courses, articulated strategies for teaching and learning, specified assessment criteria, and outcomes-

based learning in response to the skills and employability agenda. This has been instrumental in fostering widening access and opening up higher education on the one hand; it has led to the systematisation of teaching and the commodification of learning on the other. The 'new universities', in particular, have become sites for continuing professional education. This has led to the disciplinarisation of many areas of professional education and the emergence of 'practice-based disciplines' (Baynham, 2000). The role and the range of activities that academic staff engage in have changed. There is more pressure on senior academics in terms of bureaucracy and local management. They are often engaged in the 'business' of the university externally, liaising with other institutions, external bodies and generating income. Junior academic staff are often on full-teaching timetables but enter an environment which is systematised and impersonal.

The power of stakeholders - the government, employers and students - has increased as the 'economy' of higher education has changed with the introduction of tuition fees, the scrapping of maintenance grants and the introduction of student loans, allocation of higher education funding in accordance with targets, quotas, etc. HEIs are no longer entirely publicly funded institutions but commercially oriented, going-concerns responsible and accountable for their own operational, managerial and fiscal efficiency. In a market environment universities are given to differentiate themselves on the basis of their missions and their unique selling point(s) in order to attract students to their 'products'.

Rapid change elicits short-term responses organisationally. Managerialism has become a feature of higher education culture and practice espousing values such as responsiveness, accountability, pragmatism and economies of scale. Change is destabilising and disorientating and resistance to these aspects is instinctive in organisations at various levels. Massification has been the product of external (economic and political) and not internal influences. Inertia is one strategy of dealing with any unwelcome aspects of change. However, it is at the level of attitudes and beliefs related to values, roles and practices that resistance becomes rejection. Scott (1995) argued that while higher education has massified in its public structures it remains elitist in its habits and instincts.

Trowler (2002) draws attention to the 'loose coupling' between HE policy initiatives at the upper level and outcomes on the ground. He uses Reynolds and Saunders' (1987) metaphor of the 'implementation staircase'. Formal policy and

funding regimes are made at the national level. Vice chancellors and top management respond to and interpret policy in strategic ways. Heads of departments employ, reject or ignore demands for compliance, negotiating or reconstructing the discursive repertoires in which policy is encoded. Academic staff adapt, ignore or interpret policy – not all of which reaches them – as they think appropriate. Finally, students respond in unpredictable ways reciprocally changing relationships and practices in teaching and learning situations. Trowler (2002: 3) maintains that the implementation model helps to explain the development of gaps and inconsistencies in practices: divergence is inevitable because of complexity on the ground. Trowler invokes Cohen and March's (1974) characterisation of universities as 'organised anarchies', and states that policy-making and implementation at the institutional level are more likely to be the result of processes of negotiation, compromise and conflict than of rational decisions, technical solutions, careful planning and the incremental realisation of coherent strategy.

## **5.2 Teaching, learning and social positioning**

Massification should be distinguished from participation. The latter is not achieved if new entrants to university are leaving, or dropping-out, without the qualifications they were given to believe they would get and with their educational aspirations unfulfilled. A corollary issue to widening participation is student engagement and retention. In the current context of higher education are we really 'putting learning at the centre of higher education'? The time has come to critically evaluate current practices and the values they embody.

Morley (2003a) ponders the extent to which marketisation and the construction of the student as both 'customer' and 'consumer' has changed social and pedagogical relationships in the academy through learning contracts, guidelines, assessment criteria, learning outcomes, core skills, "all of which in various ways attempt to systematise and codify student/teacher interactions" (p. 129). Morley states that in this context student 'care' is 'commodified' and higher education has become like the hospitality industry (p.134). Official measures such as quality audits of teaching and the introduction of performance indicators sanctioned by the QAA, reinforce this state of affairs. Information is increasingly codified and available in the public domain for the purposes of 'consumer' choice (e.g. quality assurance ratings,



league tables, etc). Morley is concerned that presentation and contract are prioritised and that the university is moving away from its traditional identification with academic disciplines towards a technocratic and instrumental view of knowledge. Morley comments, for example, that quality assessment is time consuming, labour intensive and reduces time available for students, damaging rather than improving the student experience (cf. Orr, 2005). Quality assurance is really about assessing performance and the regulation of academics but it is couched in the rhetoric of 'the student experience'. Referring to her own research with academics and managers she mentions that improved teaching or enhanced disciplinary knowledge were rarely cited as outcomes of quality assessment.

On the one hand there is emphasis on transparency and accountability in the interests of 'customer' satisfaction and 'consumer' awareness. On the other, the mass system has led to fewer face-to-face engagements between students and teachers and a consequent decrease in 'trust'. Documentation as contract fills the space. It also redefines the boundaries and sets limits to the social relationships between students and teachers. It allows (some) academics to retain (some) autonomy in a relationship of acquiescence with, and accountability to, the demands of 'consumers'. Quality assurance values students as a source of knowledge production. However, student feedback on quality issues can be methodologically unreliable because 'it tends to be driven by provider assumptions and concerns' (p.138). Students are co-opted. Morley (2003b) questions if the incorporation of the student voice into quality procedures is really an exercise in 'assimilationist politics'.

This is the paradox of marketisation and massification in higher education: the student is ostensibly empowered as stakeholder, consumer, and customer but their voice has become domesticated and assimilated with little real influence in, and control over, matters concerning their own educational experience. It is not simply the student voice which has become regulated. Morley (2003a: 165) asserts that workers in the academy have to incorporate and internalise the discourse of quality assurance for their professional and organisational survival. As a result there is little or no scope to openly contest it. There is an ostensive 'common-sense' logic and inevitability associated with a discourse of 'quality', 'excellence' and 'best practice' that promotes conformity but stifles opposition and constrains debate. The terms used to describe organisational life in the academy are also the forces shaping it. Morley wonders what

place is there for difference and diversity in an environment dominated by conformance and standards and whether a culture of ‘excellence’ leads to mediocrity.

Widening participation and marketisation have given rise to issues and concerns about student engagement/disengagement retention and attrition within the mass system. This is a prominent theme in the current research agenda in higher education (e.g. Peelo and Wareham (eds.), 2002). Morley’s notion of the student as assimilated and compliant implies a form of marginalisation that belies the ostensive empowerment of the student as ‘stakeholder’. A more radical perspective is taken by Mann (2001) who considers different ways which, in the current context of higher education, an alienated experience of learning might arise. Prominent in her exploration, and in common with academic literacies research, are issues of power and discourse and how the processes and structures of higher education limit the extent to which students can exercise power over their own learning and development. Morley considers the effect of oblique contextual and structural factors on the student experience and says a lot about the lived experience of teachers in today’s higher education ‘system’. Yorke (2005: 48) makes the point that student learning and engagement is a factor of “the culture of the unit to which they are attached”. It is at the micro-cultural level of the teaching context that real difference has to be made:

Assuring quality sometimes seems to have a higher priority than ensuring quality; the regulatory framework sometimes seems more like a cage than something one can climb up; under pressures of various kinds, it is easier to be compliant than to hunt for ‘workarounds’ that might serve the student better (p. 49)

The ‘academic culture’ in UK higher education traditionally, and arguably more so under the current pressures within the system, externalises, rather than embeds student learning around writing and academic literacy development in the curriculum more generally and disciplinary teaching in particular. Higher education is massifying in its structures without holding up for critique the implicit values and beliefs that underpin its practices.

### **5.3 Challenges and alternatives**

Haggis (2006) problematises the notion of, and use of the term, ‘support’ as pathologising students. It implies there are those who need it and those who do not;

the latter being a superior group who can work in an unsupported way. Orr and Blythman, (2003) noted that the way 'study support' is conceptualised by lecturers influences the discourse used and the messages given to students. Conceptualisations range from the complete separation of 'skills' and content in the curricula and therefore separate roles and functions for the specialist and non-specialist, to working together as a partnership where an overlap of responsibilities exists. However, another conceptualisation that appeared frequently in Orr and Blythman's investigation is what they call "the leftovers approach". The study team take care of aspects of the curriculum which are squeezed out due to lack of time: "In this case what we do in the study support service is dictated by what the lecturer does not do in class" (p. 181).

University practices are either 'bolt-on' (Bennett, et al, 2000) and detached from mainstream study or 'built-in', where learning is developed through disciplinary teaching. Wingate (2006) noted on the basis of a random web search of 10 post-92 universities and 10 pre-92 universities that 18 of these offer bolt-on study skills courses through ancillary services (study skills centres, student and library services and even the students' union). Wingate enumerates the main reasons for the predominance of the bolt-on model. The first is the organisational and managerial challenges in coordinating progressive skills development through courses. Secondly, academic staff are reluctant to concern themselves with student learning outside content and propositional knowledge. Another is the conceptualisation of study skills and their role in broader skills frameworks such that they are often differentiated in practical terms from key/transferable skills and work related notions. Constructing study skills as detachable and transferable frees up space on the curriculum for the inclusion of other components. A consequence is that curricula are over-loaded and academic literacy support is extra-curricular.

Warren (2002) considers the challenges of developing curriculum models that can accommodate a more heterogeneous student body and be compatible with changing conceptions of higher education and current agendas; "a holistic curriculum response is desirable to the dual challenge of widening participation and skills agendas" (p. 91). Students need guidance and assistance in becoming familiar with specialist concepts, theories, models and writing conventions specific to the subject. Warren distinguishes three approaches and associated curriculum models: separate, semi-integrated, and, integrated. The first is an 'add-on (bolt-on) model'. These

models are frequently reliant on voluntary participation. Students struggling with a full curriculum load already are often disinclined to commit to extra non-credit bearing 'support' modules. Students advised or even obliged to take these courses may feel resentful or stigmatised. These optional extras often fail to reach unmotivated or academically weak students. There are also questions over transferability to target/mainstream study especially with a generic study skills emphasis. Finally, because limited time is available add-on provision inhibits deeper learning and understanding of the subject in discipline specific terms. Learners get stuck at border-line levels of performance, scraping through rather than excelling. The underlying emphasis is on remediation.

The integrated model is for all students and particularly those in undergraduate study. It is based on the premise that *all* students can benefit from a teaching and learning process that makes transparent the practices and discourses of the subject and aims at explicitly fostering in students requisite communicative skills, understanding and application of knowledge and awareness of disciplinary values. The emphasis is on development appropriate to the discipline or subject and embedding this in the mainstream curriculum. A semi-integrated approach shares the same goals and assumptions about the learning process. Provision is part of the formal curriculum, credit-bearing and closely articulated with the rest of the curriculum. Learning is developmental learning rather than remedial. Warren notes 'academic literacy' modules embedded in the curriculum provide space for non-traditional students to develop the language tools, epistemological and methodological understandings – the process knowledge (cf. Haggis, 2006) - that help them overcome feelings of marginality and deficiency. This in turn, changes perceptions of the teaching and learning relationship in the academy. Warren points out the practical challenges and ethical grounds for curriculum reform in the context of widening participation:

As with any major curriculum-development initiative, the planning and co-ordination of new programmes, together with staff development to prepare tutors, is an arduous undertaking. In many instances, resulting improvements in the quality of both teaching and learning would seem to justify the effort, besides the educational arguments in favour (p. 9)

Haggis (2006: 523) points out that the values of higher education are embedded in the ideas and models of learning of the institution and reflected in its discourse (e.g.

independent learning, student responsibility, etc). Such values are not ‘neutral truths’ but reveal what is encouraged and rewarded: they are ideological. They are also largely implicit and difficult for students unfamiliar with expectations and the discourse to access. Furthermore, a lack of shared understandings about practices and the values underpinning them between students, their teachers and the institution create barriers to learning. Haggis contends that “certain types of barrier may actually be integral to certain institutional practices and assumptions” (p. 525). The focus shifts from student ‘deficits’ to the curriculum and what aspects of it are preventing some students from being able to access the subject.

Haggis outlines five potential areas to this effect. Firstly, students lack familiarity with process in higher education. There may be a lack of previous experience of educational work and so unfamiliarity with institutional and curricular expectations (at least initially). Secondly, students in a mass system are coming to university with a range of motives and types of engagement. They may not be especially interested in the subject or have any background in it. This is likely to be the case in applied and vocational areas with students entering or returning to education and seeking to improve their ‘professional’ qualifications under the aegis of life-long learning and widening participation. Haggis contends that this needs to be viewed constructively rather than negatively. It is the role of the teacher and the curriculum to be more explicit about aspects of the discipline that are likely to be less accessible to these students and create interest and commitment to study in the process. Students need to get a clear idea of the orientation of the discipline to become engaged in the critical and analytical way teachers expect and higher education values. The epistemological underpinnings of the discipline(s) need to be made explicit and accessible (cf. Lea and Street, 1998). Teachers and curriculum designers need to consider the level of language they use and the style of the discourse. However, this is one area which is likely to be associated with lowering standards and ‘dumbing down’; but for the majority of student access to language is access to understanding (cf. Lea and Street, 1998; Hounsell, 1997a, 1987; Lillis, 2001; Lillis and Turner, 2001).

Finally, Haggis stresses the importance of explicitly supporting students with the nature of process in the discipline. This involves exploring aspects that are opaque to students inexperienced with them. It is not about giving students answers but helping them with *how* to understand and approach academic writing tasks and texts.

This was an approach adopted by English (1999) in a case-study with a Japanese student writer writing in the history essay genre; an example which indicates the importance and applicability of this approach with a cross-section of learners. It is resonant with the notion of ‘talking students into academic literacy’ outlined earlier (cf. Coffin, et al. 2003; Lillis, 2001; Scott, 2000a). Student writers need explicit support not only with the linguistic and stylistic forms but with the tacit conventions surrounding academic writing such as critique, evaluation, appropriate support and referencing and making content relevant to the question and the discussion expected. These are the questions that students are left to sort out for themselves in accordance with traditional higher education values. They are “the embedded, processual complexities of thinking, understanding, and acting in specific disciplinary contexts” and which can be “explored as an integral part of academic content teaching within the disciplines themselves” (Haggis, 2006: 530). Haggis stresses that this is neither ‘dumbing down’ nor ‘spoon feeding’; it is “learning how to *do* learning in *that* subject” (p. 532) (*italics in original*). Haggis points out that these are educational not learning processes; they are defined by the institution and the discipline rather than by the learners themselves. Warren (2003) advocates an academic literacies model which is discipline-based and focused on making transparent the knowledge-making and communicative practices of the subject area. He exemplifies this approach in a description of a History module in which there are regular opportunities for active learning and participation. Warren emphasises that this redefines the role of the lecturer as ‘scholar-teacher’ who knows what it is to help students make the knowledge necessary to be literate in the subject (cf. Northedge, 2003a and b; Ballard and Clanchy, 1988).

Haggis points out that while many aspects of higher education culture and practice should be contested the approach to pedagogy she advocates attempts to follow a path between ‘conventional’ and ‘radical’ approaches to pedagogical change and innovation. Other writers attempt to do something similar but with very different implications. Boud (2006) takes a critical stance towards one of pedagogical research’s sacred cows – (student)/learner-centredism. He questions the assumption that we all know what learner centredism means and what others mean by it. He considers this by reviewing the different forms of learner-centred innovation over time pointing out that the discourse remains even when particular versions of learner centred programmes and innovations have come and gone. Boud ends his

retrospective with ‘work-based learning’ in which degrees of freedom are “circumscribed by the exigencies of work” as the “culmination of the learner centred agenda” (p. 29). According to Boud the discourse of learner-centredism is simplistic and naïve and conceals more than it reveals. An excess of attention to the centrality of the learner can draw attention away from other concerns such as what we are trying to produce in the educational system. He also notes an irony of learner-centredness in the literature about teaching practice and innovation to ‘empower’ is that it is written from the perspective of teacher-designers and fails to consider whether or not students actually experience something as ‘learner-centred’ or centred on their own needs. Boud advocates placing teaching and learning within its broader context and network of social relations in order to make explicit the purposes of learning and the processes involved in addressing them.

Boud’s deconstruction of learner-centredism is useful because it highlights unexamined aspects of a discourse and explodes a myth. His perspective on work-based learning and broader contexts resonates to some extent with the concerns of academic literacy/writing as social practice theorists around student identities and power. However, his fore-grounding of the purposes of work-based ‘learning does not address the nature of literacy in the academy. It emphasises the nature of learning as social practice but not the extent to which literacy/student writing is mediated through social practices in the context of disciplinary study. It omits understanding of the challenges faced by student writers in managing and attempting to negotiate the diverse and frequently implicit demands of situation and context. Nevertheless, Boud’s critical stance towards the discourse of student-centredism and his perspective on the values and goals of the academy is an interesting complement to the other critical perspectives reviewed in this section. It is indicative of how thinking and reasoning about higher education goals and values are continuing to take shape at present.

The current context of change and expansion has led to reflection and adjustment in teaching and learning research. There appears to be a growing interest in coalescing ostensibly diverse research approaches and perspectives to meet the challenges of research and development in the contemporary context of higher education. Ashwin and McLean (2005), for example, suggested a reconciliation of phenomenographic and critical pedagogy perspectives through a focus on ‘academic engagement’ and the ways students and teachers experience teaching and learning.

They point out that a focus on students' perceptions of, and intentions towards their learning, characteristic of the phenomenographic approach, omits an examination of structural issues or barriers at the, in their terms, 'meso' – departmental and disciplinary – and 'macro' – national policy and wider social and political – levels. They advocate an adapted focus on the ways both students and teachers experience, deal with and overcome these barriers by focusing on the variation in the ways they experience them in order to raise awareness of how less visible structures impact on the quality of both students and teachers 'academic engagement'.

Ashwin (2006) envisages two opposing scenarios for the future of higher education: one bleak and the other bright. The former is one in which infrastructures in higher education are ever more stretched and learning technologies dominate teaching and learning with textual (automated and paper-based) sources as primary sources of information for students. Discourses of 'learner-centredness' and 'learner autonomy' will be used more and more in official documentation and permeate professional development to justify institutional practices and to impose conformity. Top-down agendas and directives aimed at 'quality assurance' will continue to regulate higher education practices and procedures for years to come and will be linked to wider agendas (e.g. the Bologna Agreements). Students will increasingly feel isolated from one another and from their tutors and alienated from higher education practices around assessment and feedback. HEIs will be either research-led or teaching intensive, affecting the futures of academic staff and influencing their perceptions of what is rewarded and worthwhile. This will do little to enhance the role and status of pedagogic and student writing research. University teaching will become standardised and systematised enforcing the same model of professional practice on everyone. This state of affairs will encourage expediency in teaching and assessment and an unscholarly approach that "pays no attention to the disciplinary and institutional context of learning" (p. 129). Teaching will be led by "unscholarly academic developers" imposed on teachers to "enact ever changing visions of vice-chancellors and government ministers" (p. 130). There will be evasion and inertia on the part of teaching staff who will experience dissonance with practices they do not own and hostility towards developers. A focus on standards and performance will take precedence over the learning environments teachers are able to establish with their students.



Ashwin's alternative is a future in which learner-centredness becomes more than just a catch-phrase employed to validate nebulous and contrived notions of student independence and autonomy. Teaching and learning will be integrated activities taking place in collaborative and interactive learning environments. The use of learning technologies, underpinned by pedagogical expertise, will play a key role. Students will participate in 'learning communities' with teachers. Teaching standards will help to create an identity of the academic-as-teacher-researcher. Equal recognition and weight will be given to both activities breaking down the barriers and between research and teaching and supporting academic staff across institutions with their choices and career aspirations. Scholarship into teaching and learning will thrive and teacher-academics will be supported by scholarly educational developers. They will work constructively together to investigate learning and teaching contexts, (re)design curricula and make best use of research and inquiry. Students will become critically engaged in the processes and procedures surrounding their own learning and assessment. Ashwin concludes that "this bright future will be one of integration and critical engagement... mutually owned by all of those who are part of the learning and teaching process" (p. 131). In such a context research will be open, eclectic and diverse stimulating debate and contributing to real change in higher education practices and processes. The future is opaque and as Ashwin comments a mixture of both scenarios is the more likely prospect. However, envisaging two opposing prospects serves to "offer a sense of where the logic of different types of thinking about learning and teaching may take us" (p. 15)

## **6.0 Conclusion and summing up**

This review began with a consideration of the nature of literacy development of adults. The writers whose views are summarised (Baynham, Street, Gee) argue that literacy attains a social and political dimension because it influences, in overt and subtle ways, how social groups are regarded and positioned. This thinking coalesced under the aegis of the New Literacy Studies movement; a core notion of which is that literacy is not a disembodied skill or a neutral medium. In order to understand what constitutes literacy it is necessary to examine the practices associated with it and the contexts of its use. In other words literacy practices are shaped in the wider socio-

cultural environments in which they occur. This influences how literacy is perceived and understood in the social institutions in which it is embedded. A perspective has emerged which regards literacy as a plural rather than a single, unitary concept (Street, 1993).

This thinking has been critically applied to the widening participation and social inclusion agendas in higher education and has engendered interest in researching how knowledge is constructed, taught, and learnt in disciplinary contexts (Jones, et al, 1999; Lea and Street, 1998). The context of higher education at present is integral to research (Lea and Stierer, 2000): the academy and its practices, beliefs and values are open to scrutiny. An 'academic literacies approach' emphasises that student learning and literacy development in higher education is situated and contextualised and problematises the teaching of writing which focus on it as principally a technical skill or as a process of socialisation that takes place implicitly and unproblematically. A core area of contention is the simplistic notion of literacy as a neutral autonomous construct – a skill or competency - transferable between contexts of use. This ostensibly 'common-sense', but unexamined perception is sustained by a notion of language as a transparent medium of communication and appears to permeate higher education practices, agendas and priorities in the current climate of change and expansion.

The literature review also considered the background to student writing research in other Anglophone educational systems, notably the United States and Australia and the attention it has received in the phenomenographic tradition in higher education in Britain. Research and theorising in academic literacies was then discussed with reference to the published work of writers and researchers in the tradition. At this point a first gap in the research literature became apparent to this researcher. Academic literacies research appears to have lost momentum; little empirical research exists which up-dates that of the late nineties. Nevertheless, it was possible to widen the discussion by reference to a number of research perspectives which embrace a social practice and problematising approach to feedback and assessment. To put the dual experience of students and teachers in context it was useful to consider the extent to which higher education in Britain has undergone a paradigm shift. A conspicuous consequence of the changes outlined is that in the mass system practices and structures have become increasingly standardised and

homogenised. As a consequence new critical perspectives are emerging which focus on addressing issues of power and engagement in the current context.

A second gap was noted in the research literature: the need for a more encompassing approach to researching student writing and academic literacy which considers factors such as the social positioning of teachers as well as students in the current context and the subtle and oblique aspects of institutional practice that encourage or inhibit change at the departmental and institutional level. This kind of investigation raises questions about the nature of learning and education in today's universities. Finally, a third gap noted was that in spite of the contribution academic literacies and writing as social practice research has made to problematising current agendas, curriculum initiatives and establishing student writing research there are few practical alternatives emanating from this theorising which contribute to innovation in the practical and pedagogical domain. A number of other perspectives were considered which resonate with academic literacies and student writing research and theorising but which offer distinct pedagogical and curricula models (Haggis, Warren). In summary, the gaps identified in the literature are firstly, the need to update academic literacies research in the contemporary context; the need to widen the inquiry to investigate the lived realities of teaching staff as well as students in that context and the need to explore the potential of academic literacy research to coalesce with other critical perspectives in order to move into the domain of practice. The present study aimed to address, in some measure, the gaps outlined and make good the perceived lack in research.

# **Chapter Three**

## **Methodology**

### **1.0 The organisation of this chapter**

The structure of this chapter is as follows:

- Firstly, an overview of the methodological strategy and the theory underpinning the research is provided
- Secondly, two sections review the role of the pilot study in the development of the main study.
- The conduct of the main study is then outlined including the salient contextual factors and an explanation of how the research developed. This includes a description of the position of the researcher in the study; the approach taken to selecting academic staff and student participants and documentary sources
- A separate section focuses on the design of the interview schedules used in conducting the research together with a rationale for their construction.
- A separate section describes how the data for were recorded and processed for the purpose of writing up.
- A final section explains how data were selected and presented in the main chapters and the basis on which analysis and interpretation were made.

### **2.0 The methodological strategy and rationale for the study**

The purpose of this study was to address the overarching questions stated in chapter one: in other words, to examine how student writing and academic literacy development are perceived, experienced and understood by teaching staff and students and attended to in the institution's provision. This research is therefore a form of institutional case study realised through a qualitative, ethnographic-style inquiry. Denscombe (2003: 32) encapsulates the nature of a case study approach:

The decision to use a case study approach is a strategic decision that relates to the scale and scope of an investigation, and it does not, at least in principle, dictate which method or methods must be

used. Indeed, a strength of the case study approach is just this – that it allows for the use of a variety of methods depending on the circumstances and the specific needs of the situation.... Properly conceived, case study research is a matter of research *strategy*, not research methods. (Italics in original)

The focus of the present study has been on one institutional context. Berg (2007; 296) considers the case study at this level as “an extremely useful technique for researching relationships, behaviours, attitudes, motivations and stressors in organisational settings”. A researcher may specialise “by placing particular emphasis on a specific area or situation occurring in the organisation”. In the present study that emphasis is on student writing and academic literacy development. Denscombe (2003: 32) points out that case study research emphasises depth over breadth, the particular rather than the general, relationships and practices rather than outcomes or end-products and multiple sources rather than one research ‘method’. The approach also emphasises a holistic view of the phenomena and one in which things are studied as they naturally occur rather than as isolated factors. The data were gathered principally using an ethnographic approach. Ethnography has its roots in anthropology and the idea of a researcher being immersed in a social group. The aim is to grasp the lived experience of participants from their point of view: to understand the culture from the inside in terms that the participants themselves use to explain and describe it (Robson, 2002:186). Ethnography is therefore primarily a qualitative research method.

The philosophical basis for qualitative research is three-fold. It is inductivist in that theory is generated from the research. It is (social) constructionist in that social interactions, or the interaction of people in social contexts, are the sources of social properties in general. It is interpretivist in that the emphasis is on understanding the social world through the interpretation of that world by its participant. Bryman (2004: 318-333) enumerates the qualities of semi-structured and open interviews in qualitative research (individual interviews and focus groups):

- Emphasis is placed in qualitative research on generality in the formulation of the initial research ideas and the perspectives of the interviewees;
- There is more interest in the interviewees point of view (not only the researchers agenda);

- Tangential and exploratory talk is encouraged;
- Questions can vary from the predetermined guides created by the interviewer; new questions may emerge on the basis of the interview responses to explore any new topics or issues of interest;
- As a result the procedure is flexible and responsive to the direction the interviewee takes it;
- Rich, detailed responses are the goal
- It is common to interview respondents more than once to follow up and expand on the data from an initial or previous interview: the process is iterative

Ethnographic research involves description of the details and artefacts of the social setting relevant to the line of inquiry (in the case of the present research the institutional approach to student writing as evident in a range of textual sources produced at the institutional and departmental levels) and participants' own accounts; it then proceeds to analysis and interpretation. A perennial concern with ethnographic research is that the presence of a researcher influences the natural setting and so compromises the authenticity of the data and the findings. In addition, interpretation may be informed by the theoretical and ideological position of the researcher. Nevertheless, ethnographers claim that in showing through research and analysis the different and complex facets of a particular phenomenon a researcher can achieve a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). This can be contrasted with a 'thin' description which simply reports facts independent of intentions and circumstances. A researcher needs to delve into a culture and gather the right kind of data which reveal aspects of the culture's complexity. Holliday (2002: 75) states:

What makes the thick description of a social phenomenon possible is not its exhaustiveness of coverage, but the way in which it scans the different facets of the social matrix or culture within which it is found, and comes up with a good analysis.

The social setting is critical and bounded social settings provide an important locus for thick description. In the case of the present research project the bounded setting is the higher education institution in which the phenomena in question – student writing

and academic literacy development – occur and where practices associated with it operate.

Methodologically the present research is modelled on the ethnographic style used by Lea and Street (1997, 1998, 1999) in their investigations of student writing in higher education which they termed an ‘academic literacies approach’ The approach aimed to examine the complexity of what is involved in student writing and learning in the academy and raise questions about what is implicated in learning and study support. Accordingly, there were two foci for the present study:

1. practices around student writing and academic literacy at the institutional level;
2. the ways in which practices around student writing are understood (by staff and students) and enacted and translated into practices (by academic staff in accordance with institutional priorities and goals) at the departmental level.

Data were obtained through:

1. semi-structured interviews with teaching staff and student writers aimed at exploring their perceptions, practices, experiences and understandings about student writing; and academic literacy;
2. analysis of documentary sources, both paper-based and electronic guides and handouts.

### **3.0 The pilot study**

The purpose of the pilot study for this research project was three-fold:

1. to determine through practice which methods for gathering data are most appropriate given the aims and the context of study;
2. on this basis to determine the methodological strategy for the main study, and;
3. to gather intelligence on the context being studied.

As Philips and Pugh (2005) point out the pilot study stage is for experimentation, “Essentially we asking: will it work?” (p. 87); and what modifications are necessary for a practical and feasible research strategy. The pilot study exercise for the present research adopted a quasi-quantitative approach: a quantitative questionnaire instrument with some qualitative techniques built in, semi-structured interviews with

teaching staff volunteers were then conducted. The initial questionnaire aimed at obtaining a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data on the following:

- writing practices,
- assessment procedures,
- text types (refer to glossary at the end of the thesis)
- generic attitudinal factors such as reasons for perceived weaknesses in student academic writing and
- the qualitatively different ways terms such as ‘argument’ are constructed.

On the basis of the responses to the questionnaire a follow up semi-structured interview schedule was designed to encourage flexibility and elicit a wider range of responses in terms of respondents’ own accounts and understandings. The aspect of the study was confined to teaching staff for two reasons. Firstly, the pilot study is an exercise in testing out methods and getting a ‘feel’ for the possibilities of the main study and the context of the research (institutional practices and agenda as the foci for the case-study approach being considered). Secondly, interviewing students at this stage would have required ethical clearance which was time consuming. The research methodology was complemented by an investigation into existing support provision for students at departmental, disciplinary and generic study support levels. The main source of the data for this part of the study was departmental and university documents. Four months were allocated to complete the pilot study exercise, but additional time was required. The results of the pilot study and extensive comment by this researcher are contained in Appendix 1 at the end of the thesis.

### **3.1 Conclusions from the pilot study**

A number of broad conclusions were drawn from the pilot study. The data clearly indicate that the essay or essay-like assignment is the dominant text type in student writing across the spread of discipline areas investigated. This confirms Womack’s (1993) assertion that the essay is the ‘default genre’ in student writing and assessment. In applied and vocational areas where other text types are frequent ‘essayist literacy’ (Lillis, 2001) expectations are prevalent. There was a high instance of the association of weak student writing with transcriptional features and with



generic academic writing conventions (such as referencing and using source material) by respondents. The data also indicated the uncertainty over interpretations. The generic term 'argument' was variously understood and discipline specific understandings were elicited from teaching staff. These were clearly areas requiring further investigation in the main study. The data from the semi-structured interviews were extensive and for this reason it was decided to focus on qualitative methods in the main study following the same thematic outline to structure the conduct of the research. It was further decided to incorporate the pilot study interview data into the main study: this is reflected in much of the data transcriptions given in chapter four.

The methodological outcomes of the pilot study also appeared to confirm Hartley and Chessworth's (1999; 2000) observations, and reservations, regarding the limited efficacy of quantitative methods in research into questions over interpretations and understandings. Hartley and Chessworth were concerned with contrasting the results from Lea and Street's qualitative study with a quantitative one of their own in order to develop on the "pioneering work" of those researchers but also to consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of each method. The authors point out that Street and Lea's (1997) original work focused on difficulties with 'interpretation' that students experience when writing essays. This is emphasised at the expense of difficulties attributed to deficits (dealt with by 'study skills' provision) and 'institutional failings' (such as limited resources, time pressures, guides and textual sources such as study guides for students). Hartley and Chessworth compiled a 30-item questionnaire using a Likert scale to address the three concerns – deficits, interpretations and institutional failings - and determine how widespread they were. The Likert scale was given to over 100 second year students. The findings indicated that all three areas are represented as presenting problems for students in higher education but that validity with quantitative methods into these questions is an issue. In the light of Lea and Street's work revealing the difficulties students have with interpretation they question their own results pointing out:

it is possible that it is easier for students to admit to difficulties that might be thought of as trivial – such as spelling – than to admit to others that might be thought of as serious – such as not knowing what to do (2000: 21).

In short, according to Hartley and Chessworth, quantitative research methods cannot get to the underlying answers about students' problems with 'interpretation' and 'institutional failings'. Qualitative methods are more effective in providing a thick description of how practices around student writing and academic literacy development are enacted, understood and experienced.

On this basis it was decided to use an extended qualitative approach and extend the documentary study as the design for the main study.

## **4.0 The conduct of the main study**

### **4.1 Delineating disciplinary contexts**

Intrinsic to this study is the effect of interdisciplinarity and modularisation of course structures on writing practices (Lea and Street, 1998). Three disciplinary areas were chosen as a focus for the main study:

- History, as a traditional humanities discipline;
- Sociology as an applied and 'hybrid' discipline (i.e. epistemologically and methodologically sharing characteristics of study and knowledge representation in both arts/humanities and social science. This is reflected in the types of writing and assessment (or text types) students are expected to produce and awareness of how disciplinary knowledge influences disciplinary writing (Coffin, et al, 2003) ) and;
- Nursing (degree and diploma) as an emergent or 'practice-based discipline' and where student writing and assessment requirements are widely heterogeneous (Baynham, 2000).

Each department runs a range of joint degrees. Sociology and Criminology offers the widest range of degree provision in the School of Arts and Social Sciences. Nursing is an emergent area within the School of Health, Communication and Education with a wide range of provision including degree and diploma as well as programmes for pre-registration nurses. The pilot study revealed that lecturing staff and students from this area are normally involved in curricula which are work-based with placement components. The pilot study also revealed that notions of disciplinarity and associated writing requirements vary in this area. Although the bulk of the data were gathered

from these three discipline areas, in practice in order to gather sufficient data the researcher found it necessary to interview academic staff outside the three initial areas of focus. This is more fully discussed in 5.1 below.

#### **4.2 The position of the researcher as data gatherer**

The position of the researcher was that of both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. Being a member of staff at the institution under study gave him the status of an insider: a member of the cultural group being studied. It also facilitated contact with teaching staff in the various departments. In so far as he was based in a discipline area other than those denominated above, he had, to some extent, the status of an ‘outsider’ which facilitated, to a certain degree, seeing what is ‘familiar’ or ‘taken-for-granted’ to ‘insiders’ as ‘strange’. This dual status is a common feature of ethnographic and social research and integral to an ‘academic literacies approach’.

### **5.0. Selection of the study sample**

#### **5.1 Enlisting participants**

The compilation of the study sample of staff members within the disciplines identified for the study was systematic and flexible. Initial contacts were made with programme leaders in the School of Health and Arts and Social Sciences to explain the research and for permission to contact staff members directly. There was an element of ‘snowball selection’ in this arrangement. Some respondents were approached at the suggestion of an earlier interviewee. A respondent would identify a colleague who would have, or had in the past, experience with student writing support in the department or who may have particular views on student writing support. In some cases contact with staff was made by networking through teaching and learning events and professional interest groups. Several lecturer respondents were approached who attended a teaching and learning session on student writing. A list of those who attended was obtained from the teaching and learning coordinator who timetabled the session. This was quite fruitful and enabled the researcher to contact a range of staff outside the initial contacts made directly to programme leaders. However, the main

criterion underpinning the selection of staff participants was to obtain a cross-section representing key and distinct areas of the university's provision: traditional humanities, applied or 'hybrid' discipline areas and emergent and practice-based areas. The number and provenance of respondents is given in the table below.

Table 2. Academic staff interviewees by discipline area

<b>Discipline Area</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
History	4
Sociology and Criminology	9
Nursing (including Adult Nursing (respondents included those teaching on degree, diploma courses), Clinical Care, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy)	8
History of Art	4
English	2
Applied Sciences (including Environmental Sciences, Human Geography, Sports Sciences, Psychology)	7
Social Work	2
Education	1
Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences	3
Politics (and Media)	2
Built Environment	2
Newcastle Business School	4
Academic Registry	2*
Student Services	3 **

(\* participants in Academic Registry were able to provide information on admissions policy, strategies for widening participation and regulations for foundation degrees. This was contextual information rather than data for analysis. \*\*Two participants in Student Services were full-time study skills advisers; another participant was consulted for information on how student and library services are configured in accordance with university policy and infrastructure)

All interviews with university staff were individual sessions. Ten sessions were recorded and transcribed; the rest were recorded manually. A total of 14 teaching staff respondents took part in the pilot study and the main study, (i.e. they agreed to be interviewed more than once) raising the number of interviews overall to 62. Details were taken on the participants' departmental affiliation, subject specialism, levels at which they teach (under-graduate, post-graduate, other) and status (junior lecturer, senior lecturer, programme leader, etc). Certain variables were not specifically recorded in the details of respondents: age, length of teaching career, professional experience outside, of or prior to joining academia and gender. These factors were considered incidental to the research. This information occurred spontaneously in the interview process and was not part of any profiling of respondents. However, prior experience and length of teaching career in particular may have had some bearing on responses. Age and gender differences were discernible at the level of seniority and across disciplines: in humanities and social sciences there was a balance of these factors; in emergent and practice-based areas the ratio of female lecturers to male lecturers was higher.

The arrangement with student interviewees was also systematic and flexible. Obtaining the participation of students was a challenging aspect of the field work and the researcher had to go to some lengths to achieve a sample of sufficient size and diversity. It was possible, through contact with subject teachers and support staff in the study skills centres, to 'select' appropriate students (those from the disciplinary backgrounds fore-fronted in the research and from other areas where study is modularised and interdisciplinary). Student services were a fruitful source for student respondents. By far the majority of students who utilise this service seek support with assignment and essay writing. Many self identify but others are referred by tutors. Students contacted through student services were interviewed in the study skills centres. An interview on this basis lasted between twenty-five and fifty minutes (but on occasions longer). Students were often interviewed subsequent to their appointment with the study skills support specialist and according to the time they had available. Students were more relaxed and amenable to being interviewed subsequent to attending their appointments and receiving some diagnostic support. In the opinion of the researcher this also made them more open and articulate. Students contacted through tutors were asked to be available for up to an hour and beyond. All focus groups lasted at least an hour, with some sessions lasting longer. The researcher

liaised informally with other researchers in a similar position to seek advice through research networks, professional development groups, the library and academic support providers to determine whether it was 'accepted practice' to offer students inducements. In all cases inducements were offered ranging from free lunches, vouchers and handouts and including book tokens. Students who were contacted in the disciplines were offered an inducement in the form of a book token.

A total of 15 student participants were contacted directly through tutors. A total of 20 students were contacted through student services. A total of 35 students were interviewed overall. Student respondents came from a range of disciplines or fields of study (refer to Table 4). Only one post-graduate level student was interviewed (MSc in Pre-registration Occupational Therapy - PG students were not a focus of the research given the focus on developing academic literacy in the first degree experience and the factors which complicate learning in that context). Only one student was studying on a part-time basis (Business Management). The composition of respondents is tabulated below:

Table 3: student respondents by field of study

Students in single degree subjects	Twenty two interviewees as follows: Sociology (6) (includes two international students); Human Geography (3); Nursing degree (8); Occupational Therapy (2); Social Work (2); Physiotherapy (1)
Students on joint degree subjects	Seven interviewees were following joint degree programmes, as follows: (History and Politics (2); History and Sociology (1); English and History (1); Sociology and Criminology (1); Politics and Criminology (1); Early Years Care and Education (1).
Others	Four interviewees from the School of Health were following pre-registration/Diploma qualification. One PG and one PT student were interviewed

## **5.2 Documentary sources**

The pilot study for this research sought to ascertain the range of documentary sources that could be obtained at different levels: institutional, departmental and individual tutor; for the main study a variety of materials were collected and used for analysis. The list includes generic, institution-wide sources for learning and study support in the form of guides and booklets and ‘study-skill’ materials as well as on-line, electronic sources at the institutional level, module descriptors, pro-formas in general and with additional rubric directed at the student writer, course and module-specific guides and other paper-based sources at the departmental level (a list of the documentary sources included in this research is found in Appendix 2 at the end of the thesis).

## **5.3. Access and formal procedures**

University guidelines for the ethical conduct of research and obtaining informed consent were followed rigorously. Although some teaching staff were initially approached informally, on each occasion a member of staff was sent a formal request and the details and purpose of the research were outlined. This was followed up by verbal contact to agree a time. Details of documentary sources, their location and availability were gleaned from participants at this stage. At the institution wide and departmental level these are available openly and can be accessed electronically.

Formal permission to interview student participants required ethical clearance from university ethics committees and took an entire semester. In addition interviewing students in the School of Health, Community and Education required that the ethics committee for that school were informed of the research before students could be approached via their tutor or facilitator groups. Student respondents were obtained in two ways: through module tutors and through student services. In either case the student was informed about the research in writing before agreement was sought. A participant consent form was given to the respondent to sign and date and the researcher retained these as records. The researcher complied with the requirements stated in accordance with the use of this form. In all cases the formal request form was the one issued by the School of Arts and Social Sciences

## 6.0. Design of the interview schedules

Figure 1. Interview guide for academic staff respondents

<u><b>Interview guide used with academic staff</b></u>
1) What do you understand are the canons of student writing?
2) Are they changing? How/ in what way? Do you agree with this?
3) What is student writing in your discipline? / What particular features distinguish student writing in your discipline? / What expectations are there of student writers in your discipline?
4) How do you understand the distinction between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students and what has been your experience with non-traditional students?
5) What innovations in student writing practices and assessment have taken place in the department/the modules you teach?
6) What support for student writers exists in the school/division/at the level of the module?
7) A lot of words are typically associated with the way we talk about student writing, assessment and, indeed, learning in higher education. What does the term/ do the terms structure/argument/critical analysis/etc mean in the disciplinary context in which you teach, and assess student writing (and learning)?
8) Are students clear about the meanings of these terms? If not, why in your opinion?
9) There has been an increasing trend towards inter-disciplinarity in higher education study and modularisation of degree structures. What is your experience with this and what problems does it raise?
10) What is the purpose/function of feedback?
11) What sort of feedback do you give?
12) What do you hope to achieve by it?
13) What do you think you achieve by it
14) What reasons can you give to explain why students don't seem to benefit from feedback, or even ignore it?
15) To what extent are practices in the department discussed amongst teaching staff/at departmental meetings?
16) What is the role and purpose of learning and study support? How do you think this might change in the future? / What changes in the nature of this provision would you like to see?



Figure 2. Interview guide for student respondents

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Interview guide: student respondents</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Why did you decide to come to university?</li><li>2) What for you is/what do you understand as academic writing?</li><li>3) Apart from submitting your written assignments, is there any value in becoming good at academic writing?</li><li>4) How do you understand plagiarism?</li><li>5) In general are essay questions easy to understand?</li><li>6) How do you approach writing assignments?</li><li>7) Apart from the essay question what else do you use to guide you with writing assignments?</li><li>8) What do you understand by words like structure/argument/critically discuss in the wordings of assignments?</li><li>9) Do these words always seem to mean the same thing? If not, why and in what way?</li><li>10) Do you get specific help from tutors on how to write and what is expected? How useful is this?</li><li>11) Do you feel you are often writing to meet the expectations of individual tutors?</li><li>12) What do you find useful/less useful or like/dislike about (written) feedback?</li><li>13) Looking at this standard feedback sheet, what do you like or dislike about it?</li><li>14) What sort of support do you think benefits students the most with their academic writing?</li></ol>
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The interview guides for the staff and student study samples were designed to reflect the focus of the research – practices around student academic literacy development and the perceptions and experience of both teaching staff and student writers. In addition, a number of other concerns that were outlined in chapter two were influential in constructing the guides. The questions were designed to be open-ended in order to encourage reflection and exploration on the part of respondents. This flexibility is a characteristic of qualitative research (see section 2.0) and integral to ethnographic research. Bryman (2004: 324) describes the role of the interview guide in semi-structured interviewing is as a “list of issues to be addressed or

questions to be asked” which can be allowed to develop in any way as the interview progresses. The student interviews included focus groups. The emphasis is on interaction between participants and the joint construction of meaning. The researcher may follow a guide but the respondents have the opportunity to listen to one another and compare reasons for holding a certain view or perception. They may qualify, modify or revise their initial responses on the basis of discussion with others. Hence the focus group is an effective way to elicit a wide variety of responses. The researcher is a facilitator; the respondents have more control over the issues they choose to foreground in the course of the interview.

The initial questions (1-6) for teaching staff focus on their understanding of student writing generally, expectations at the disciplinary level, what support and guidance are provided and how both practices and expectations are changing. Academic literacies research has drawn attention to the importance of investigating the descriptive and analytical linguistic tools academic teaching staff use in transmitting knowledge and assessing students’ understanding and how such tools are understood and interpreted in the context of increasing modularisation of degree courses and course switching requirements (Lea and Street, 1998). In a constructivist paradigm ‘learning outcomes’ are ‘aligned’ with learning activities (Biggs, 1999, 2003). However, the situated and contextualised nature of learning is under represented in this paradigm. Arguably, this has led to a diminution of the importance of language in research into the student experience of learning (and teaching staff experience of teaching). Questions (7-9) included in the guide were, therefore, designed to tease out the beliefs, understandings and experience of academic staff on both of these points.

Feedback (and increasingly written feedback using structured forms) is a key area in which practices, and a range of concerns associated with those practices, occur. Teaching staff were asked (10-14) to reflect on their beliefs about feedback in terms of its role and efficacy as well as institutionally sanctioned practices associated with the way feedback is framed and delivered to students. They were also asked the extent to which institutional practices are discussed and modified at the departmental level (Trowler, 2002). This area of inquiry brought to light the experience of staff in terms of living and coping with change and how they feel socially positioned in the current climate of higher education (cf. Becher and Trowler, 2001, Morley, 2003). Staff were also asked (15-16) about the perception of the role and efficacy of generic

study support in student writing/learning and their understanding of the role of support in teaching and learning at the departmental level (cf. Lea and Street, 1998, 1999; Orr and Blythman, 2003; Blythman and Orr, 2002).

The student interview guide similarly reflects the concerns of academic literacy research but it also included other areas of concern that were included in the discussion of the literature in chapter two. Student respondents were initially asked (1-2) about their backgrounds and motivations for coming into higher education (cf. Lillis, 2001, Haggis, 2004, 2006). This was to elicit detail on the backgrounds of respondents and to gauge how practically meaningful it is to talk about 'traditional' and 'non-traditional students' (although these terms are used in the research – refer to the glossary at the end of the thesis). Students were asked how they respond to writing at university and what value they feel there is in it (3). This question was designed to tease out some of the tensions students experience with 'academic writing' in higher education as opposed to writing in ways they are perhaps more accustomed to and comfortable with. In a similar vein students were asked what they understood by plagiarism (4). The focus in the interview process then moved on to the specifics of writing assignments (5-7) and understanding terms that occur in formal and promulgated assessment criteria and learning outcomes (8-10) (cf. Lea and Street, 1999; Chanock, 2000; Orr, 2005). A particular focus was to explore the extent to which students experience confusion when studying in modularised and interdisciplinary areas of study and involve writing for different teachers and markers (Lea and Street, 1998). Students were asked about their experience of feedback on written and assessed work (11-13) (normally written feedback) and their perceptions of the utility and efficacy of feedback practices overall (14) (cf. Hounsell, 1987, 2003; Lea and Street, 2000; Higgins, et al, 2002). Finally, students were also asked for their perceptions of the support they receive with writing and assessment at the institutional and departmental levels (Wingate, 2006; Blythman and Orr, 2002).

## **7.0. Data gathering and transcription**

The researcher always visited academic staff who agreed to participate sometimes going to different campus sites. On occasions interviews were done at short notice. Quality recording equipment was not always available. Respondents,

staff and students, were not always comfortable at being recorded. This happened on two or three occasions early in the data-gathering phase. As a result the researcher decided to avoid requesting that the interview be audio-recorded in order to render potential respondents more at ease and willing. In theory an audio-recording makes for a more thorough examination of the data, facilitates repeat examinations and helps to counter any allegations of bias or influence from the researcher's values or prior judgements. In practice, particularly when interviewing on a large scale and without support resources for transcribing, this is often not practicable. The amount of time required to transcribe interview data is ten-fold the interview time. On the other hand, a field notes approach delimits the data collection and provides for more scope.

Manually recording interview data was simpler and in some respects more efficient. For example, although not always possible to capture a verbatim account of the responses it was possible to capture important sound-bites and to interact by asking for clarification and amplification at certain junctures and to go back to some points if necessary. It is important in ethnographic research to establish rapport with participants. Being a good listener is crucial. Manually transcribing the interview data made it possible to ask participants to repeat or clarify their statements at the time of data gathering. Whole sections of verbatim interview data were obtained without the necessity of using audio-recording equipment. The relaxed tone and nature as well as the privacy of the setting are important elements in interviewing. The absence of recording equipment also created a more relaxed and conversational atmosphere critical to the exercise and appropriate to the research approach. Respondents would often pause to allow the researcher to complete notes and this also facilitated more time for reflection. There was also time to recap and get further thoughts from respondents after the interview guide has been gone through making the exercise highly productive. It was also far easier for the researcher to write up the notes from the interview; this was usually done immediately afterwards while the experience was still fresh in the memory.

In the case of the focus group interviews with student respondents the conditions were different. It is essential to capture as much of the data as possible and to keep track of which respondent is speaking, what they are saying, to whom and when. A manual technique cannot accommodate an exact transcription of what is said in a group interview and does not record pauses, hesitations, partially finished sentences, stress and intonation, repairs, redundancies and other aspects of actual

speech. Equally it is not possible to describe or comment on aspects such as tone of voice, facial expression and other non-verbal responses. These were not considered crucial elements in the data gathering process and have been omitted in the presentation. In some instances the presentation includes transcription techniques for some features of the actual recordings such as overlap, redundancy and interjections of laughter. In general, transcriptional conventions are used sparingly in the presentation of data in the chapters that follow. The figure below itemises those conventions which are employed.

Figure 3. The use of specific textual and transcriptional devices.

E) or H)	Initial of the person speaking. Applied only in the case of student respondents in focus group data
....	Gap in data transcribed
[ ]	Used, occasionally, to indicate overlaps and interruptions in the data Also to signal contextual and elliptical information for the benefit of the reader; e.g. Newcastle College [a feeder institution]... [all laugh]... etc
Italics	are used in the presentation of data excerpts in two ways: to indicate the presence of a question asked by the researcher in the excerpt, and for emphasis. In the latter case this is explained within parenthesis at the end e.g. (Italics added for emphasis). In the documentary sources italics indicate the formatting of the original e.g. (Italics/Bold type in original)
( )	The disciplinary background of academic teaching staff data is in parenthesis at the end of each excerpt. In the presentation of the data gleaned from student respondents the disciplinary background, level of study and course of study and relevant additional information is provided in parenthesis.
“ or ‘	Quotation marks are used in reference to sources outside the data Where short excerpts from the data are repeated in order to connect them to elaborated observation or comment, single inverted commas is used. Quotes from other sources and the numerous data excerpts exceeding two sentences in length are indented; no quotation marks are used.

## **8.0 Selection, analysis and interpretation of data**

The emphasis in the interviews was on eliciting open and exploratory talk in response to the questions. As a result data were not categorised or codified at the point of collection. The data were examined subsequently and in drafting and finally writing up the thesis four categories or themes were used which reflect the foci of the case-study strategy and the top-down considerations that applied to structuring the interview guides:

- institutional practices and priorities;
- beliefs, perceptions and problems associated with writing at university;
- communicative and discursive practices around student writing and learning;
- perceptions of the role and efficacy of learning and study support.

Various sub-sections are used to group data and interpretative commentary and analysis are included throughout chapters four to seven. Interpretation, insight and the formulation of the findings emerged from the data as the research progressed. Once similar data were identified as occurring regularly in responses to the items included in the interview schedules conclusions were drawn. This is consistent with an ethnographic approach and is also a characteristic of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in which theory – that is the findings of the research - is derived from the study itself. There was a process of progressive focusing in the analysis and writing up of the data: a shift from initial description to interpretation. A bottom-up approach was also employed to determine the way in which data would be categorised in the sub-sections of each chapter. Broadly, analysis was applied to determine:

1) the extent to which commonalities were evident in responses and in the broader discussions with interviewees that ensued;

2) the extent to which additional, and often unexpected, perspectives, insights and alternate views emerged associated with particular practices and the experiences of staff and student respondents (e.g. with pedagogical and curricular change, shifting values and current agendas in higher education)

The second point in particular reflects a social practices and contextual perspective this research espoused (refer to chapter one) aimed at applying a critical ethnographic lens to the practices, procedures and discourses that constitute

institutional approaches and pervade attitudes in the current context of higher education. In presenting and interpreting the data in ethnographic (style) research a distinction is drawn between the 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives. The former is the insider's (or native's) point of view; the latter is the outsider's (researcher's) perspective which seeks to impose a conceptual and interpretive framework on data. The ideological position of this researcher concerns a view of language in communicative and pedagogical interactions in adult education: language is not simply an autonomous and technical skill, transferable between contexts of learning, nor is it a transparent medium of communication. This is stated throughout and the interpretative commentary that accompanies the presentation of the data in the forthcoming chapters reflects this researcher's stance; in particular it is evident in the critical analysis of documentary sources. Otherwise the research emphasises the 'emic' perspective and the analytical and interpretative commentary therefore focuses on the stated and ostensive views of respondents. Excerpts from the data/field notes are sometimes juxtaposed to emphasise their similarities as well as significant divergences and contrasts that were identified. The chapters and subsections are organised thematically in accordance with the broad schematic outline above but with variation. Each chapter contains a final summary section which draws together what are perceived to be the salient findings.

Chapter four focuses on the institutional context. An initial section focuses on teaching staff perceptions of student writers. A second presents data from student respondents who are 'non-traditional' (refer to glossary), as many in the sample were, about their self-perceptions. Thereafter the data presented are mainly from interviews with academic staff on teaching within modularised degree structures, marking and moderation and their experience with institutional policy. Data drawn from interviews with student respondents are occasionally interspersed within the thematic sections.

In chapter five staff perceptions and beliefs about student academic writing are divided into four sub-sections: problems with student writing at the transcriptional level, expectations and beliefs about student capabilities more generally, problems with students' abilities to write in accordance with specific textual requirements in disciplinary contexts and the relationship between writing and student learning at the level of epistemological understanding. This is juxtaposed with a sub-section on how students experience writing in higher education. Subsequent sections then focus on areas that were designed to elicit a lot of data in the interview discussions with

students: how they understand and manage assignments, how they approach writing and the challenges they face in course switching. The analysis then considered data that emerged in the interviews and discussions with both teachers and students about innovation and change in practices and discourses around writing and assessment at the institutional and departmental levels. The chapter concludes with a final section which summarises the analysis and interpretive commentary as constituting salient findings.

Chapter six first of all sets the context by deconstructing the notion of 'feedback' and then examining institutional policy. Two subsequent sections present data elicited in connection with the respective perceptions of staff and students of the role and utility of feedback. There are then sections on themes which emerged as prominent in the data gathering: how staff and students respond to proformas, academic staff views on their use of language in feedback and tutorial interactions and interesting data on the extent to which staff are adjusting their individual practices.

Chapter seven begins similarly with an overview of institutional practice and then considers the data on the perceptions of academic staff and student respondents. A particular theme that emerged in the interviews with academic staff was the tension between resources and demands and a section presents data on the experience and views of academic staff in this regard. A final section considers the views of student respondents.

The analysis of documentary sources is interwoven. Each chapter contains a critical analysis of documents at either, or both the institutional and departmental levels. The selection of texts falls into two categories.

1) Key documents on institutional priorities and practices were available for open access (e.g. statements on teaching and learning policy, plagiarism in student writing and assessment and other areas of institutional practice such as the framing and delivery of feedback and generic guides produced by student and library services).

2) Departmental guides for students were also easily available. The selection of documents at the sub-departmental or divisional level was more flexible. Certain module descriptors, for example, were available electronically but most paper-based, division specific sources such as guides were provided at the volition and discretion of teacher interviewees.



A critical discourse analytical lens was applied to an examination of these documents to determine how these texts are constructed – e.g. the theory of language underpinning them (Lillis, 2001, 2003) – and therefore understood, the implicit conceptions of what constitutes writing in the disciplinary contexts in question and, how these texts might appear to students and ‘outsiders’ (Lea and Street, 1998, 1999). Textual analysis was also intermingled with data from the interviews in some cases in order to add a further dimension to interpretation and discussion. This is integral to a critical ethnographic research strategy, a characteristic of an academic literacies approach and a means of triangulating research findings in general (refer to section 2.0 in this chapter).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Institutional priorities, established practices, new entrants and student writing**

#### **1.0 The organisation of this chapter**

This chapter is organised into sections as follows:

- Academic staff perceptions of non-traditional students and students' perceptions of themselves in higher education
- Learning and teaching policy and practice: the institutional ethos
- University-wide study support materials and department specific support in three areas – Humanities, Sociology/Criminology and Nursing
- The modularised university: perspectives on modularity, degree structures and student writing/academic literacy support
- The institutional approach to plagiarism
- Policy and practice concerning marking and moderation
- A final section summarises and outlines the salient findings from the data analysis

#### **2.0 Lecturers' perceptions of non-traditional students**

Mature students tend to be well regarded in discipline areas in arts and social sciences, where there has been a tradition of a mature student intake. Such students are seen as having implicit strengths as writers that give them a perceived parity with traditional A-level students in this respect as the following excerpt indicates:

A-level students have it sussed generally...I believe the more a student read before they came here the better they are as a writer. Mature students who come to university are good readers. They have read a lot even if it is only Catherine Cookson. They are better at writing as a result (Social Sciences)

A benign view of the mature-age learner's writing abilities is, however, off-set by a perception that they actually struggle with disciplinary requirements of higher education study as the following excerpts suggest:

A typical problem is that these [mature] students are already fixed in their thinking (Humanities)

Mature students become less good at writing as time goes by (Humanities)

In fact lecturers are given to believe that concessions need to be made for certain students to facilitate their induction into disciplinary study:

There is a big difference between being good at writing and being able to think [in the discipline]... it is important to point non-traditional students towards the right literature. Those writers who write texts with the student in mind (Social Sciences)

Other respondents felt that certain 'non-traditional' students are under prepared for higher education. For example the following lecturer identified particular groups of non-traditional students in his discipline area and the problems they have as follows:

...those who do not get beyond the description and hearsay stage with no independent valuation; and those who belong to a special group with little or no experience of higher education who seem to have a conditioned mentality and can't challenge or collect data independently. They often fail to meet the learning objectives of assignments (Business School)

Overseas student numbers are rising in higher education with more diversity. In particular there is evidence that international students, especially those coming from east and south-east Asia, are seeking entry in greater numbers to undergraduate courses of study in applied discipline areas (Cortazzi and Jin, 2004). Particular types of students are represented as unaware of the specific, yet tacit, expectations of higher education study in the disciplinary field:

Students from other educational systems are trained to learn facts. Far eastern students tend to be weak at analysing and criticising. This derives mainly from their cultural background. They are not trained to challenge but to take things as given (Business School)

The respondents from the Business School define non-traditional students specifically in terms of what they as teachers value. Groups of students are represented as under-prepared for, or even incapable of, the high level intellectual work required. The characterisation of international students attests to the conventionality, implicitness and culturally specific nature of expectations. In Nursing, a practice-based discipline, there has been a big increase in diversity and in the levels of entry:

The age range of students coming into Nursing over the last 15 years has expanded. The student population varies. Some already have degrees but others may have only completed an Access course to get onto the degree and many are returning to education (Health, Community and Education Studies)

Standards are considered to be high and the department is prestigious:

We get very good nurse applications and can afford to be selective. At the diploma level we get two types of student: those coming straight from school and in-service applicants. The diploma course is more like a PGD [post-graduate diploma]. Citation practices and presentation need to be of a high standard. Nurses do not usually have literacy problems because attaining new levels of training and qualifications are part of developing a nursing career (Nursing)

In spite of this variation among entrants there is the perception, evident in the last two excerpts that 'literacy problems' are not an issue given selection, entry requirements and the level of formal education expected of students. Implicit is a view of literacy in simple functional terms rather than any other conception of what being literate in the academy entails.

## **2.1 Students' self-perceptions**

The excerpts below give a cross-section of student responses to being asked about their decision to enter higher education. Each of the student excerpts indicate that they have had mixed previous experiences of formal education, different motivations for coming to university and there may be little or no family background in higher education:

Neither of my parents went to university but they would have liked to. It's an opportunity to further yourself. I'd like to work in my field. I'm not sure what but you need a degree for that (third year humanities, joint degree, A-level entrant).

I came to university to finish off my education. I didn't want to take a job straight from school. I am the first in my family to go to

university (second year humanities, joint degree, traditional student)

I wanted to come to university because I missed out when I was younger; I didn't have the opportunity. This was a pathway into doing something else in life. I did a HEFC [higher education foundation course] course before taking up the degree (third year social sciences, mature-age, non-traditional route)

I started off at Newcastle College [feeder institution]. We are the first in my family to come to university; me and my sister. My family don't fully understand what it entails (second year undergraduate, School of Health, direct entrant to second year)

The data here also suggest students arrive with limited preparation to grasp the tacit nature of assumptions and expectations surrounding higher education practices: they lack the assumed knowledge, background and cultural capital (Bourdieu,1997) associated with higher education expectations. In the following excerpts students expressed their apprehensions and mixed motives for coming to university:

I took A-levels but messed this up the first time; I resat them and messed up again. I've had an up and down experience with education. It was a very big decision to come back. All my friends from school went to university and I felt I had to go (second year undergraduate, Health; direct entrant to second year)

Others mentioned negative previous experiences with formal education:

My previous experience with education was a problem. The commitment wasn't there when I was 18. It's the whole thing of university as well – it has to be of a certain standard. Essays are something that has to be done. You have to 'face your demons'. But it is all to do with confidence I suppose (first year undergraduate, nursing, mature-age)

The latter excerpts indicate the complex challenges facing certain students entering higher education in the current context of widening participation. On the other hand, students are pragmatic about their choice to attend university especially in applied/vocational areas where they are seeking professional education:

*Why did you decide to come to university?*

A) To do a nursing degree. You can get a diploma but at some point you need a degree so you might as well start off with one

B) To get a degree and a professional qualification

C) Pretty much the same reason  
(undergraduate nurses, first year)

In the following excerpt students are unclear about their motives for being 'at university'. For one student the decision to enter higher education was a belated choice. Both individuals appear to be more focused on the vocational nature of study and how it relates to the world outside:

*Why did you decide to come to university?*

A) That's a hard question [laughs]

B) Initially from school, sixth form, you weren't given that many options [several years between A-levels and entering HE]

A) Get a recognised qualification and progress to another level. To be able to do a job I wish to do

B) Money as well [all laugh]

(undergraduate nurses, third year)

The data in this section indicate that there are (non-traditional) students entering university who have limited prior experiences of formal education and who do not possess the levels of socialisation and academic background normally expected. The aspiration to enter higher education is mixed with pragmatic considerations about how to get training and a job for students in vocational subjects such as Nursing. Students are entering HE courses with a range of motivations, preconceptions and self-perceptions (Haggis, 2006). This validates concerns which are current in higher education policy about levels of participation and subsequent engagement.

### **3.0 Learning and teaching: the institutional ethos and university-wide practices**

#### **3.1 Learning and Teaching Strategy**

The university is committed to its vision of becoming "one of the world's leading teaching and learning universities". The university mission statement comprises nine underpinning aims and strategies to that end.

- Challenging and innovative learning which empowers the active learner;
- A commitment to research and scholarly activity in the generation and dissemination of knowledge and understanding;

- Opportunities and access to students with a variety of ambitions and from different circumstances;
- Global recruitment and international activity;
- A high quality student experience, through a comprehensive network of student support and guidance services, and a range of social, cultural and sporting activities;
- The underpinning of its activities by the values of equity, diversity, collegiality and a concern for ethical behaviour and the welfare of individuals and society;
- Prudent and cost effective financial management for continued investment;
- The employability, lifelong learning and continuing professional development of its students and staff;
- A strengthening of the economic, environmental and cultural life of the region.

Instrumental in the achievement of these aims is the promotion and dissemination of good practice through innovation in teaching and assessment, e-learning support and investing in learning resources, virtual learning environments (VLEs), personal development planning (PDPs), fostering active and independent learning, guidance and student services. This is in accordance with QAA codes of practice and standards and the university's quality control framework. The 2003 White Paper on the future of higher education called for the creation of learning and teaching strategies to be formulated and delivered by appropriate committees. The university is divided into five faculties and nine schools, each with a separate committee. Each school develops learning and teaching strategies in support of the university's mission and vision which are approved and monitored by the university committee; strategy and implementation is therefore centrally managed and controlled.

## **3.2 Implementing institutional support**

### **3.2.1 E-learning**

The university has selected Blackboard as its virtual learning environment and is keen to promote and embed this technology in the everyday business of learning and teaching. Staff support is extensively available. All new students are encouraged to

register on the e-portal as this is an important medium for communication. It is used to access coursework and assessment requirements outside formal teaching contexts as well as generic sources such as course guides, module descriptors, assessment criteria and learning outcomes. Open access IT facilities are available across the university and there is off-campus accessibility.

### **3.2.2 Learning resources**

The university is committed to supporting and equipping students to become active and independent learners. Learning resources – print and electronic – are available in the university libraries, on-line and via student services or in the study skills centres. These resources are generically designed and high quality. There is on-going investment in this form of institution-wide learning and study support.

### **3.2.3 The tutorial system**

The tutorial system is an integral part of teaching and student support in higher education. It is an established means for students to request support with written assignments and to receive feedback. The university has a central policy for guidance and learner support. In the arts, humanities and social science areas the researcher investigated in this study the standard practice is for teaching staff to set aside a period of time on a weekly basis. Students book tutorial time with tutors or use the slots as ‘drop-in’ time. Students, in principle, can request contact with tutors outside this arrangement. They have the option of e-contact with tutors in lieu or in addition to face-to-face contact although this is generally on an informal basis. The precise way the tutorial system works varies according to departmental practices and the preferences and dispositions of individual tutors. In Nursing students are allotted a guidance facilitator at the beginning of their studies who is then their tutor over the duration of the first year. Guidance facilitators have both an academic and pastoral role. The guidance facilitator is not the only teacher who students will write for and who will comment on their written work. In this system the guidance facilitator is often responsible for feeding back to the tutee and interpreting the assessment marks and comments of other tutors during the first year. Sociology and Criminology is a large



department with numerous degree programmes. A system of guidance tutors groups of students is operational.

### **3.2.4 Study skills centres**

The university operates dedicated study skills centres. Students can access this facility for extra help with a range of study support needs. Specialist support staff are available. Many students self-select; others are referred by tutors. Students need to make an appointment for specific help on a one-to-one basis. By far and wide the majority of students requesting individualised help through this service do so in connection with course assessment requirements and written work. In this study over half the student respondents who volunteered to participate were approached through the study skills centres. The centres do not offer help with language skills – for native and non-native speakers - nor, in principle, proof-reading services. The nature of one-to-one support is explained by a support specialist:

I like to start by asking students what they think the problems are: this becomes the focus. We do not want to encourage dependent students. I see my role as a facilitator. We don't like students coming and asking "is this right?" They have to retain the ownership of their work. They can't hand over the responsibility for the production of the essay to us. There is a tension there which can be difficult to manage. They want the definite stuff. We offer advice and pointers. I tell students I can only offer an interpretation of why they might be going wrong. There isn't time in a 30 minute session. I'm not a subject specialist. Students need to be encouraged to engage and to look at the guidelines they have been given and the assessment criteria. Almost all students who use the centre come to us about academic writing and assessment

The generic nature of study skills advice is made clear in the above excerpt. The focus is on enabling students to take responsibility themselves and engage effectively with promulgated guidelines and assessment criteria. There is a mismatch in perceptions between what study skills specialists think they should be doing and what students expect and want. The emphasis is on the student to adjust to what is required and facilitating this adjustment appears to be the role of the study support specialist. Once the adjustment has been made the student is, in theory, in a position to no longer require direct contact with 'support' (Blythman and Orr, 2002; Haggis, 2003; Wingate, 2006)

### **3.2.5 Non-native speaker students**

Specialised services are available for international students whose first language is not English. Higher education is internationalising and overseas student intake is increasing across HEIs. In practice departments may take overseas students on the basis of their applications and assumptions about their suitability for the course in question. Traditionally overseas student admission to HEIs has been at post-graduate level where there is an ascertainable level of relevant achievement and educational socialisation. Increasingly, however, overseas students are being admitted to undergraduate courses on full-time or shortened degree structures. In addition, there are contingents of international students who attend the university on exchange schemes or secondment arrangements. Typically this can be a semester or a year-long arrangement. Students are required to comply with university and course specific assessment requirements.

There are established gate-keeping mechanisms for admitting overseas students to full-time, credit-bearing programmes. Chief among these is the International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) to determine the level of language proficiency of potential overseas entrants. Students deemed to have appropriate levels of English language proficiency are given direct entry; those deemed to have inadequate proficiency are required to take a pre-sessional course. The focus is on language improvement, academic English and study skills enhancement. Pre-sessional courses are delivered by the English Language Centre (ELC).

This form of support is on-going for international students with in-sessional support provided across schools. It is delivered on an optional and non-credit bearing basis and taught by support specialists attached to the ELC. In some cases there have been initiatives to customise in-sessional provision; however, support is overwhelmingly generic in character and focus due to its essentially add-on nature. Implicit is a dominant conception of non-native speaker student needs in terms of deficiencies in language and effective 'study skills' know-how. Schools are required to pay for in-sessional support on a top-slicing basis.

### **3.2.6 Promoting innovation and good practice in learning and teaching**

Schools have their respective learning and teaching committees to oversee innovation in teaching, the curriculum and the learning environment. Continuing professional development for staff is central to the university's human resources strategy. A lively network of enhancement groups exists across the university to foster and develop teaching, learning, curricula change, student assessment and the university's stated commitment to independent learning, the e-learning agenda and the quality of the learning experience. Participation is open to all academic staff. The university also offers professional doctorates in teaching and learning for academic and support staff. Student services are responsible for much of the concrete work that goes into student academic support. Generic, university-wide learning and study support materials are generated through this service and there is research into the student experience.

The university regards teaching and research as complementary activities and believes that high quality teaching can only be achieved through the solid underpinning of research and scholarly activity (Northumbria University Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2003-6)

A key mechanism is the Applauding and Promoting Teaching (APT) award system which recognises good practice and innovation. This is both a catalyst and an incentive for bottom-up initiatives. The learning and teaching committee runs a series of seminars each semester so that pedagogic practice and research are shared and disseminated. There are also guides in print form which are freely available to all staff through library and information services. There are annual conferences – the Northumbria Conference for all staff and the Programme Leaders Conference.

The university has a dedicated Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) which is nationally funded. This is a key driver for development and innovation in pedagogy and research. The designated focus is on 'Assessment *for* Learning' (A/L). Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of assessment and linking it to principles of teaching and learning is a core component of the university's learning and teaching policy and regarded as impacting on student retention and success.

## 4.0 University wide study guide material

Available to all students is a booklet entitled “Your Guide to Effective Study” produced by student services and academic registry. The version described here was issued academic year 2005-6. It introduces itself as a ‘food for thought’ text encouraging students to think about their own learning. It is in a ‘handy guide’ format; attractively designed to be innovative and user friendly. Three sections focus on:

- independent learning;
- writing at university, and;
- other challenges (e.g. working in groups, doing presentations and exams) respectively.

It is thirty-three pages in length and the section on writing at university is ten pages. Essay and report writing, referencing and plagiarism are covered. An initial section on writing essays draws students’ attention to understanding essay questions and how to distinguish key, instructional and other terms. Short sections on reading and providing evidence in academic work, structuring essays logically, writing style, revising and editing and referencing follow. Another section covers report writing. Throughout the text there are coloured coded text boxes providing information on sources of further help, many of which are web-based and accessible through the e-portal. Specific information is given on referencing, why it is important and specific conventions. A university guide to referencing (produced by the library) - Cite them Right: Referencing Made Easy – is suggested reading. The link between referencing and plagiarism is strongly emphasised. The booklet distinguishes the report from the essay in the following terms:

Writing a report is very different from writing an essay. In a report, you are *generally* required to be more concise and specific. A report also *usually* has a clearly defined purpose and will be divided into distinct sections with headings and sub-headings (p.18)

Students are also advised to be careful about their language:

If you are writing a report for colleagues you can assume they will understand your subject jargon, but if you are writing for a wider readership you *may* have to use more commonly understood language. Reports should be *readable, accessible* and have a *concise style*. Don’t use *waffle* or *unnecessary padding*.

The italicisation of the words in the above has been added by this researcher. The use of imprecise modifiers and modal verbs testifies to the fact that this is no one size fits all description. What is acceptable and expected would, by implication, be assumed to vary across disciplines and possibly across and within subject areas according to the preferences of individual tutors and how they construe assessment requirements and learning outcomes. Words that are unlikely to be fully clear and meaningful to students occur without any attempt to clarify or exemplify (*readable, accessible, concise style, waffle, padding*). The student writer is also advised to break the report down into “logical sections” so that the reader can “tell from the section headings that you have addressed all the relevant and necessary factors” (p.19). This seems to vary significantly from the requirements of the essay with its sequenced and balanced argument (counter-argument) structure, paragraphs and the implicit quality of getting writing to ‘flow’. However, this is not explicated further, even in generic terms.

#### **4.1 Department specific support: study guides and student writing instruction**

A range of generic support modules and module guides exist within schools and are used across departments. This study looked in detail at examples in Nursing, History (applicable to Humanities in general) and Sociology (and Criminology) at level four of degree study and focused on student writing support content. Each of these modules serves as an induction experience for new students.

Professional, Information and Communication Studies (PICS) is a taught module and delivered in the first year of degree and diploma study to students in all programmes and within all branches of the School of Health. It is taught to first year degree and diploma students together. It is taught in seven different programmes: all the different branches of nursing, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Social Work, and ODP. The module guide is a 50 page document consisting of five sections. At the beginning is an introduction and orientation section for the reader. Sections three and four (19 pages) cover ‘Academic Writing’ and ‘Citation and Referencing’ respectively. Section three begins with a statement of learning outcomes. A general introduction follows identifying “good academic writing” as “a skill based on the sub-skills of “answering a question in a given word limit and over a specific time span”, “independent thinking” and “locating, selecting, organising, analysing and referencing

appropriate information from varying and often competing viewpoints and sources”. This is followed by some generic advice on preparation and structure in formal academic writing (“All essays have a standard structure - Introduction – main account – Conclusion”). There is a sub-section providing advice on writing style laid out in bullet points. A check list on presentation features follows this. Exercises are built into the format. The first is a diagnostic exercise on punctuation, spelling and grammar. Another is a fictitious sample of writing; the student references a subsequent section (Citation and Referencing) and then checks and amends the text.

The following section is similarly prefaced with reference to learning outcomes and an explanation of the importance of referencing in academic writing. This section explicitly states that the Harvard System is the standard for referencing across the university and provides examples on the “House style for all the health and social care professional courses accessing PICS and should be adopted in all your academic work unless stated otherwise, by individual tutors” and emphasises that “consistency is vital”. Examples are given about how to cite from books, secondary sources, journals, web-sites, government reports, how to do multiple referencing and using anonymous sources. A final section contains some short exercises where jumbled references need to be corrected.

Skills in the Humanities is a generic skills module taught to all students in first year (first semester: level 4) of study in English, History, History of Art, Politics and Film Studies. A sub-set of student booklets are available under the general heading of Study Skills, entitled: Writing, Essays, Reading, Visual Analysis (for art historians), Notes and Summaries, Revision and Exams. There is an introductory booklet which sets out the aim of the course and explains the self-study nature and format of the texts. There are self-assessment questions in all the texts (“allowing you to learn by doing”) emphasising the element of “self-learning”. The guide entitled “Writing” is a 44 page document. It is entirely a use of English text:

This booklet is designed to develop and improve your ability to construct concise and meaningful sentences and help you recognise and avoid common errors

It covers: choosing a style, spelling, word confusion (“such as affect/effect”), grammatical agreement, infinitives, the apostrophe, punctuation, word order and ambiguity in general, paragraphs. A separate 36-page booklet on ‘Essays’ is

...aimed at improving and extending the following skills:  
analysing essay titles; gathering ideas; selecting appropriate  
material and excluding irrelevancies; constructing an argument;  
arranging your material; drafting, checking and rewriting.

There are also short sections on organising time, collaboration and copying and general assessment criteria. There are self-assessment exercises in all the sub-sections.

The booklet on “Reading” draws attention to the “skills” of choosing the most appropriate techniques for reading different types of texts; reading actively, effectively and fast; selecting useful texts; reading to remember; reading critically and thoughtfully. The text does not emphasise the connection between reading and writing at any point. The text contains frequent use of the term “transferable skills” Writing is covered in the booklet on “Notes and Summaries” (43 pages) but not essay or assignment writing. There are some passing references to note-taking and assignment writing but overall this is left implicit. The term “transferable skills” is scattered throughout this text too. The module descriptor for Skills in the Humanities lists 26 programmes on which the module is used. The module is worth 10 credit points. The descriptor duly mentions that the module “emphasises independent learning”.

The Department of Sociology and Criminology is located within the School of Arts and Social Sciences. Two first year (level 4) modules exist which are year long: Enabling Sociological Study and Enabling Criminological Study. They are 20 credit modules. Both module descriptors are introduced as follows: “The module aims to develop the students’ study skills so that they become effective learners of sociology and criminology”. The module descriptor for sociology states: “The main emphasis is on student independent learning, focusing on the development of particular skills”. In the first semester at level 4 the focus is on generic study skills. The second semester is a “classical reading” component to accustom the students to reading sociological texts and to key concepts. The summative assessment in semester one involves “information search and retrieval, bibliographic construction, referencing and comprehension”; in semester two it is written and requires students to produce an essay and “a 500 word definition of three key concepts”.

The criminology module mentions the formative aspect of the course as enabling “critical reflection on the part of the student to begin to be developed” through peer review work. Summative assessment is in semester two only and consists of a 1500 word “essay”. The indicative reading lists for both modules direct students to

generic study skills handbook and guides (obtainable through the library or the study skills centres). Neither document mentions student writing specifically nor are they explicit about what ‘writing’ is in the discipline.

## **4.2 Induction practices and student writing**

The following are accounts given by teaching staff in humanities, health and social sciences of the ways in which student academic writing pedagogy is addressed within and outside the frameworks outlined above in the first year of undergraduate study. While the departments share commonalities of practice within a study skills ambit there are differences in how it is viewed and it appears to be a vehicle for more than one agenda as the following excerpt suggests:

There is a diagnostic exercise in the module: a one thousand word essay with detailed feedback. Students write the essay in groups. The topic is ‘groups and teams’. There is a heavy weighting to the structure of the essay. The students are meant to reflect on the practice of doing it as a learning process. The emphasis is on building and collaboration in groups and teams (Health, Community and Education)

The importance of impressing on students the expectations and standards of higher education are reflected in this statement:

Students coming from FE need to unlearn. They need to know what is academic and what isn’t. They come to university without these skills; they are accustomed to something else. For example they fall into using quotes too much and misunderstand the practice and concept of referencing and are inept at it; at least the way we want them to do it (Nursing)

A deficit conception of the student is evident here. There is a need to emphasise through direct transmission that appropriate formal aspects of writing are adhered to by students. This appears to over-ride any other conception of what writing in the discipline entails in pedagogical terms. The following respondent highlights a couple of problems with a generic support approach: firstly differences between areas are inexplicit and secondly, there is an uncertain assumption they are dealt with at another level:



The differences between disciplines and areas have not been made explicit. Staff decide how it is to be slanted. What we try to capture is the generic or core stuff; whoever is facilitating will superimpose what they expect. We have decided that we are going to do it according to discipline (Nursing)

In humanities areas diagnostic and formative work is part of the induction into academic writing, this practice is common to both English and History:

At the beginning of their courses students are given a couple of sessions when they do a critique on their own work. They decide what the weaknesses are in their own writing. There is also the 'independent essay'. Students select a topic of their own choice and negotiate the title and then set about writing it and selecting appropriate sources (History)

What appears to underpin this gesture is the assumption that once a diagnostic tool is administered there will be no further explicit need to directly support students with their writing. Some lecturers are not in total agreement with study skills input and have attempted to extend and adapt their departmental practices. However, institutional priorities have inhibited initiatives as is evident in the following response:

We argued that given the excellence of our [the university-wide] study skills material and that we are embedding this in the modules anyway, there was no need for a study skills module. We won at first but the university has backtracked. We still have the generic stuff but we would rather do it. (Sociology)

## **5.0 The modularised university**

### **5.1 Modularisation across the institution**

The university is modularised across all programmes. The increase in modularisation (or 'unitisation' as it was initially labelled) elicits different responses from lecturers. In some cases it is regarded approvingly:

The modular system takes a holistic approach with related modules and cross-teaching with homogeneous content (Nursing)

The availability of (generic) support assuages doubts about the atomisation of the curriculum in the perceptions of those in larger and more applied areas:

Students engage in modules simultaneously but support is available and is consistent across module areas (Business School)

In other cases modularisation fits with the beliefs of teachers about their disciplines:

Modularisation reflects the world. Clearly defined discrepancies [between disciplines] have started to break down. We need to collapse the distinctions between Arts and Social Sciences and replace a rigid formalist approach in some way (Politics)

On the other hand there are instances of implicit disagreement with the process:

We used to have coherent degrees. Now we have been shoe-horned into new structures (Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences)

There is also evidence that departments are conscious of the potentially negative effects of modularisation. Programme leaders were aware of this and there was evidence that the modular system was managed and moderated, in particular in faculty where a wide range of modularised study and joint degree structures operate:

Sociology is attempting to make longer, thinner modules so that there are fewer rather than more. We are concentrating on our cores (Sociology)

The data suggest that there are clear reservations about the effects of modularisation on students' performance in assessment and writing in disciplines. This can be crystallised into three common areas of concern:

- Linkage;
- Joint degree programmes, and;
- Course work and conflicting demands.

Lecturers are particularly concerned about links between courses in modularised programmes in a number of respects, as the following excerpt indicates:

Modularity reinforces discrepancies and encourages students not to make links. We are inclined to teach our modules in a blinkered way. There is little linkage in spite of things like programme boards and so on. It is making student support more complex...Another problem is that there are differences in credits for modules. History runs joint degrees with Sociology and Politics. Students can be spread too thin... It hasn't really been researched. (Humanities)

The absence of linkage has side effects on how tutors perceive student writing and what they expect. The above lecturer's concerns go further: where is the educationally – based research to support the commercially motivated drive towards ever more modularised and joint degree programmes. Teaching staff are under pressure in terms of time and resources but, as the following excerpt reveals, they are well aware of the confusion and uncertainty engendered through over-modularised course structures:

What we consider to be an essay is not what someone else considers to be an essay. Marking systems are also different. There are different perceptions about what a report is as well. What can we do? We should accept that there are differences and be training our students to work out what form of essay or report to select (Applied Sciences)

Concerns linked to issues of epistemology and authority in student writing across disciplines is prevalent in staff perceptions about the deleterious effects of modularity in joint degree structures:

We have many joint degrees with other departments. This has been very problematic. We are trying to get them to write 'sociologically'. The system of writing or their structure [in the other discipline(s)] is not the same as ours. Is there any real synergy between the two? What we have is a pick n' mix situation... Students have to switch from different modes of thinking and writing. There is too much marketing going on for joints that maybe aren't really feasible. There are different ways of thinking and communicating. (Social Sciences)

This is, in turn, related to how some teaching staff perceive the effects at the more tangible level of teaching and inducting students into and coping with the demands of disciplinary study. The following lecturer has a clear opinion of the deleterious effect on one important aspect of pedagogical interaction:

The facility to write in the academy develops over time. Modularity destroys that. The assessment dialogue is essential. But you can't do that as well with modularisation (Humanities)

In large schools where there is diversity in the curriculum there is corresponding diversity in writing and assessment practices. The following interviewee clearly perceives this as a problem:

There is a lack of clarity and consensus. The business report required in some modules invariably clashes with the dissertation style expected later. Students are variably confused about writing styles and requirements (Business School)

The effects of modularity permeate teacher practices at the very basic level and there appear to be unresolved issues and an unclear understanding of practices as a result:

One problem with modularisation is that there are differences in expectations at the personal level as teachers have specific views. This sometimes inhibits students. There are differences in the cultures of teachers. We have different practices... The issue of variability is a question if we decide that all later [second and third year] modules are harder than earlier ones (Business School)

The data in this section abundantly illustrate that the effects of modularisation and the sorts of course switching (Lea and Street, 1998) demands this makes on students and teaching are largely perceived as problematic by academic staff themselves as this engenders ‘blinkered’ approaches to teaching, appears unsupported by research to validate practices, and results in a perceived lack of clarity, consensus and adequate communication across subject areas and departments.

## **5.2 Module descriptors, learning outcomes and assessment criteria**

The Modularised Framework for Northumbria Awards sets out the regulations for devising and designing new modules on taught programmes. The document points out that awards are defined in line with external standards: the QAA and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). A module is defined as a “unit of learning” with “specified learning outcomes and a specified volume of credit at one level only”. Credit and qualifications levels are represented as a progression from level 1 to level 8 according to the FHEQ framework. Levels 3, 4 and 5 are undergraduate levels culminating in honours (H) level. The 20 credit module is the norm for undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. New modules have to be approved by the teaching and learning committees.

There is a standard module form used across the university. It includes the following headings:

- synopsis of the module;

- pre-requisites; co-requisites;
- aims of the module;
- learning outcomes (specified in terms of performance capability to be shown on completion);
- outline syllabus;
- learning, teaching and assessment strategy;
- indicative reading list, module reading list;
- module summative assessment (specified in terms of weighting and the form the assessment takes);
- programmes on which the module is used (or intended to be used for new modules).

Assessment criteria are also specified in accordance with level (3-6 for undergraduate modules). The Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice, Appendix 1: Guidance on Level includes a seven point list categorised according to Bloom's taxonomy (1956) of competence, skills demonstrated and question cues (specified in terms of performative verbs) in the cognitive domain. The taxonomy was devised specifically for ascertaining and measuring levels of learning and achievement in higher education. In effect this constitutes a guide for departments and teaching staff in determining levels of performance and learning outcomes for individual modules on taught courses across the three years of undergraduate study. The guide states:

while the categories do not map exactly onto levels, it is expected that higher levels will involve more learning outcomes and assessment tasks requiring more complex activities.

Assessment criteria are also generic and given in terms of word length for written assignments, presentation style, referencing and the use of evidence and this varies in form and degree across departments and in accordance with the preferences of programme leaders and individual tutors.

Inside this framework module tutors decide on the content of the module, how it is taught, its assessment and how students are guided. The following excerpts from the interviews with academic staff indicate some of the practical difficulties of working within this system:

It can take so long to get module approval. This stands in the way of doing anything differently. It is a disincentive to be innovative in what you do (Applied Sciences)

I have to spell out what we mean by 'evidence'. I rely on teaching them to express those things (Social Sciences)

The former highlights a particular problem with the system which is a disincentive to innovate at the pedagogical level. The implications from the second excerpt are arguably much more serious. The teacher is suggesting that it is through pedagogical interactions that the epistemology of study in the discipline is best imparted to students. Guides and descriptors are not the best medium for this purpose. The same staff member qualified this as not simply an issue about guides or module outlines *per se* but as an issue with what can feasibly be given to students in written texts according to institutional requirements and priorities:

There is a degree of fear in writing guidelines. I'm afraid to be different. It has got to be formulaic and look like everybody else's. I can be more fun and creative in the classroom, I don't have that freedom with the guide. I'm afraid of promising too much and getting found out

This can be juxtaposed with excerpts from the student interviews which reflect the limited extent to which students' share the restricted and opaque language of their tutors and higher education in general and the effort it requires of them to understand:

Last year writing for the course was mainly descriptive, but this year 'analysis' is the thing.

*What does it mean?*

It is why, and why it is done, why and who said what, oh... it is quite hard to explain! As a group we have been told what it means but you need to be told more than once. Analysis, analysis, analysis, erm... breaking things down into little parts; basically that's it. I'm trying to make sure my essay answers the question that has been asked (second year degree student, School of Health)

The following data are taken from a focus group session with third year, undergraduate nurses. There is a suggestion that students experience dissonance with the language of official forms – guides and descriptors – and that this persists into the later stages of degree study. What also emerges is that the officially sanctioned language of this kind of documentation has infiltrated the communicative processes between students and teaching staff widening rather than narrowing a communication gap

C) It takes a whole year to get used to these terms; then the next year it's all different because you are working at a different level. If we had something set out at the beginning of each year, what they want writing wise, it would be so much better instead of us ploughing through and working out what they want. At the end of the year I'm confident but I know I've got to start again at the beginning of the next year.

H) Yeah, that would be ideal

C) It changes every year. Our academic writing has to go up every year. We get smarmy comments like 'you're not at level 5 now'. We have to work out what she wants by passing on her comments.

H) We've got the nursing skills but it is just the academic writing  
*What do other classmates think?*

C) Everyone would generally like more information on what they mean. They use terms like level 5 but they don't explain what they mean.

H) I want to know what level 1, 2 3 and 4 are! [both laugh]

## **6.0 The institutional position on plagiarism**

The university takes a strong stance on plagiarism which is described on the official student services website as:

using someone else's ideas without properly acknowledging them  
or, to put it another way, presenting someone else's ideas as your  
own.

This is a "serious academic offence and will lead to work being disregarded or action being taken by the university". Plagiarism can be "deliberate or inadvertent" and can occur even if students' "words are considered too close to the original work". In fact the definition provided for academic misconduct on another web page defines this as "plagiarism or any other form of cheating". The plagiarism page itemises the ways that students can fall foul of plagiarism which include not only failure to reference and acknowledge quotation but copying other students work, getting someone to write your work for you and downloading text from the internet.

The last three issues here are sources of concern across higher education as student numbers expand, forms of assessment are changing, time pressures on teaching staff and the volume of student work increases. The e-learning environment means that students increasingly access the web for course work and additional sources for study and preparation of assignments. There are illicit services available through the web, and

other sources, that will offer to help students with their work, write their assignments and sell complete items of work which a student can pass off as his or her own. Plagiarism, collusion and the safeguarding of academic integrity and standards in general have become perennial concerns across HEIs.

The university has a Plagiarism Advisory Service (PAS) which offers advice to all staff and students on how to recognise and avoid plagiarism and collusion as well as “information on legal issues relating to plagiarism”. The university employs high quality software – Turnitin – in plagiarism prevention. The use of plagiarism detection software has been associated with formative work and students can access the software and use it, in principle, as a learning tool. Support for students is also available through student services. The plagiarism advisory service is government funded. There have been two “international” conferences, in 2004 and 2006, testifying to the university’s seriousness about dealing with this problem and placing it at the forefront of combating plagiarism in higher education.

The data excerpts below are from students in different areas of study and at different stages in their courses. Although these students are beyond first year study, uncertainty pervades their understanding:

*What do you understand by plagiarism?*

C) Repeating what’s in a book and copying it into your own essay or just swapping a few words around. To not plagiarise you have to read it, think it in your head, know what you are talking about and rewrite it

H) But we were never given advice on that

*You were just expected to know?*

C) Yeah. It was just expected

H) That’s the thing with references you weren’t allowed to rely on them but then you have to support your work with them, so it’s like, which one do you want? [laughs]

C) But everyone’s different. They’ve all got different ways.  
(third year undergraduate nurses)

Students have confused perceptions of cheating/misconduct and there are concerns that copying can happen accidentally. Research shows that this perception is a common one among students (Ashworth, et al, 1997). Students are ‘terrified’ and have naïve and unclear ideas about when to acknowledge and reference.



*What do you understand by plagiarism?*

H) I'm always terrified of it, that I'll get called in. When you try to say 'soanso said that' and you put their name in brackets next to it and all the rest of it you can still be very close to their actual words. Everything we read is making us think the way we think, so somewhere along the line we have to own somebody's ideas, don't we?

E) I got a book out the other day and I thought 'oh my god, this is my dissertation'! [laughs]

(third year undergraduates, mature-age: Sociology)

All around them students are reminded of plagiarism and the consequences of being found to have done it. The walls and corridors of the university are plastered with printed details about plagiarism detection services, web sites and software. The Students' Union has recently produced a set of flyers depicting academically unacceptable behaviours. Transgressors are represented as a bestiary in a surreal and Orwellian manner: a picture of a student but with the head of an animal superimposed. For example, a 'lazy dog' is 'idle' and 'doesn't read up on how to do things properly... misses references and will lose marks'. On the reverse there is a story. A student who had used the internet got caught. He had to resubmit his essay and was reported to the Law Society; his career prospects stymied. Students are exhorted not to 'fall into the plagiarism trap!' It is symptomatic of the desperation circulating in higher education in connection with plagiarism and academic misconduct and the level of autocracy brought to bear in attempting to control it. Uncertainty emerged in the interviews with traditional students as the following excerpt exemplifies.

It's the one thing the lecturers ram home. It's in every module guide – three to four pages of it! It's in your welcome pack as well.

*It's rather frightening isn't it?*

There is a danger that they go into it so much that students are worried about everything they write down; every simple sentence that you write will have to be referenced and footnoted. You don't get anything like it at A-level and then you come here and it is straight at you. It could get to the point where a fact like 'the great fire of London was in 1666' has to be referenced. You don't have to reference facts!

(second year undergraduate: History)

## **7.0 Marking and moderation – policy and practice**

Student written work is marked and second marked before it is returned to them. The teaching and learning committees across schools are responsible for determining how standards are maintained in accordance with QAA recommendations. Typically, first and second marks are allowed to differ within a margin of five percent. If there is disagreement beyond that margin then arbitration by a third marker is required. Feedback is then provided in writing to the student using the cover sheet or pro-forma instrument. If a student writer wants to clarify, discuss or challenge the mark and/or the evaluative comments of the marker that can be done in tutorial time or, in extreme cases where disagreement persists and cannot be resolved, through student appeal mechanisms.

The university provides advice on assessment, marking and feedback to teaching staff in a document entitled Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice based on the QAA Code of Practice on Assessment of Students. It is a QAA and university requirement that students are given handbooks explaining the assessments on their courses. These are to be devised at the divisional level by subject leaders and subject teams. Appendix 3 of the Guidelines document states:

To ensure consistency and transparency it is important that agreed marking and assessment criteria exist in each subject. These should have been agreed with relevant external examiners and should be made available to students in the programme handbook. Because of varying subject-specific requirements it is not appropriate to issue a standard university-wide set of marking criteria. It is for subject teams to define their own criteria around a common framework...(p.10)

Moderation may involve a second marker who works ‘blind’ (i.e. cannot see the first markers comments and marks). This arrangement is practised in some divisions but not in others; whether to second mark appears to be the choice of divisional heads and programme leaders. The decision is not simply arbitrary; it is deemed necessary to blind second mark students’ work to ensure fairness and rigour in particular with weak or borderline passes and work which is commended to distinction. Student work at both ends of the spectrum may have to be externally moderated depending on the requirements of the accrediting bodies in question. Where there is an agreement that

marking will be blind then markers are not allowed to write on student scripts. Comments (summative and for formative purposes) are restricted to the space available on the cover sheet /pro-forma. A programme leader stated:

I mark drafts and cover them in red ink. A policy of not writing on scripts doesn't apply to us. The cover sheet provides only summary comments. Feedback should be formative. Across the School some work is moderated and some is blind double marked (Engineering, Computing and Information Sciences)

In one case the stipulations of the university are dissonant with the praise accorded to markers by external examiners. This indicates a further level of complexity and complication; the sometimes arbitrary influence of external examiners on approving or discouraging practices within individual programmes.

The external examiners have actually praised us as a department for the amount of information we put on [student] scripts. I find it very frustrating that with blind double marking we are not allowed to write on them because for me that is very important for the student (Applied Sciences)

Another teacher notes a particular problem around the use of structured feedback sheets:

...[w]hen comments on scripts are not used, will the student know where the comment is relevant on their script? (Nursing)

The following data excerpt, however, suggests that there are informal elements in the moderation process. Tutors may work on the basis of shared assumptions and knowledge of each others practices and preferences:

We are a small division so there is a lot of consensus over moderation and second marking because we have a lot of exposure to each other and know about each others' practices. (Humanities)

Data also testify to the existence of marking and moderation 'cultures':

There is very little disagreement. Staff are acculturated to a certain view. We don't see it as a practice which we need to examine directly (Social Sciences)

But there are also some reservations about the process implicit in the following data.

As guidance tutors we mark a sample of student work but we do not formalise it. Any discussion among markers ensues from this. There

is not a lot of real examination by us regarding our own practices and different interpretations over the meanings of things [criteria] exist (Education)

Particular marking practices exist in spite of ostensibly clear guidelines on formal processes. There are differences in the backgrounds of teachers, particularly in applied and vocational areas.

There are differences and discrepancies in what markers are looking for. When a teacher prepares her own guidelines he or she often takes a 'these are the things I'm looking for' attitude. Students are encouraged to cross-check with tutors. Teachers, who are more academic, for example have a Master's level qualification expect more. They find it difficult to mark nursing diploma level work (Nursing)

The data in the above excerpts imply that tutors bring different values to the processes of marking and moderation which students might find unsettling (Carless, 2006). An excerpt from the student data appears to exemplify precisely this form of confusion which many new student entrants to the system, in particular may face:

When I did my second essay the tutor said it had been marked to a completely different structure. She didn't go into detail about what she meant by 'structure'. How can something be marked differently if they are using the same criteria? Tutors have their own styles (first year: nursing degree: mature-age)

The excerpts in this section highlight the tacit aspects of departmental and individual tutor practices. This seems to be at odds with the values of transparency and accountability which currently dominate higher education policy and discourse.

## **8.0 Summary and outline of the salient findings from the data analysed in this chapter**

The data suggest that lecturers' perceptions of non-traditional students are often coloured by a mixture of personal responses, and the values and assumptions they adhere to. Their perceptions of the difficulties students experience are associated with levels of expectation and the particular requirements of study in disciplinary contexts.

The underlying source of consternation is assumptions about students' preparedness and their understandings of the often tacit values and expectations of study.

University policy and practice consistently emphasise particular values embedded in the ideas, models of learning and discourse of the institution and explicit in documentation surrounding teaching, learning and student support. A common feature of the texts analysed in section three is the rhetoric: 'independent learner/ing', 'transferable skills', 'skills development', 'self-assessment', for example, occur frequently suggesting a particular value system which has established itself as normative. On the other hand, there is an overt emphasis on what Ecclestone (2002) refers to as 'procedural autonomy' which focuses on attention to requirements, guidelines and instructions. Autonomy in respect of the student's ability to manage and control subject knowledge (Candy, 1991) is another matter. This kind of learning is less generic and more embedded by nature. It is assumed to develop in accordance with stages of learning in degree study (cf. Bloom's taxonomy, 1956). The notion of 'support' is ubiquitous. However, there are students who need 'support' and others who have transcended that need: the latter is the kind of student the university idealises in its discourse.

The data indicate that university practices subscribe to a 'bolt-on' approach to student learning support, as opposed to the 'built-in' or embedded approach in which learning is developed through disciplinary teaching. This seems to indicate a deficit conception of support which is external to curricula. Unlike study skills, key skills are given more prominence in the curriculum (PDPs, Skills for Graduate Employability, etc). Wingate (2006) argues that a perception of learning that supports the teaching and acquisition of study skills outside the subject reflects a misunderstanding of the complexities of what is required in carrying out academic tasks and in academic learning in general. The accounts given of situated practices reveal the values that are prioritised. The approach to writing pedagogy seems to be based on implicit induction and explicit attention to study skills. Writing is covered in the latter component as a transferable technology providing evidence of the way in which institutional priorities can inhibit changes at the departmental level.

The data present a picture of underlying tensions and incoherence around modular programmes. There are concerns about compatibility, credits, course work requirements and marking systems. Students are required to switch between different ways of 'thinking and communicating'. This affects the ways students write, how they

understand discipline specific expectations and the practices around writing and assessments. Viewing writing as a decontextualised, transferable technology or skill does nothing to mitigate some of the problems of modularisation: student confusion over referencing conventions, epistemological presuppositions and how knowledge should be represented. Modularity creates fragmentation in course structures and militates against embedded academic literacy support.

A module descriptor is, in principle, a source of information, learning and guidance for students. It also serves to reinforce institutional legislation. Teachers are expected to specify learning outcomes, methods and assessment and, hence, the student experience. A descriptor is a record of compliance (Morley, 2003). This may account for why, according to one respondent it is so difficult to get new module approval and why they have to be 'formulaic' according to another. Teachers are restricted as agents of change. Descriptors are not effective conduits for the imparting of the epistemic conventions of the discipline.

The students' responses imply that they are not explicitly taught about academic conventions such as plagiarism and they cannot they make sense of guidelines (such as the university booklet on citation and referencing). Tutors have got 'different ways'. Larkham and Manns (2002) claim plagiarism is a rising trend because it is not viewed as sufficiently serious by students and teachers. They suggest more severity in its treatment. The data presented in this chapter, however, indicate that the more severe the strictures against plagiarism are the more confused the message is that students receive.

Students may not understand marking and assessment processes and this may affect their sense of engagement with higher education (Haggis, 2004a; Haggis and Pouget 2002; Mann, 2001). They may see things subjectively and think, for example, that teachers are biased or partial in marking (Ivanič, et al, 2001). They may misunderstand marking and second marking systems (Carless, 2006). In the area of assessment the workings of the institution are at their remotest and most arcane for students. The power differential is most accentuated. As a result, students tend to become more sensitive to what they perceive as tacit practices and hidden agendas than do teachers, who can be oblivious to this in their own, and, in particular, the practices of others (Sambell and McDowell, 1998; Orr, 2005).

## **Chapter Five**

### **Student writing in the contemporary context of higher education: beliefs, perceptions, problems and practices**

#### **1.0 The organisation of this chapter**

This chapter is organised into sections as follows:

- An initial example which sets the tone for the discussion in this chapter by considering how the institutional agenda and an individual teacher's perceptions and beliefs both coincide and differ
- Section 3.0 considers data on staff perceptions of problems in student writing related to any elements of written language in student scripts. These include transcriptional features and generic conventions associated with academic style. A subsection considers data on staff perceptions and beliefs about student writers and problems with writing development in the academy more generally. Another subsection focuses on staff beliefs about the types of writing students are expected to do at university and changes that are occurring. This is followed by data which reflect staff expectations and beliefs about student writing in the disciplines. Finally data is presented from student interviewees who were asked how they perceive writing at university in order to tease out their understandings and experiences of academic writing.

Three subsequent sections focus on the student experience in more detail:

- Students' understanding at the point of writing: titles and the wording of assignments
- Understandings of epistemology and authority in the perceptions of student writers; the preconceptions students hold, and the strategies they use in managing, and adapting to, the demands of writing at university.
- The experience of students writing in different subjects for different teachers.

A penultimate section considers what this research revealed about innovative practices in writing and assessment and teachers' beliefs. A sub-section presents data on the experience and views of a group of students in this regard. Finally, the salient findings from the data are summarised and further discussed in a separate section

## **2.0. Institutional discourses and individual teacher beliefs: an example from the data**

The notion of student learning as, in part, a matter of skills and competencies is represented in both the practices and discourse of the university. This may be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the conception of learning skills accords with both government official education policy and the emphasis of employers groups on developing the skills base of the national and regional economies. Secondly, the university has a policy to recruit a large number of students from schools and colleges in the region. A lot of potential graduates will seek future employment in the local or regional economy. In addition the university is concerned to demonstrate its commitment to the ethos of 'life-long learning' in line with the government's policy of the 'knowledge economy'. The purpose is to attract people in vocational walks of life back into education, to develop their 'skills base' and to develop commercial (and cultural) links within the region. As noted in chapter two, the notion of skills is underpinned by the objective of transferability, which reinforces the university's claim to be responsive and accountable. Skills are seen as measurable and quantifiable. Students can be defined in concrete terms on their 'transferable skills' and 'graduate employability'.

In chapter four it was noted that one way in which this discourse affects the curriculum is in increasing modularisation which complements and mutually reinforces the notion of transferable skills. Unsurprisingly, it influences how learning and teaching are perceived by academic staff. It is particularly prevalent in applied and vocational/practice-based areas and scaffolds approaches and attitudes to teaching. The following data are taken from an interview with a tutor in an applied/vocational discipline area:

A skill is quantifiable and can be taught. It can be taught by people who are fairly ordinary. Most of us can teach it and mark it. When a student is not to the required standard it is difficult to argue that if it is not skills based. It is safe for teachers and it is teachable. Much of what we do is jumping through hoops. In order to teach you need yourself to be very secure



This teacher feels she is engaged not only in teaching but ‘jumping through hoops’ to satisfy institutional requirements. The effect on her attitude to student writing is shown in the following excerpt from the same interview:

... the whole point of learning to write is that it is transferable. Additionally in certain subjects there are things that have to be added. Writing is having the skills then on top of having an understanding of what is required.

Although she did not say so explicitly, the interviewee appears to be referring to both the need to satisfy assessment criteria and to impart to students the specific characteristics of academic writing. Some of these she identifies as follows:

Sentence structure is fundamental and grammar can be a real problem. They have difficulty structuring complex thought in a way that is comprehensible to the reader. When they get into argument there is often a morass of messy words. They borrow ideas and barely paraphrase them or do so badly. Many students can write well in certain circumstances but the assignment is not the right one. When they talk through the assignment with the teacher they generally do better because the teacher provides the structure

The excerpts from the same interview encapsulate both the thinking associated with, and the discourse that pervades, attempts to talk about student writing in a conceptual framework of transferable skills or competencies and writing/language as autonomous and transparent. Overall there is ambivalence to writing as a ‘skill’ and uncertainty about the way students learn and adapt to writing at university in the above excerpts. The views of this particular lecturer were reiterated in various ways in other interviews and raise questions about pedagogical approaches to writing:

- To what extent can student writing be feasibly addressed in terms of transferable skills such as sentence grammar, referencing conventions and so on
- The extent to which students, who may be considered weak writers by tutors, struggle with different ways of doing writing (genres) and the implicit expectations of writing (‘complex thought’, ‘argument’, ‘structure’) at university

- The extent to which students need guidance with writing and their academic literacy development at the level of interaction with tutors

### **3.0 Staff perceptions and beliefs about problems with student academic writing at the transcriptional level**

Student academic writing is expected to be formal in register and avoid styles similar to everyday speech such as colloquialisms and non-standard forms. It is also expected to be depersonalised (cf. Creme and Lea, 1999). Coffin et al. (2003: 28) describe formality as “the use of technical, elevated and abstract vocabulary, complex sentence structures and the avoidance of the personal voice (I, you)”. Student writers are expected to use impersonal constructions in their writing and maintain a degree of objectivity or distance. This is reinforced by the requirement to ‘hedge’ or use verbs and phrases to modify statements. Complex grammatical forms and sentence structures are common (for example, lexically dense and compact nominalised syntactic structures). The academy expects students to be ‘literate’ in the use of these complex forms which are assumed to have been ‘acquired’ as part of their socialisation process for, and in the initial stages of, higher education. The following excerpt indicates that this level of attainment is not always apparent or even reached:

The level of ability of students to express themselves varies. A lot of them mix registers and produce a lot of colloquial expressions and slang in their writing. Many students don’t seem to be able to express themselves with any degree of sophistication. (Art History)

Creme and Lea (1999) point out student writers may grapple with trying to meet expectations that are not explicitly taught and may produce sentences in their formal written texts which are “approximations” of the registers and linguistic genres – language forms and usages - they are exposed to and which they equate with academic style. This is clearly evident in the following excerpt:

Sometimes students write in an over-complicated way or they try to be overcomplicated. Other times students simply don’t write well at all. I refer them to the study skills centre. Syntax is frequently a problem; however, we do not penalise directly for poor grammar. There is a limit to how much time as teachers we could and should spend on correcting poor English (History)

In the above excerpt a tutor appears to equate problems in student writing with technical aspects of producing written work which 'study skills' provision is meant to address; if this has not done the job then there is a back-up: referral to the study skills specialist. Teachers recognise that problems persist beyond the first year despite the inclusion of study skills components:

[Students] take study skills in the first year but this doesn't always filter through into their writing. Even in the core courses in the second year students are badly in need of assistance in basic writing skills (English)

Another teacher, located in an interdisciplinary and modularised department, offered the following diagnosis:

My view is that it [poor student writing] is not to do with aptitude or rationality; it is to do with poor grammar. What makes a difference is what they read and their exposure to different writing styles (Applied Sciences)

Implicit in the above is a lack of recognition that students need direct support with their writing. They are meant to acquire the literacy skills expected osmotically through reading widely. In vocational/practice-based areas there is heterogeneity of text types, writing requirements and practices but conventions are emphasised as an aspect of professionalism and academic standards:

There is an emphasis on reflective practice type essays. Disciplines that have worked hard to professionalize maintain an emphasis on the canons [of academic writing] (Nursing)

The above excerpt highlights a conflict between learning driven by work-based requirements (cf. Boud, 2006) and the expectations of teaching staff in the academic context. There seems to be a pull in different directions. Curricula and assessment are increasingly given over to work-based approaches to learning in accordance with the employability agenda but the underlying attitudes of teaching staff emphasise traditional values. This is likely to be reinforced by accreditation standards and external adjudication. However, as the next excerpt illustrates, in applied and vocational areas there is uncertainty about how far beliefs and practices are shared by teaching staff across fields of study:

We would never accept writing in the first person; the standard style that is required is the third person. There may be areas of the School where it is the case they write differently. I don't know about that (Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences)

The views expressed so far indicate, wittingly or unwittingly, a model of learning as implicit induction and writing as autonomous of context. As with the example in section 2.0 this provides a clear frame of reference and way of talking about student writing: discrete, transferable skills and deficits in the student. The point of view expressed below shows how this thinking can lead to a reductive perception of students and their writing problems:

The literacy issue is two-fold: home students have poor grammar and the overseas students can't write (Business School)

In contrast another teacher sees the problem in plural terms and not simply a characteristic of students:

People are obsessed with referencing and plagiarism nowadays. What students need most help with is to express themselves clearly. A lot depends on the audience and the objective of the writing, of course. Students are confused by practices between modules. There are differences of opinion about what is acceptable and we [teachers] have different standards (Informatics)

This teacher wishes to provide explicit support with writing but mentions two factors which inhibit her doing so: the institutional priority of referencing in student work to control plagiarism and safeguard official standards, and disparate practices among tutors and their conceptions of standards within a modularised discipline. The following excerpt identifies another problem:

The huge problem is referencing. We put a lot of effort into this. But we do get a lot of first year work without any referencing in it at all, or very little. They tend to rely on lecture notes and handouts. A problem with giving them detailed handouts is that you see the material coming back to you in essays. (Sociology)

The perceived dependency on lecture notes maybe a symptom of students trying to make the transition to university: from one set of practices to another. Lea and Street (1998) noted that this is characteristic of students in the first year of study who are, in the absence of any explicit support, struggling with adjusting to what they perceive as

the expected style and register. They reproduce rather than reformulate (Lea, 1998) and produce an imperfect version which may be understood as struggling to avoid 'simple language'. This conceptualisation of 'requirements' leads students to underestimate the purpose of referencing; hence they fail to connect with what is expected (cf. Haggis, 2006; Yorke, 2005).

### **3.1 Expectations and beliefs about students' academic writing capabilities in general**

This lecturer equates poor writing with poor thinking, but doubt and ambivalence is palpable in what he says:

The evidence of their thinking is in their writing and if this is flawed their thinking is too... a lot of students write badly but we don't know why. There is a big presumption that students will be able to write when they arrive but this is never really challenged (Art History)

Another teacher states:

Essay writing is a test of ability to express yourself well in writing. The facility to write in the academy needs to be built up over time starting with building blocks (History)

Writing essays is a 'test' at which not all students excel. They are expected to develop an appropriate writing style through 'exposure', by 'connection' and 'over time'. The metaphor of 'building blocks' reflects this belief. The following respondent is less certain about the implicit and acquired nature of this learning:

Academic writing is a skill that develops through repetition and practice. However, this doesn't necessarily follow (Politics)

The implicit nature of learning how to write is linked to professional practice and work-based learning in vocational areas:

In nursing we are required to keep nursing records. Students learn how to use the appropriate phraseology or turn of phrase to manage this. Student writing practices are driven by professional requirements. It usually takes students a good six months to get the hang of how to write in the academic style. (Nursing)

This functional approach to students developing their writing and understanding at university is evident in other practice based/applied areas of study but has contradictory and deleterious effects in other areas of the teaching and learning experience as is evident in the next excerpt:

I have run an essay lab for students in their third year because they are weak at writing essays. We are encouraged to devise innovative assessment and then the students are put through exams in which they write discursively. We haven't given them the skills to write essays (Psychology)

The next comment expresses a similar general concern. Altering the forms of assessment may be seen as making it more practical and relevant to the curriculum (especially in applied areas) but often minimises writing, and the learning of (implicit) expectations in the process (cf. McLellan, 2001, 2004; Yorke, 2003):

We give our students a mix of assignments and it appears it is the same ones who write badly. I don't think it is about non-traditional students especially. It is because students rarely have to write (Applied Sciences)

### **3.2 Academic prose and textual heterogeneity**

In traditional humanities the essay is the dominant text type and the main basis for student assessment. The implicit nature of learning how to write in the discipline is clear in this teacher's comment:

Connected prose is what you do best in History. Some students step over the barrier consummately while others struggle with it (History)

In applied disciplines there is a wider spectrum of text types:

Student writing includes seminar logs, exam questions, portfolios and biographies (for a particular module), essays, reports and diaries (Sociology)

In an applied and hybrid area this heterogeneity is viewed as part of the changing epistemic nature of 'discipline' itself:

Politics is an older discipline and Media is relatively new. The world is more fragmented nowadays and the old distinctions and astringencies have been broken down. Students have to write essays, do seminar logs, presentations, write text to accompany imagery (media) and resumès (Politics and Media Studies)

Particular types of writing vary in and across areas of study in applied and vocational areas and students are expected to be able to write according to the requirements of different contexts (Lea and Street, 1998; Baynham, 2000). The following two excerpts illustrate the practical concerns of two lecturers from different applied and vocational areas:

Normally students write reports. There is some discussion and referencing but it is not a 'statement and discuss' type assignment. However, there are exams in which students have to write discursively. There are differences between courses as they require different ways of writing and different levels of skill (Business School)

The traditional essay is the common text type. Students also have to write reflectively and produce reflective essays. This can be a source of confusion (Nursing)

Conflicting practices and teacher perceptions about what is appropriate can occur in the same school. The following excerpts, from teachers within separate divisions in the same school, exemplify the extent to which this is the case in large faculty:

In Geography some modules are applied but many are theoretically based. We don't have many report based assignments. We still use traditional essays of two or three thousand words (Applied Sciences)

In the Environmental division there has been a move away from essays to the report genre motivated by considerations about how well the curriculum reflects work-based requirements. On the other hand this may have been *ad hoc* as the following excerpt implies:

In the Environmental division there is great diversity in the way students are required to write: field-trip write-ups, essays, lab reports. We don't define what our style is. Another issue is the diversity of students. Some come with good [writing] skills, others with weak ones. Several years ago skills were not considered good enough. What employers want is a more report style of writing.

There was something of a transition from essays to reports.  
(Applied Sciences)

The implication from these comments is that some teachers subscribe more to one way of doing writing than do others depending on their subject, the practices they are most accustomed to, their beliefs about writing in the discipline and, presumably, their subjective view on what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘acceptable’ student writing. By not defining ‘style’ in terms of student writing practices, changes in requirements and assessment can be made *ad hoc* and piecemeal which permits greater heterogeneity in text types and assessment mode. For some teachers this flexibility is a boon and is consistent with the values they express around the purpose of student writing. For others their particular beliefs about ‘good’ student writing, and the nature of ‘learning’ in disciplinary contexts, is overridden on the basis of pragmatic considerations and conformity with other requirements and agenda.

### **3.3. Expectations and beliefs about writing in the discipline(s)**

In traditional humanities and social sciences areas there are generic and specific expectations among academic teaching staff:

A clear introduction is important that sets out the agenda. Arguments need to be supported with evidence; a series or sequence of points that are interlinked. Balance is important and the ability to look at things from a variety of perspectives and use critical judgement (History)

The following respondent characterises a ‘good’ writer as a student who can write in accordance with disciplinary expectations:

Good writers can apply logic and use evidence. They need to demonstrate a capacity for abstract thought. Sociology has qualitative and quantitative areas. Writing in social theory, for example, is similar to writing in History or Social Geography (Sociology)

On the other hand, practices vary within, as well as across, subject areas. There is confusion at the level of epistemology in large, modularised departments. Teachers do not agree about what to expect from students and module tutors have latitude in deciding how to orientate assessment requirements:



There are two types of writing in Psychology: essays and scientific reports. We are thinking about introducing a second year programme on “how to write essays”. There are differences. A lot depends on the module tutors (Psychology)

It appears to be the responsibility of the student to figure things out. This follows in applied areas; students need to grasp the underlying epistemological nature of writing and using knowledge in the discipline. Where there are difficulties it raises other concerns for teachers associated with the amount of support they are expected, or willing to give students on an individual basis:

Nursing students must produce evidence-based material in their written work. Students misread questions or fail to use support from the literature. This raises the question of spoon feeding and a direct teacher to learner approach (Nursing)

In order to obtain a richer account of how practices and expectations varied staff were asked to explain and comment on ‘argument’ in their discipline and what they expect to find in student texts. Argumentation is a core epistemic skill and requirement in higher education (Mitchell and Andrews, 2000). Other words such as ‘structure’ also have this quality. These terms, and others, constitute the basic descriptive tools for discussing the properties of student writing and communicating judgements to student writers on the quality of their work. This teacher makes a statement about what is looked for, some problems, and what is deemed (un)acceptable. There is a clear mention of issues in relation to the epistemic conventions of writing in cross-disciplinary contexts:

It is quite clear that they confuse ‘assertion’ and ‘evidence’ and that they don’t quite understand what a consistent argument is nor what is required with structure. I try to get them to show me plans but this isn’t always reliable. Using a quotation is not enough. That’s a particular bug-bear of mine. They do it in the social sciences. We often find that they use quotations which just repeat something or it is a generalisation which rarely in fact advances their argument (History)

History runs joint degrees with Politics and Sociology. There is a clear statement that the use of accepted conventions (quotes) in one area is deemed bad practice by the historian and students do it ineptly in any case. But students are also confused at the level of epistemology – using evidence appropriately and developing a consistent

argument in the way that this tutor expects. Other respondents gave similar accounts of what they expect and, implicitly, what ‘good students’ can do:

It is assembling your thoughts about a topic in order to persuade somebody about something. How do I as a student writer persuade my tutor? Better students recognise that this is required. The less good ones fall back on regurgitating information (Art History)

Another respondent points to an overt issue that exists within applied and modularised disciplines at yet another level:

Students don’t really need to construct arguments in their writing for the science team. Comparing and contrasting is the basic thing. It is an issue for the sports studies sociology team (Applied Sciences)

Teachers continue to use familiar descriptive tools associated with underlying disciplinary values, such as ‘structure’, ‘argument’, and ‘analysis’ for example. There is a tacit acceptance that understandings and practice vary among academic staff especially in large and diverse faculty:

Different interpretations of words do occur when staff talk; during moderation for example. The process can reveal big differences in the way people see things like ‘structure’. Are terms like ‘structure’ and ‘presentation’ mutually exclusive? Practices vary among staff and across the branches [of nursing] (Nursing)

Teacher understandings and interpretations differ not only across but even within disciplines. A sociology lecturer candidly admitted that in a division in which there are as many as forty separate degree programmes staff could sit down and discuss what these words mean ‘but we wouldn’t necessarily agree’.

### **3.4 How students perceive and experience writing in higher education**

Despite the concern at the institutional level about basic literacy, research indicates that students are less aware of this in general and less concerned about it overall (e.g. Robertson, et al, 1998). In order to tease out what students thought about writing in the university and the challenges they face participants were asked what they thought was distinctive about academic writing and its value (to them) in general. A third year

student in Applied Sciences reflects on his initial first year experience with student writing and assessment and the transition from A-level to university:

It's very formal. There is no space, no leeway, and you have to work within the structures set. The sixth form standard of writing just isn't acceptable anymore. You have to get accustomed to it. From the beginning, with the first essay it hits you.

*So there was a bit of a culture shock?*

Oh yeah... Sixth form is all geared to exam and to content. They don't prepare you enough with the structure of essays. I think a lot of students find it hard to adapt to university style. They are set in a routine. The lecturers set out the criteria and the resources are there to help people. If you don't follow it and meet expectations then it is tough luck!

Another third year student had a clear opinion based on experience and practice:

There is no emphasis on the individual and there are no personal feelings involved in it. It is direct and to the point and from the first few lines you can tell if it is academic. It is the style that is expected (third year Applied Sciences: traditional A-level entrant, single honours)

The adroitness of this account contrasts with those of the mature-age non-traditional students interviewed while in the third year of their Sociology degree course (the letters E and H are the forename initials of the students and were used in the transcription of the data; they are retained here):

E) The structure; exactly what is asked of you. You are writing more critically. You have to make sure you put an argument in there and answer the question. It's that sort of thing. Probably that is what academic writing is about

*But apart from passing assignments is there any value in being good at it?*

H) Oh I think so. When I look back at my writing in the first year it is unbelievable how it has changed. I was writing 'the cat sat on the mat' [both laugh]. The more you write it the more the more you understand what other people are writing too.

E) Writing has helped me with reading. Just being able to write I can read so much better because the two are working together. Books we struggled with in our first year, ones we had to read three and four times to understand them, are easy to read now.

These students have attained a working understanding of what student academic writing 'probably' is about but they are still tentative. Words such as 'structure', 'argument' and 'critical' demonstrate an awareness of disciplinary values. They

reflect on their struggle with their writing and how their command of style and register has improved. They recognise the symbiotic nature of writing and reading at university. Their comments reflect the difficulties they encountered in the early stages of degree study because of a model of learning as implicit induction. Both students had a record of achievement in their assignments over the three year of study and value their hard earned skills and insights. Nonetheless they are still, even as third year students, not completely comfortable with some aspects of writing in the academy such as referencing, the synthesis and acknowledgement of sources and paraphrasing.

The data below are taken from a focus group session with first year nursing degree students one of whom already had higher education experience (A), one who came through A-levels (B) and another who came through a non-traditional route (C). An issue for these students seems to be the way they have to write as undergraduates compared with how they wrote before coming to university and what they anticipate writing will be in the professional context. An incongruity between academic writing and the nature of the discipline seems to come through. As a result they are sceptical about the way they were inducted into doing 'academic writing'.

*What would you say is distinctive about academic writing?*

C) Referencing. I'd never had to do that in my life before coming here. Also having to write in the third person and not being allowed to abbreviate words like 'can't' but having to write 'cannot' and have not' instead of 'don't' and all those things.

A) I always knew you couldn't use contractions, but referencing, well, that's just a minefield.

B) They encourage you to read as much as possible. I guess the process of reading helps with the writing. They tried to introduce us to writing through a group essay writing exercise. I couldn't see the point of it. I don't need to know that again!

C) And you just get annoyed don't you? You think what else you could be doing with your time. A group essay about writing a group essay, done as a group [laughter]

These students appreciate that reading helps them with writing consistent with implicit induction but cannot relate their understanding of academic writing to anything more specific. The formal induction they received as first year students was lost on them. The group essay writing task seemed muddled. The task was ostensibly about writing but other values associated with practical aspects of nursing such as group/team work were fore-grounded such that students were confused by the

exercise. The implication is that where outcomes-based learning is dominant, as it is in vocational areas, it permeates how other areas of learning are conceptualised. A measurable 'outcome' arguably unrelated to the purpose of the task was superimposed to legitimise it. The students saw through the artificiality and felt exasperated. This example also raises questions about the ways in which formative assessment as a learning tool is implemented and understood by teachers in an environment dominated by work-based curricula, formal assessment and outcomes (Maclellan, 2001). There is also the suggestion that a more fundamental and hidden tension exists: the values of the profession are conflicting with academic values. Essayist literacy, and the implicit beliefs and expectations of teaching staff, is not resonant with the former. One set of values appears to take precedence over another. University discourses around textual sources and generic support contribute to this ostensive polarity in the way they position students and teachers. Students – in particular those in applied and practice-based areas of study - are routinely referred to guides or recommended to visit the study skills centre if they have questions concerning academic expectations and meanings.

The following student experienced problems caused by the conflict between her own writing style and a tutor's unclear expectations:

I was putting words in to connect ideas and sentences – words like 'however' and 'therefore'. The guidance tutor told me to leave them out and that I should structure my writing so that I don't have to use those words at all. But she didn't give me any other guidelines so I just carried on using them. She hasn't said anything about it since (first year nursing diploma: mature-age)

The tutor may have been right in pointing out the student's possibly inept use of connective devices. However, the student was left guessing. The above example also raises doubts about how well the teacher felt s/he was able to give advice to students about their writing or where work-based learning is emphasised writing fluency is even valued. This third year nursing student attended the study skills centre for advice because he was experiencing a fall in his marks:

As with all essays you are actually writing to please someone else. The question will want to take you in certain directions and you have to go there. I write what I think about. If they tell you what to write it is not really you is it? The lecturer and the GF [guidance facilitator] are not saying the same thing. Who am I writing for?

The majority of students ask each other ‘what are we supposed to be writing?’(mature-age)

The last three data excerpts raise a few questions about attitudes to student academic writing in emergent and vocational disciplines. What is acceptable in different contexts and according to whom? Where do you start with addressing this issue? Tutors strongly encourage students to read widely in their first year tacitly embracing implicit induction as perhaps the only option available. Students have come to university to become practising nurses and the unfocused and inexplicit help they receive with writing in the first year makes them wonder ‘what else you could be doing with your time’ compounding their lack of affinity with writing at university and polarising the academic and the practical in the early stages of study. The third year nursing student expresses a lack of affinity with writing for assessment. This had not inhibited his progress so far. What appears to be the problem (and led to a worsening of his marks) is the need to adjust his writing to the more astringent yet inexplicit expectations of unfamiliar lecturers across modules when writing at the advanced stage of the degree.

This apparent lack of connection with the academic endeavour through writing can give rise to frustration and disengagement as indicated by this excerpt from a mature-age, first year nursing diploma entrant:

*What is distinctive about academic writing for you?*

It’s finding the right terminology. I don’t think it does come naturally. Referencing I find very difficult. I was a legal secretary for many years before I came into the health field. Some students can write on the computer but I have to write it down first and then put it on the computer. It’s more structure I get mixed up with. Primarily I don’t necessarily answer the question or give them what they are asking for. Tutors seem to have so little time. There are rumours that if you seek direct help with your assignment you will get marked down. There are problems with fairness. Everybody in the [seminar] group would want extra help. Some teachers point you to study skills. A school leaver in our group remarked that they need extra help too. Things are done differently in school than in university

This excerpt casts light on the world of the first year student in areas with large student in-takes. Tutors are not really available to guide outside scheduled tutorial time on an individual basis. Unaccustomed to academic study and writing lengthy

assignments the student struggles. Hearsay and rumour abound about asking for extra help, what is fair to others and getting 'marked down'. Over-worked teachers under pressure of large class sizes refer students to study skills support specialists. It is not only the mature-age, 'non-traditional' student: everybody is concerned and all would like extra help. In addition to there being insufficient support in the curriculum there is little 'peer' interaction. The student seeks extra-curricular help; any port in a storm.

#### **4.0 Students' understanding of essay titles and the wording of assignments**

The values of higher education are, arguably, at their most opaque (Haggis, 2006; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Hounsell, 1997a) in essay titles and the wording of assignments. Students are also confronted with the language of assessment criteria and learning outcomes which have colonised higher education discourses. Titles are statements of what is required for assessment and how knowledge and learning should be represented. They obliquely communicate expectations to students. A large number of students talked about dissecting titles and focusing on key words to demystify essay and assignment titles as a first step:

I pull out all the key words and define them. I think it is hard to understand the question, harder than it looks. I try to rewrite it in my own words. Even when you think you have got the gist of it you can't be sure it is what they are asking for (second year: Occupational Therapy)

This student had prior experience of tertiary education with the Open University and is more circumspect about the nature of set work and tutor expectations:

I pick out the key words. They are just fancy words anyway. They could put it in a simple format but they don't. It can be a massive long question and they are only really interested in one thing (first year: Social Work; mature-age)

Students talk about being variously confused, thrown back on their own devices and referred to study guides when they ask for clarification:

E) When there is something in it like a key word such as 'discuss', 'analyse' or 'describe' it helps me to understand the question, as well as any other key words you can pick up on

H) Yeah, jargon; some of them use big long words you have to go and look up in the dictionary before you can even begin to understand the question

E) Some of them are never explained. When you look them up in the dictionary they mean something quite simple. When you ask the teacher about them you are referred to the module guide and left to get on with it

*Are these words clear to students in general do you think?*

E) For me they are fairly clear because before I came to university I got some help with what these words mean in an academic sense [student had completed a Higher Education Foundation Course]

*If you hadn't?*

E) I wouldn't have had a clue!

H) E gave me a sheet with from her HEFC course in the first year. It helped me to get started. (third year Sociology: mature students)

The sense of being at a bit of a loss in the early stages of degree study is evident in the following account from a non-traditional entrant:

If it says 'describe and discuss', well those are quite different things.

*What does discuss mean then?*

I have a sheet at home with all this on. I don't know it off the top of my head. I should I suppose (joint honours student: Health; direct entry to second year)

The next excerpt is an unedited account from a non-native speaker student who was admitted directly to the third year of study on a degree course:

They gave us tutorials for the dissertation every second week. What we really wanted to know about was the assignment and to talk about the difficulties we had. At first we didn't know what the question means. The British teachers didn't answer us. They see it as our task. In China the teacher would give some directions but not reject to answer your question. Here it is more deep and more professional, I think... I don't have the background. I know it is my problem.

The institutional practice of mystery cannot accommodate this student and others like her. Tutors seem to be uncertain how to respond in this situation. They may be reluctant to advise students on assignments in other modules where module tutors have different practices, expectations and countenance different conventions. The student identifies her problem as a direct entrant and without the 'background'. The tutor has made an effort to support the student by pointing to the epistemic



conventions of the discipline generally; the student accepts this (and the tutor's) authority ('here it is more deep') but she is still perplexed.

## **5.0 How students approach academic writing: epistemology, authority, preconception and strategy**

Research within the phenomenographic tradition into student learning has revealed that students often have different concepts of what an 'essay' is and how they learn about it (Hounsell, 1997a; McCune, 2004). This influences both the way they prepare their work and the way they write it. Prior experience with writing in formal educational contexts (school/A-level or prior tertiary education experience) and an awareness of what constitutes the epistemology of the subject are intrinsic factors. Trial and error is part of the learning curve for student writers:

*How do you approach an essay?*

I switched from a joint in History and Politics to a joint in History and Sociology. I missed the first year in the sociology degree. With some of the early sociology essays I got it wrong. There was an essay that asked us to compare the work of sociologists. I just compared their work. The teacher advised me to look at the practical evidence of their work in society. I had based the whole essay on their theories. I had read the question too literally – "compare and contrast the thinking of Marx, Durkheim and Weber". I got the wrong meaning of 'compare'. At A-level the questions are more straight-forward. You don't have to read between the lines so much (second year joint honours: History and Sociology)

The following student has picked up on some important points in connection with writing in two disciplines (recall here the history lecturer and his 'bugbears' about quotes in student writing) and has identified a way to circumvent uncertainty:

The Politics department is keen on quotation. History can be somewhat more conceptual than Politics. After a while you begin to pick out the things they [teachers] like. If you have the same tutor for more than one module it can be a great advantage. (second year joint honours: History and Politics)

Other students have developed a pragmatic, if pedestrian, approach to writing assignments over time, but a sense of uncertainty is clearly evident:

*How do you approach writing assignments?*

I look at the criteria. Then I make notes on each section. Then I try to form some sort of structure. I get the percentage rates and I work through each block of the criteria. If I try to inter-mingle them I just get confused. It has to be block by block.

*What is argument in academic writing?*

It's something against; when somebody doesn't believe in somebody else's view. You have to look at them both. If a teacher wrote that they couldn't follow my argument I would have to go and ask [what it means]. They don't make these words clear to students. They might be hidden words. (Nursing diploma: mature-age)

The student is struggling at the processual level of knowing how to think through the question (Haggis: 2006). Faced with an opaque discourse around specified criteria, the compartmentalisation of learning into outcomes and uncertainty about the epistemology of study in her field and what tutors expect the student atomises her response to the question concentrating on doing at least enough. The expectations of tutors and markers emerged in the interviews as an important consideration in thinking about and planning writing:

I look at each sentence individually and separate out every word. It used to take me ages because of words like 'analyse'. I'd have to go and find out what 'analyse' was. I'd look at books and study skills things. It takes bloody ages! You have to think about getting everything in that the tutor wants. (third year undergraduate nurse, mature-age)

The following is an example of how epistemology and authority become muddled and entangled in the advice given to students. In a 'general feedback form' acquired from a student interviewee used in connection with a 'diagnostic (formative) essay' nursing diploma students are given generic advice under 'presentation and structure' as follows:

The *structure* of your essay is very important as it ensures you maintain your focus, *clarify your thoughts* and *develop arguments* ...*ideas and arguments* should develop *logically and coherently* (italics added)

A feedback sheet which had been moderated and a minimum pass awarded to a student included no reference to any of the above. Instead comments focused on 'typographical and spelling errors, and citation errors ...inconsistency in referencing

and limited use of published sources'. The typographical and procedural features of students' writing are equated with professional skills and linked to competence-based outcomes central to course aims and objectives. On the other hand, the assessment of academic work is influenced by underlying academic disciplines in the social sciences and uses the genres in these traditional discipline areas (Hoadley-Maidment, 2000; Stierer, 2000). Nursing students are required to write essays that include 'structure', 'analysis', 'argument' and follow the canons of academic style. However, an emphasis on professional skills and the influence of outcomes-based aspects of the assessment process are prioritised over explicit teaching of the epistemological underpinnings. The epistemic nature of study and writing in the discipline is submerged ('hidden') under procedural and typographical concerns. This becomes the authority in judging students' work. Students are left to their own devices in deciphering what tutors mean by their use of conventional descriptive terms such as 'analyse'.

The same international student who described her experience in the last section speaks about her understanding of the problem she has with writing for the tutor:

I came directly to the third year. It was my choice so it is not the teachers' responsibility. The tutor told me to keep asking "why?" during writing. Classmates gave us some help and some useful writing words. They lent us essays so we can see the writing style and the structure.

Peer support enabled these students to know the discourse, the style and structure at departmental and as well as, it has to be presumed, module tutor level; something these international students could not get properly any other way.

This traditional A-level entrant, studying History in the second year, is a self-aware and successful student writer. His comment is candid:

There should be some course in 'how to write an essay'. For me these things are like common-sense because I've done it. But they aren't for everybody or they would be getting better marks. It isn't just what you know about History, it is about playing the [academic] game!

The student clearly indicates that to break the rules you have to know them but that it is not the same for all students. There are those who continue to struggle with the

rules and who are doubly disadvantaged. However, it is in the applied and vocational areas where the student data reveal most uncertainty. Hoadley-Maidment (2000) notes that students in these areas are expected to learn the conventions of writing quickly on the basis of their levels of schooling (recall the points of view at the beginning of chapter four). However, if students have followed a vocational rather than academic path after leaving school they may not simply assimilate conventions and expectations uncomplicatedly. Baynham (2000) argues that in practice-based disciplines such as Nursing, “academic writing pedagogy must make the concerns of disciplinarity, disciplinarization and consequent writing positions central” (p.30). An alternative is to avoid using the genres and assessment approaches imported from traditional academic disciplines. This would have ramifications for the position and status of practice-based/vocational areas in higher education and the role of universities as suppliers of this form of education.

## **6.0 Writing in different modules, for different teachers, across disciplines**

The student writer on a modularised degree programme is writing in a number of modules over the course of any year of study. This entails meeting a range of possibly varying writing practices, expectations and assessment requirements. The following excerpt is a third year student talking about writing on a joint degree and makes some interesting points about the challenges students face writing across disciplines:

*Does writing for different tutors in different modules throw up any concerns for you?*

I think there are different styles of writing and you have to find that balance.

*How did you learn that?*

Trial and error; in the first year I did two essays side by side. In the politics one I used the sources much the way you would in history. It took me to the end of the first year to get it right.

*What influence have the individual expectations of tutors had on the way you write?*

If a tutor writes something about a pet hate you are actively trying to avoid doing that in your work. A tutor has said ‘I don’t like overlong quotes’. If you take everything they say to heart it can make writing harder; too many individual ‘dos and don’ts’ can derail a student before the event. If they are going to use a standardised assessment guide they should stick to standardised

practices as well. I think you have stand back and tell yourself that you are writing the essay to get the best mark and not to go with whatever the preferences of individual tutors are

The following student is struggling with similar issues but has reached a different conclusion:

I once started an essay with a quote. It was a hearsay thing, my friend had said this was a good thing in an essay she did in another module. The tutor didn't like it. I think tutors should distinguish with their students what they expect in an essay. That is not something that can be understood from a few words in a module guide... tutorials are very much the key to a good essay. (second year, joint honours: Humanities; traditional student)

Changing course often means changing tutors and adapting to an individual tutors expectations and practices. Students value continuity; they know where they stand that way. This confident writer knows when to adopt the strategy of 'playing the game'.

There was a module and the lecturer was a Marxist. I knew if I wrote it from this [the tutor's] perspective it would stand a chance of getting a high mark. If you can work out how a teacher would examine it you know which way to take the question because you know which way they are. It sounds a bit shallow but you want to go for top marks (third year, single honours; Social Sciences; traditional student)

The last example seems to correspond to Entwistle's (1987) notion of the 'strategic learner'. Knowing what the teacher wants in a written assignment and how s/he 'would examine it' is the key to getting a good mark and succeeding in course work. The excerpts in this section indicate that confusion over tutor expectations in modularised course structures, and joint degree structures especially, is a pervasive aspect of the student experience. In such contexts students are often confronted with having to work out what tutors want well into their degree experience. On the other hand, the strategies used by non-traditional students when faced with uncertainty prove to be unreliable. The evidence suggests that in the current environment of higher education the experience of many students deemed to be non-traditional, is confusion, exasperation and a sense of having to cope. This is a far cry from the luxury of being 'strategic': learning how to 'play the game' to 'maximise' grades.

## **7.0 Innovative practices, disciplinary, assessment and student writing**

The university is keen to promote innovation in teaching, learning and assessment. The data below are accounts of innovative practices and how they are perceived by teachers. They are given in detail to do justice to the perspectives of teachers. Teachers' personal beliefs as well as their disciplinary backgrounds influence their views about innovation in assessment and writing practices. The inclusion of workplace experience into degree courses has provided both inspiration and impetus for change according to the following respondent:

I believe in learning by doing. Why do we want them to write like that [academically]? Is it essential? It disadvantages some students. We can get quite blinkered about this. We have got past the point of thinking exams are everything. Now we need to apply the same thinking to student writing. What are we producing graduates for, to be academics or to engage in careers? (Environmental Sciences)

The above clearly echoes the institutional line of assessment and learning (see chapter six) and the current ideology of employability and life-long learning. There is a concern to engage students more directly, build in more affect and move away from negative stereotypical perceptions in the next extract:

Students tend to see writing as a hoop to jump through. We want to make it as pain free as possible. We use seminar logs for reflective work. They write logs in a personal style about what they have learnt. We assess them. The inspiration for this was the placement in the fourth year and the workplace experience portfolio. It works well with the mature students in particular. (Sociology)

As the educational (and professional) backgrounds of students become more diverse then so do their learning styles, therefore devising assessment strategies that meet the challenges of diversity and the applied nature of learning and study is important. This permeates the account given by a programme leader in the following:

One of our most popular modules is a 'reflexive' journal. Students are asked to react to the lectures and their experience on the module. It's in the third year [an option module] and it includes a

field trip to Amsterdam. In the assignment students write about experiences, attitudes and feelings but they have to include theory from the literature. They are encouraged to use the first person and give their own views on matters. It forces them to consider how things relate to their own lives as well as academic theory... It is difficult to plagiarise. It is better than the standard essay. It fosters deeper learning. Often academic writing tends to stifle real expression. The traditional students who are in the 'essay comfort zone' are not necessarily the ones who get the best marks. The standards you get used to in assessing a traditional essay don't really apply (Human Geography)

There is a clear indication of the desire to bring 'writing' at university closer to the experience of (some) students and make it more inclusive. The respondent is keen to emphasise the perceived benefits in terms of learning and inclusivity. Yet there is a clear concern with expediency; trying to meet the requirements of assessment, 'intended learning outcomes' and reduce the incidence of plagiarism. The same merits are given in association with an innovative course in social sciences:

There is a mystique around academic writing and we have debates about it. We want to get new voices into their writing and use the learners. We feel that the world of work has been neglected in sociology. There is a new [option] module in which students write or create biographies. It is about the private and personal as well as the academic. They use the literature, reference and use evidence as normal but the subject matter is more personal. It is a very different writing style and involves personal engagement. For the assessment they produce a biographical poster...We came at it from a learning gap point of view. We felt that students needed to know more about history and their own backgrounds to make sense of sociological thinking and theory. It is good for older students because they are inducted into how to write academically at the same time. We are taking the lid off the box with academic writing. Very many birds have been killed with one stone (Sociology)

The above excerpts raise a few interesting questions: is 'innovation' more improvisation than change and it is driven more by expediency and outcomes than processes. Although there is a perceptible shift to course specifics, a more embedded conceptualisation of learning and writing, and 'student-centred' approach the data, nevertheless, raise the question: are such changes and improvisations addressing the symptoms rather than the cause of problems with student writing? Are contextual factors sufficiently considered? In the final excerpt a respondent alludes to concerns which are submerged in the call for innovation: making it clear to students why they

are being required to do things in different ways, what is actually being measured or assessed, the need for more clarity about the nature and purpose of innovative methods at the departmental level and the vulnerabilities of certain students.

Before coming into academia I was out in the big wide world. I have a slightly different view of things and about how people learn. They have preferential learning styles... The ways of learning and demonstrating understanding are different across the disciplines. We have to value essays because they are the best way of synthesising knowledge. They are absolutely essential for assessment. But in an interdisciplinary degree structure we are measuring different things. It is something we [the department] are going to have to talk about. They [students] need to understand why we ask them to write in certain ways and we need to show more understanding of the difficulties they face. We need to do this to retain students. Those on joints are particularly vulnerable (Sociology)

The examples are all from applied disciplines with a culture for innovation and new ways of 'doing' things. Innovative practices, especially those driven by the needs of the work-place and the desire to mould the curriculum to work-based elements, are transforming student writing by introducing new genres, text-types and rationales. They appear to share the following characteristics:

- there is connection with writing outside the academy and the inclusion of key skills in the curriculum;
- the tenets of essayist literacy appear challenged by these practices;
- there is a responsiveness to perceptions of students' learning styles;
- non-traditional student writers figure in the rationales given to underpin them;
- expediency in combining learning outcomes and meeting assessment criteria in accordance with institutional requirements seems to be a significant factor.

It is debatable how far such initiatives go in addressing some of the following concerns of this research:

- the discipline specific nature of genres of writing and the deeper epistemological issues involved in writing disciplinary knowledge (Lea and Street, 1998; Hounsell, 1998);
- the influence of situated practices in the way students learn to write and respond to the requirements of particular settings;



- the vagaries of course-switching and writing across disciplinary boundaries (Lea and Street, 1998);
- recognising, and contesting, authority in student writing (Lillis, 2001);
- the desirability of embedding the explicit teaching of student writing in the curriculum.

### **7.1 Writing at university outside the disciplines: students' views**

Student writing at university is not confined to the discipline. The modular system facilitates the inclusion of other components which reflect current higher education agendas. This research identified the occurrence of these in the curriculum in two forms:

- add-on generic skills modules in the first year of study, and;
- the mandatory inclusion of modules that comply with the university's skills and employability agenda.

The following excerpts from interviews with third year sociology degree students say something about how students respond to writing in these contexts and the first included a revealing anecdote:

E) In the first year I got top marks for an essay. Then I did this study skills one and got a mark in the mid-fifties. The first mark is telling me I can write an essay, so how then can I get a mark in the mid fifties?

H) I got 57% in that and I was told it was a good piece of work

E) I got that. I was beginning to lose a bit of faith here. Study skills are supposed to be about teaching us how to do this but I'm getting lower than average marks for this stuff

H) On a module about writing essays we get marked down, lower than we are getting for our course work as if to say 'you are not very good at this stuff' [laughs]

E) There was another student who took his essay to the study skills centre. They ripped it apart and told him how to write it. But the tutor looked at it and gave him the exact opposite feedback! [laughter]

Their coursework writing is influenced by the social practices of writing for tutors in the department. In this context they are excelling. On the other hand their writing in the less contextualised setting of a skills module is assessed differently. It epitomises the nature of writing as social practice on the one hand and as decontextualised skills

and procedures on the other. The former has been more integral to their success. The same students recounted an experience they considered a waste of time:

E) We did a portfolio in the third year. It was part of this 'Skills for Graduates' module

H) It was awful but we had to do it. It was about reflection and transferable skills to the workplace and that sort of thing. It was a core module. We were forced into it; not good!

E) I didn't feel I was learning anything

H) Yeah, I would agree with that. I came here to learn things but something like that [skills for graduates] is not what is required to be an academic person

E) I would never have chosen to do it

The mandatory inclusion of the 'Skills for Graduates' module is part of the institutional agenda. These students are dissatisfied with the way they are positioned in this respect. The data provides an insight into what students' value. These students perceive both the bolt-on and 'skills for employability' modules as detached from the kind of writing they have had to do in the discipline to get their degrees; the thing they had to work hardest to achieve. The modules in question are compulsory. Writing pedagogy and embedded academic literacy development are invisible in the curriculum while priority and space are given to other things.

## **8.0 Summary and outline of the salient findings from the data analysed in this chapter**

The data in this chapter have revealed a number of related issues and findings. The evidence suggests that the dominant conception of student writing at the institutional level is as skills and competencies. A skills approach is compatible with a transmission model of teaching. Whilst university policy eschews a transmission approach to teaching in favour of constructivism and formative learning (see chapter six), transmission is prevalent in guides and other textual sources (see chapter seven) in which advice and guidance on writing and academic literacy is found. Writing is consistently represented as a transferable skill in textual sources influencing the attitude and understanding of teaching staff to student writing and academic literacy development. This model of student support is officially established across the

university which may account for the apparent dearth of embedded writing support in the disciplinary contexts covered in this research.

Underpinning a transmission approach is a conduit view of communication and a transparency notion of language, all of which conduce towards a conception of writing as a transferable skill, detachable from disciplinary contexts of learning. Time is spent on emphasising referencing, for example, but it is typically treated as a generic skill which students can read off from textual sources or imparted through generic advice such as the injunction to use the 'Harvard style' irrespective of context. Despite this there are students who consistently reference inadequately (or not at all). A preoccupation with form and convention perpetuates a monolithic view of language and student writing conventions and may obscure the deeper epistemological problems students may be experiencing. In addition, it militates against the real challenge for student writers: the development of understanding and the negotiation of meaning. Lillis (2001) points out that this is a potentially marginalising issue for students from non-traditional backgrounds in particular because conventions regulate meaning making. Students may be excluded from certain ways of meaning that they are most accustomed to by being required to use the representational resources of the academic. Russell (2000) points out that students, initially daunted by specialist writing demands, may choose not to write in the ways expected of them: they actively resist because academic writing conflicts with their sense of identity and agency.

A second finding is that student writing development is commonly conceptualised as skills and socialisation by teaching staff. An implicit induction model of learning underlies lecturers' accounts of how students learn to write and is manifest the way teaching staff talk about it. They have clear associations of good writing with the epistemology of their subjects and what they expect to find in student scripts; a concern which foregrounds a relationship between student writing and learning in the discipline. However, practices are often limited to the use of models of writing and specimen answers to assignment questions both of which are features of academic socialisation. The data reveal that this occurs within departments and seems to be a regular feature of individual tutor practices. Aspects of academic style that students are generally expected to recognise and understand (in reading) and exhibit, in accordance with essayist literacy expectations, are those outlined by Coffin, et al, (2003) in section 3.0. Lillis (2006) draws on Ivanič (1998) in extending this list with a

range of other formal features couched in social functional (Halliday, 1994) descriptive terms, and the effects of lexical bar (Greek-Latin provenance vocabulary) (Corson, 1985). This adds a great deal more qualification and complexity to the simple assertion that some students are 'bad at grammar' and that others 'can't write'

A further finding is that there is ambivalence in the attitudes of teaching staff about the ways students learn, and adapt to, writing at university. Both the ways in which students write and the ways in which they are assessed vary widely in, and across, departments and divisions. Decisions to alter requirements on courses and individual modules may be based on factors and beliefs pertaining to a world outside the curriculum *per se*. This is evident in applied disciplines in particular as the excerpts in section 7.0 illustrate. Attempts to induct students into practices and embed academic literacy support are complicated by other agendas. The data appear to suggest that innovation and improvisation in student writing and assessment procedures reflect teachers' beliefs but are also linked to expediency in assessment practices rather than educational purpose. The experience of the first year nurses in the focus group data is apposite in this respect. The example recalls Lea's (2004) concerns about dominant agendas, course design and implementing academic literacy practices in the current context of higher education.

The student data indicate that uncertainty over epistemology and authority is widespread. The ground rules about writing – what and whose authority to follow – are not made explicit. Lea and Stierer (2000: 4) point out that what counts as good writing is a combination of individual preferences, individual interpretation and the 'given' rules. This leads to variation in the way students are advised to write and what is deemed acceptable. Student writers are confronted with this when they attempt to decipher the wordings of essay titles and assignments. Students mention that they 'are never explained' and when they ask about them they are referred to the course or module guide. This is accentuated in large departments with interdisciplinary study and joint degree structures. Students in interdisciplinary areas of study and those following joint degrees are likely to experience confusion in other respects. The experience of the second year History and Sociology student in section 5.0 is apposite: a standard guide and prescriptivism over 'dos and don'ts' on the one hand and individual tutor preferences and practices on the other. The student had to 'stand back' and use his own judgement. For other students it is constantly a question of having to 'find out'. The data also reveal that students regularly adopt strategies to

circumvent the uncertainty they encounter. It is 'trial and error' over the first year for most undergraduates but students admit that knowing the disposition of tutors and what they want is an advantage and influences their module choices at later stages. The next chapter shifts the focus to an area of teacher-student interaction integral to student learning and academic literacy development: the availability, framing and quality of feedback.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Exploring communicative and discursive practices between tutors, student writers and the institution**

#### **1.0 The organisation of this chapter**

- This chapter opens by considering how feedback is metaphorically conceptualised. Another section contextualises feedback practices by considering how they are driven and implemented in accordance with university policy. The framing of feedback is analysed by looking at three examples drawn from the areas of humanities, social sciences and nursing and how these documents reflect institutional and departmental priorities and values. A brief sub-section presents data on teachers' accounts of how they have been individually socialised into the practice of giving feedback.
- Another section analyses the perceptions of academic staff of the role, purpose and efficacy of feedback. Respondents were asked a number of questions in order to engage them in more in-depth reflection. Data are presented in separate sub-sections accordingly.
- A following section focuses on how students, as recipients, respond to feedback and view it as a practice: their experience in general.
- The focus moves to the practice of using forms for the framing of feedback and presents data from student and tutor respondents in separate sections. A sub-section considers the communicative efficacy of written feedback and explores the extent to which there is a communication gap discernable in the accounts of students. A short section then considers data from teacher accounts on their use and awareness of language in (written) feedback interactions.
- A penultimate section provides examples on the ways in which lecturers are adjusting their particular practices to accommodate the academic literacy needs of students in the contemporary context.
- A final section outlines and discusses in further detail the salient findings from the research

## **2.0 Conceptualising feedback: its role and purpose**

Metaphors are shaped by the way we perceive and think about the world. In turn they shape the way we talk about phenomena and the action we take; they facilitate but also constrain (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Feedback is a metaphor that motivates a number of ways of talking about the nature and processes involved in learning and teaching. An examination of the metaphors we use in teaching and learning can help in understanding how conceptualisations are fashioned and suggest ways in which they may be reframed (Reddy, 1979, Bailey, 1996). The notion of feedback is intrinsically linked to performance and evaluation. Kluger and DiNisi (1996: 255) refer to “feedback interventions” and define them as “actions taken by an external agent to provide information regarding some aspect of one’s task performance”. The metaphor of a ‘gap’ is also present in the way feedback is conceptualised: “feedback is information about a gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way” (Ramaprasad, 1983: 4). What is also implicit in this metaphor is that in bridging the gap by providing information on performance, feedback has a formative, as well as evaluative role and function. The definitions of feedback given above are mechanistic; they are motivated by the conceptual metaphorical structuring of feedback as a mechanism or device and are rooted in a ‘systems’ conceptualisation of learning and education.

Feedback is typically divided into assessment feedback and formative feedback. The distinction is not clear cut. The latter is integral to the former by definition. On the one hand, the term ‘assessment’ is commonly associated with exams and levels of attainment. Assessment is also about marking and practices such as moderation which directly impinge on practices of feedback at the institutional level (the form it takes, how it is delivered, its availability, constraints, etc) and, consequently, its communicative and formative efficacy.

## **3.0. The motivation behind university policy on feedback**

The QAA (2000) emphasise timeliness, relevance, transparency and specificity in feedback comments and for them to be closely related to predefined assessment criteria. The university’s Guidelines on Good Practice embody these values and state:

Feedback to students should be timely, given within four working weeks of when the work is handed in and will provide opportunities for students to benefit from its formative function. It should be sufficient in quantity and quality to give developmental information to students on what they need to do to improve on the programme, in employment or in further study, and available to students in forms that are useful to them (p.6)

According to the Guidelines it is the responsibility of module tutors and programme leaders to make clear to students the “forms of feedback they can expect, including *“the availability of oral feedback and limits to it”* and to ensure it is *“provided in such a way that it can have a formative function”* (p. 3) (italics added for emphasis). A constructivist approach to teaching and learning in higher education emphasises the ‘alignment’ (e.g. Biggs, 2003, 1999) of teaching activities and learning outcomes to measure and evaluate the extent to which the latter have been met. Alignment is intended to get students to engage in deep learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976) in accordance with the level of study. Biggs comments (2003: 60):

meaning is not imposed or transmitted by direct instruction but is created by the student’s *learning activities* (italics in the original).

This approach aims to address variability in student motivation and the propensity for learning. This lends itself to an approach to assessment which aims to help students understand the vocabulary of objectives and outcomes. It is implicit in university Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice:

Assessment instruments should be designed as an integral part of the learning process. Assignment design, questions and tasks should engage students in deep learning by applying theoretical concepts at the appropriate level in practical ways and involving students in ‘learning by doing’ (p.6)

The term ‘alignment’ is not found in university documentation; nor did it occur in the interview data with teaching staff. This implies that it is not a part of the discourse, formally or informally. What is stated is that assessment should “match published learning outcomes” (p.4) and there should be “explicit links between learning outcomes and assessment”. As noted in chapter four ‘outcomes’ are strongly linked to a taxonomy of mostly performative verbs (drawing on Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive development) that map onto assessments incrementally and at different



levels of degree study. This language permeates thinking and practice and provides clear and measurable points of reference. Students may be told that they are not meeting the performance benchmarks for successful learning at their level of study by reference to the language of learning outcomes; or, more obliquely, they may be told that they are not 'writing' at the 'appropriate' or 'required' level.

### **3.1 The framing and delivery of feedback**

Written feedback on students' written work is increasingly restricted to the use of cover sheets and structured forms (pro-formas). Marking schemes are linked to assessment criteria. The evidence of this research suggests that this practice is, as the guidelines require, a predominantly divisional affair decided on by programme leaders and/or individual module tutors in accordance with the stated requirements of the module. This study found some examples of 'negotiated' marking schemes. Assessment criteria and marking schemes are hard to standardise in disparate course structures and where there is innovation in assessment methods. At the level of individual modules there is some evidence that practices are disparate and often *ad hoc*. This is partly in response to increased staff workloads of marking, changing assessment practices and partly attempts by individual tutors to make marking and feedback manageable in their own terms and transparent to the student as the following excerpt indicates:

I encourage students to make their own feedback sheets. They are negotiated each year based on the module descriptors. Sometimes students don't understand the criteria. Telling students to write 'a good introduction' is no good to them if you don't explain why!  
(Psychology)

Hounsell (2003) notes that the use of pro-forma feedback instruments is the most widely adopted change in practices in recent years and identifies four factors behind this shift:

- a concern with greater transparency and equity in assessing students;
- achieving greater consistency across (and within) departments;
- QAA requirements emphasising formal articulation of criteria and learning outcomes, and;
- guidance to new and established tutors.

The type and use of forms were explored in the interviews with staff in the three discipline areas of History, Sociology and Nursing. They offered instructive examples of the variations in design, layout and key features of forms. The standard cover sheet in the School of Arts and Social Sciences is open-ended. Evaluative and formative feedback comments are written on an A4 size sheet and the mark entered as a percentage. This is the traditional and, arguably, labour intensive method of supplying feedback. It is used in communicating feedback to post-graduate students. For undergraduate students in humanities areas a pro-forma has been developed. A feature is a 'Student Declaration' set in bold type related to the 'regulations concerning plagiarism' which needs to be signed and dated when the work is handed in. Below this is the section to be completed by tutors. On the left are the 'assessment categories' divided into five main categories, each one is sub-divided. The main categories are generic:

- Organisation, (sub-divided into 'clear introduction' and 'well structured argument')
- Knowledge and Organisation, (sub-divided into 'knowledge of relevant information', 'understanding of relevant issues', 'good critical judgement', 'good use of examples')
- Research Effort, (qualified as 'range of appropriate sources')
- Writing Skills, ('Good punctuation, spelling, syntax and choice of words')
- Presentation (accurate referencing and bibliography)

An asterisked note underneath points out that 'the importance attached to these categories will vary according to the nature of the question set'. On the right are three columns requiring simply a tick: 'Achieved', 'Partly Achieved' and 'Not Achieved'. Finally, there is a space consisting of about a third of the form for 'Comment'.

In Sociology and Criminology the form is simpler and divided into two parts. The upper part is for bureaucratic purposes and requires details related to the student and then two divisions of tick-boxes to indicate 'course programme' and 'assessment type'. A student declaration in bold type, almost identical to that on the SASS form, is included underneath. There is then a box for 'Lecturer's Comments/Learning Outcomes' clearly implying the strong link between the two underpinning the rationale for and presumptive nature of feedback.

In Health, Community and Education Studies there is a variety of assessment feedback forms. Some are cover sheets (open, unstructured forms) and others pro-formas with tick box features. One instrument entitled 'HCES – BA Joint Honours Assessed Work' combines elements. Below the student and course administrative details is the student declaration relating to plagiarism. On the left are three main categories:

- Structure,
- Content
- Presentation

The first of these is sub-divided into two sections emphasising how the essay is 'organised' and 'points and arguments are linked'. The second is in five sections related to dealing with the question, depth of coverage, range of sources, showing that key concepts have been understood and illustration and examples linked to theory. The third is sub-divided into five sub-sections emphasising clarity of expression, grammar and spelling, paragraphs and sentences, appropriate references and neatness and legibility. On the right are tick boxes: 'Yes, very true', 'Yes fairly', 'Not Really', 'Not at all'. Finally, there is a space occupying about 25% of the form for 'Assignment Comments'.

The first and third of the examples include headings such as 'structure' but there is no attempt in the documentation to explicate further the contextual meanings associated with these terms, as discussed in chapter five. Meanings are tacitly assumed to be transparent and transferable within and across discipline areas; or it may be that each discipline/subject area takes little notice of what the others do. Each example is used across a range of disciplinary and subject divides. They contain common features and reify a conception of literacy in formal textual terms around self-evident, transparent meanings (literacy as a singular and autonomous construct). The distinctive ways and understandings about writing in disciplinary contexts go unrecognised. This may influence how teachers are likely to construct literacy in their disciplinary contexts and influences and constrains what they give feedback on. It may permeate students' views of how literacy is configured in their degree work and leads to a superficial understanding of requirements and a dependency on trying to find out what tutors want at a 'deeper' level.

Taken together these forms give an indication of the variation in design and degrees of emphasis that are possible. They embody the discourse of assessment and learning outcomes which students are required to grasp, comply with and satisfy in their work. Arguably, the only genuinely unambiguous feature in each form and the most prominent aspect of the socio-discursive interface between the student and the documentation is the rhetorical stance towards the student who reads it. Each form addresses the student directly at the level of a more remote but perceptible higher authority with the power to enact sanctions in cases of non-compliance and transgression.

The following excerpt from the interview data indicates that discussions at the departmental and divisional level fail to address the problems of the discourse; neither procedures, nor opinions are fixed on best practice:

With pro-formas the learning outcomes have to be agreed. We don't discuss this as much as we perhaps should. I think personally there are unique qualities related to thinking and understanding in student written work. An unstructured feedback form is better. For example, there are students who can write well but are poor at analysis (Sociology)

These 'unique qualities' he associates with student writing are not simply about writing well but appears to be a reference to the tacit expectations of disciplinary study. Later in the interview the same teacher added:

There is a big difference between being good at writing and being able to think...

This teacher appears to be conflating several things: what constitutes writing in the discipline, what he personally expects and the limitations of forms to articulate what this is and communicate it to students either in advance of, or following, the assessed task.

### **3.2 How teaching staff feel they have been socialised into writing feedback**

Data on the ways academic staff learnt how to give feedback emerged spontaneously in the course of the interviews on numerous occasions. This is an important dimension for individual tutors. There appears to be wide variation in how this learning took place and an indication of the extent to which feedback it is considered principled,

routine or just *ad hoc*. In some cases tutors are able to draw on a professional training background, but more often it is simply through exposure to the practices of others and imitation:

I follow the 'feedback sandwich'. It started as a practice teacher. I had coaching. We discuss feedback as a team especially when it comes to practice assignments. There is quite a tradition among us of 'how will I say this?' (Social Work)

I really try to give feedback I hope can be understood. I avoid using too many big words. Nobody ever teaches you how to give feedback. I learnt something about it through the Cert Ed but the time spent on it was only brief. You really learn about it on the job and through moderation and meetings (Nursing)

In moderating there are certain members of staff I feel an affinity with, I find I copy the phrases used by my own teachers when I was a student. I often incorporate comments I like. I can be inspired by other teachers and their practices (Sociology)

When I first started I remember the way I did it. I had looked at what a colleague who was on leave had written. Quite a lot of the phrases and comments I use to this day came from him. I just picked up on the phrasing because I thought it sounded quite good. There are no real rules here (History)

In applied and practice based areas teachers take a considered approach to feedback. Quality feedback is important for students on 'practice assignments' and teachers are concerned about its communicative efficacy and the language they use. In addition, there are 'on the job' or acquired aspects which are integral to formal feedback. Yet there is a pervasive note of uncertainty about its efficacy. On the other hand, where habits have developed in an *ad hoc* fashion, as in the third and fourth excerpts, there appears to be more confidence. Feedback seems to be regarded as an acquired stylistic register which creates a detached comfort zone for the provider. A concern with the student perspective is not obvious. The following section explores the data gleaned from academic staff accounts in more detail.

## **4.0 The perceptions of academic staff of the role and utility of feedback**

The interviews explored marking and feedback practices across the various departments from the perspective of teaching staff:

- conceptions of the purpose of feedback;
- perceptions about the efficaciousness of their practices
- perceptions about the attitude of students towards feedback

The information was gleaned from answers to the following questions included in the interview schedule:

- What is the point/purpose of feedback?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- What do you think you achieve?
- What do students do with it?
- Why, do you think, do some students fail to follow or even undervalue/ignore feedback?

The questions were presented as discrete items but responses overlapped considerably. An advantage of asking the questions in a consecutive way was to allow respondents to explore their ideas more reflectively and in depth. The data are summarised in the following sub-sections. The five questions above are conflated into three sections; the second two and third two are dealt with together.

### **4.1. The purpose of feedback**

This is an area about which respondents expressed generally clear opinions and responses were short and succinct. Carless (2006) noted that tutors believe that they provide more detailed feedback than students do and that tutors perceive their feedback to be more useful than students do. There was a common emphasis in responses on the formative, developmental and affective role of feedback as each of the excerpts below respectively demonstrate:

It is learning; a learning tool. It is about the growth of individual skills and knowledge. But it is also about communication; about

shaping expectations and about a reflection on the quality of what has been submitted (Applied Sciences)

To try to encourage students by pointing out what is good about their work. Also, to show them why they didn't get a higher mark and for that to be something they can apply to later pieces of work. Unless the student has got a very good mark I want to show them how to get a better mark the next time round. (Sociology and Criminology)

It is for instruction and motivation. Students realise attention is being paid to them. (Business School)

Another tutor expressed a more global view of its purpose:

I get them to reflect on what other people have said: 'have you read or heard this before? I regard my feedback as related to the overall development of the student and not in a restricted way as related to the module; that's not what we are about (History)

The following excerpt from an interview with a colleague in humanities shows that there are several things teachers have to bear in mind when providing feedback:

One reason is formative learning; to give guidance on what they have done and how they can improve. The other one is a formal requirement of the system. It is not an option, you must provide feedback... Another person may well look at it, of course, a colleague and it may well go to an external. I always think 'somebody else may read these comments'. The other reason is to justify the mark. If students come back to you it has to be all there. So you are doing it [providing feedback] for a number of reasons (History)

For other tutors the use of pro-formas ('the grid system') structures feedback according to categories and guidelines, linked to formal procedures and external requirements:

With some types of written work we have moved to the grid system; specific guidelines that they have to fulfil in order that they can be awarded a mark that relates to those components. This occurred as a result of feedback from external examiners. (Nursing)

The following excerpts from the data pithily encapsulate the ambiguity staff experience:

Feedback is a balancing act: that balancing act is between working to be helpful and knowing you are accountable (Nursing)

There are two things: helping and performing. I feel the emphasis is on the latter (Humanities)

The data indicate that there is a feeling of disjunction on the part of teachers in their capacity as markers and writers of feedback: they are uncertain about whether they are helping students or merely performing in accordance with institutional rules? There is a discernable ground swell of dissatisfaction and non-conformity as evident in the last two excerpts. As a programme leader in an applied discipline area commented ‘lip-service to pro-formas is wide-spread’

#### **4.2 What do you hope you achieve/what do you think you achieve?**

These questions elicited thoughtful and reflective answers from many respondents: ones that were less certain and more speculative. Respondents often prefaced their answers with comments like ‘that’s a good/interesting question’. The answers constituted one of the most interesting and explorative aspects in the interviewing process with academic staff. Teachers naturally hope that their feedback will be instrumentally useful to students but recognise that success is difficult to ascertain:

One doesn’t always have the opportunity to follow up on students’ written work to the next stage, because, obviously, we have module tutors and other colleagues who take on the same responsibilities (Nursing)

I can’t measure that. I may see a student in semester one but not in semester two. I can’t really measure it unless I see students on a long-term basis. It is the responsibility of the student to take advantage of the provision of feedback; my responsibility is to provide it (History of Art)

The ‘marking culture’ of the division or department is important, although even then there are concessions to individual practices and preferences. The influence of ‘grade descriptors’ figures prominently in the construction of feedback:

We are moving towards greater consistency in writing on assignments, but not to the extent that we do it...I make pencil



notes and then transfer these to the pro-forma. A lot of this feedback is cut and pasted so students get a standardised format. Once they have learnt to read one response sheet they are able to read all others fluently. The language of the grade descriptor is used more and more. If we can't use the grade descriptor for grade 1 then we give them a grade 2. When there are elements of the higher grade we give them a mixture. We mix and match from the marking criteria. (Education)

Marking and the provision of feedback are labour intensive activities. Increased workload pressures contribute directly to this state of affairs. The drive to speed up processing time is part of the institutions' commitment to quality provision and fairness; hence the trend towards 'cut and paste' and 'mix and match' practices in some departments. Writing feedback becomes a functional activity. Under these conditions comments may become hackneyed and meaningless to students. This may be on top of feedback being vague, unexplained, too specific (to particular content), impersonal or simply too general to be any (formative) use. The next excerpt indicates that in spite of processes to maintain standards and consistency both teachers and students have concerns regarding the process in general and, implicitly, the utility of feedback:

There is moderation and an assessment standardisation committee to check the feedback we give and iron out any ambiguity. Our feedback is scored. But there are differences in expectations of academic supervisors even though we are working within the same criteria. It worries students when one person tells them one thing and another something different. (Nursing)

In the following excerpt a teacher has identified a similar problem with the feedback process and has been proactive in addressing it:

In level 6 they take in the feedback more quickly. But at level 4 students seem to focus mainly on the mark. I have sometimes forced students to read the feedback by not putting the mark on Blackboard. They have to come to a feedback session. Our undergraduates don't ask enough questions. I have a strong sense of what I like students to do. I now talk to my students about 'structure'. There is a big difference between knowing your subject and being able to develop that in your students (Sports Sciences)

There is a clear indication in the above excerpts that something in the feedback process is not working well enough and this disadvantages certain students in the early stages of study. Both teachers have had to reflect on their assumptions and the

nature of the feedback process. The second respondent sees this as directly linked to the quality of his teaching. The overt scepticism in the next excerpt is a clear indication that feedback is not fulfilling a pedagogical or educational role in the opinion of some teaching staff:

We get better performance from the better students. I'm not sure if the weaker ones gain a great deal

*Why?*

The weaker ones don't really understand what we are doing or trying to tell them. We are telling them *what they are not doing* well and what they *should be doing* but we are not really telling them *how to do it* (Business School) (Italics added for emphasis)

#### **4.3 What do students do with feedback/why do they fail to follow it or sometimes appear to ignore it?**

Like the preceding questions, these two elicited a lot of uncertainty. Teachers typically gave impressionistic accounts or made largely unsubstantiated claims about what students do with feedback. In some instances this was related to impressions gained through tutorial time with student writers. To some extent these answers provided additional detail on divisional as well as individual tutor practices. A number of the answers focused on the student: there are 'good' or 'better' students on the one hand and 'poor' or 'weak' ones on the other. The former group thrives and benefits, the latter fail to take any notice and make limited progress. In fact the adjectives 'good', 'weak', 'able', 'less able' abounded in the academic staff data in response to this question as the following two excerpts illustrate:

There is no such thing as the average student. If the student is motivated and conscientious he or she will make changes. Some are lazy and don't really care others want to perform well and gain satisfaction (Sociology)

For the more able students feedback works. The less able ones don't benefit very much. They are getting the same sorts of comments because they have the same sorts of problems. The more able students use it more and can show that they have (Nursing)

The distinction between being a 'good student' and making use of feedback or a 'bad' one and not doing so was unclear. This respondent appears to be suggesting that

feedback's developmental and formative nature is inexplicit and obscured in its delivery and framing:

Some students simply don't understand the role of feedback. They don't see it as particularly valuable (Business School)

At least two respondents believed that students use feedback amongst themselves and one gave reasons for their doing so:

One of the things they do is comparison with other students (Psychology)

They discuss it amongst themselves and debate and decipher it openly. They try to make sense of what it implies. It isn't easy from the students' point of view. There are inconsistencies among tutors (Art History)

Carless (2006) points out that students are more likely to use an informal register in order to decipher feedback whether it is the idiosyncratic or loaded with the language of assessment criteria. Either way it, arguably, may work against the internalisation of that language and therefore negatively affects the presumed benefits of constructive alignment (Biggs 2003, 1999) and accentuates a dissonance between students and the institution and its practices.

The second question (*Why do some students fail to follow feedback or even ignore it?*) elicited mainly opinion and guesswork. Respondents often prefaced their answers to both questions with hedges such as 'that's a good question', 'hard to say' or 'that's a difficult question to answer'. One respondent simply exclaimed "This mystifies me!" and another with thirty years lecturing experience said "I don't know. It's a puzzle for me and extremely worrying". The next excerpt highlights separate issues:

*Why do some students fail to follow feedback or even ignore it?*

[Pause] I think in some cases it is because they haven't understood it and in others it is because they don't take the trouble to read comments and link these up to the work to see how it could have been done differently. In some cases I also think that some assignments are done so much at the last minute that they don't have time to refer back to previous work. I'm guessing. I'm forced to conclude that in many cases students are only really interested in marks (Criminology)

Students receive feedback too late, sometimes well into the next semester when the module is over and the tutor replaced by another 'marker'. This explains a lot of the uncertainty in teacher's response. The next excerpt highlights another shortcoming which militates against the formative efficacy of written feedback.

Because they can't read and understand it; nor understand how to map it onto another piece of work. The pressure in the university system encourages teachers to be brief and vague. When an essay is really weak it is difficult to say anything constructive. A private tutorial is what is needed in these instances (Psychology)

For students coming from non-traditional backgrounds and who need specific support in the early stages of higher education study 'constructive' written feedback may be insufficient; some kind of direct pedagogical interaction is needed. In practice-based disciplines which are modularised and where there is considerable placement experience integral to the degree structure teachers tended to be more specific in terms of how they perceive and understand and attitudes of students. The next excerpt draws attention to the language of feedback:

It is an 'I've done that I'm moving on' attitude. They can't see the relevance to the next bit of work and even the next module. On the other hand they may read it and not understand it. The challenge for us is trying to make it as easy as possible to understand. People outside education don't use words the way we do (Applied Sciences)

As was evident in the data in section 3.2 of this chapter the language of feedback is an issue for teachers and a source, in applied areas of study, of their uncertainty over its efficacy. The next excerpt adds another dimension this sense of teachers' uncertainty; students who fail to connect with the meanings of feedback comments are likely to be the ones who are most difficult to identify and least likely to come forward:

Some students do not understand it; some are overwhelmed by it. They lack self-confidence. Sometimes they seem to understand but they are only feigning it. Are they in over their heads? We know that some students, particularly mature ones and those returning to education come with negative emotional connotations towards evaluative feedback (Social Work)

The final excerpt indicates an overarching problem, especially in applied and vocational areas, that compounds those identified so far:

When there are over 750 students a year coming onto the programme it affects the mentality of some students. They have little respite and sometimes they are too busy on practice to pick up their marks. As one module finishes the next one kicks in. It's a quick turn around culture. (Nursing)

## **5.0 Students' attitudes and responses to feedback**

Student respondents were asked to describe and explain what they find useful or not useful about feedback they receive from tutors on their written work. The questions were deliberately kept fairly open in order to allow respondents to reflect on experience and explore their perceptions. Students equated what they like about feedback with what they see as useful; for some the opposite was the case. Their experience and opinions were explored through two related questions

- What sort of things do you find useful/do you like about feedback?
- What sort of things do you find less useful/dislike about feedback?

On the whole, students said they attach importance to receiving and reading feedback and are willing to take notice:

For me it is important to work on the feedback. The best feedback is that which highlights the flaws in an essay. When it is critical it is most positive. (second-year, joint-honours, Humanities)

Advice is also valued where it is linked to tangible improvements such as better grades:

What I find most useful is advice on specific ways I can improve. I prefer comments like 'if you change this you can get X%' and so on (third-year, Applied Sciences)

However, the same student followed up by saying:

Often when I get the feedback it is about content and module specific. Usually I've moved on [to another module]. Once I've got the mark I don't really pay a lot of attention to the feedback that's been written

This appears to validate some of the concerns expressed by academic staff in the previous sections. Some interviewees recognised and appreciated constructive criticism but also value clear and explicit guidance:

- B) If it is constructive. The GF tells us to put in this and that and it helps us to understand what we did and how to do that for the next piece of work
- C) Yeah, it's not just a personal attack on you  
(First-year undergraduate nurses)

In this example it is personal guidance that is crucial for the students. The next student's comments add more qualification to how some students view the process. They recognise the pressures teaching staff are under to excuse the poor quality of (written) feedback comments they receive, but this does not mitigate their sense of frustration, leading to indifference with the process.

I prefer it without exclamation marks and smart arse comments. Teachers sometimes lapse into this because they are overworked. Alternatively when the work is good the comments are minimal. But students who get good marks want to know how to improve too (second year; Physiotherapy degree, mature-age)

The account given next, by contrast, indicates a pro-active but also self-conscious attitude even though the student is in the third year:

Sometimes feedback is difficult. I make an effort to book a tutorial. It is the student's responsibility to do it... I worry a lot about what the tutor expects. If you go to see a tutor before you write they will elaborate on the requirements but they are not going to spoon-feed you. Some students feel reluctant to talk to tutors because they think they will look foolish. But tutorials are the key to good essay  
( Humanities, joint degree)

Students may be inhibited from seeking a tutor's help on grounds which appear to be linked. They may be embarrassed, as the above student indicates, by the negative connotation associated with 'spoon-feeding' which is implicitly, though unmistakably, conveyed to them in higher education values, attitudes and practices (Haggis, 2006; Higgins, et al, 2002). This in turn plays on a sense of reluctance and fear of being judged (Carless, 2006; Ivanič, et al, 2000). Both of these apprehensions are compounded by the separation of academic literacy support (in the form of guides, descriptors and criteria) from direct teaching interactions. Nevertheless, some students were quite explicit about what works for them (and what does not) as is clear in the following excerpt:

It is easier to come out of your shell when it is one to one. I don't think a lot of people would argue with that. It is all very well

getting a [written] comment on your essay like ‘you should have developed this more’, the question I have is: well how? One to one is better than reading the feedback sheet (second year undergraduate: Occupational Therapy)

The next example illustrates just how distant the register of academic language seems to students from non-traditional backgrounds and how they perceive its use:

The tutor used words like ‘pedantic’ and ‘pragmatic’. I don’t know what they mean. We had it out with the tutor over this. Why don’t you talk in layman’s terms? It makes you feel down here and they are up there. He was using words he felt comfortable with. The higher up you go the more you use those words. He says things like ‘knowledge is power’. Well, power over who? It really gets my goat! (first year, undergraduate, Nursing, mature-age)

A self-assured, mature-age learner like this individual may quickly adjust to the register of academic study; others may not and continue to struggle or even complete their academic courses as a result. It is a clear testimony to the importance of language and pedagogical guidance for such students in the early stages of study. The data below are taken from a focus group. The members are traditional A-level entrants on a single honours degree course in Sociology:

*How much help do you get from tutors about how to write now you are in the second year?*

S) I haven’t booked a tutorial this year at all. It depends how far you are willing personally to ask for help

A) Yeah, I’m aware there is help out there if you want it but I haven’t gone to great lengths to get that this year so far. I am more concerned with the content than how I have written it.

*Is that what tutorials are for?*

S) I think they are pretty much about guidance, yeah. They will not give you the answers but they will guide you about what direction to take

A) They don’t tell you are definitely doing this or that wrong

*Would students want tutorials for any other reason?*

S) I know some students on my course, mind, the mature ones especially are going for support rather than guidance on specific things. They want to know that there is a lecturer available

*Are you making a distinction between guidance and support?*

S) Yeah, the second is more of an emotional thing than an academic one

(second year, single honours, traditional A-level entrants)

These ‘traditional’ students are more concerned with content and propositional knowledge than they are with ‘support’. The excerpt stands in significant contrast to

the experiences described by other students included in this section. It indicates that a divergence in the perceptions and needs of different kinds of students occurs quite early in degree study and often persists. The current system of assessment and feedback favours those students most equipped to benefit from it. In other words, those students most able to reach the goal of independence and self-sufficiency in early stages of degree study and who are already to some extent familiar with the meanings and values associated with the practices and the language of feedback and formal assessment (cf. Haggis, 2006; Lillis, 2001).

## **6.0 Dealing with forms and feedback instruments**

### **6.1 Tutors' opinions**

To some extent the data in earlier sections (3.0) on staff perceptions about the role and efficacy of feedback practices has cast light on how forms are regarded by teachers. In humanities where the pro-forma is well established there is qualified acceptance of its utility:

Certain categories are standard. It's an example of good practice in my view; before it was just the blank sheet. (History)

In applied areas the expediency of forms is acknowledged but there is awareness that something else has been lost which resonates with the concerns expressed by students in the previous section:

More time is needed to write on student essays. The trend is to be more and more formulaic in writing responses. Some colleagues would prefer a series of tick boxes only. Feedback could link to the tutorial system but this rarely happens. We are formally available for students but in fact we see them less (Sociology and Criminology)

The following excerpt from a teacher in an applied discipline area echoes some of the concerns already evident in the data analysed in previous sections:

We use a standardised feedback form with standard criteria. It provides a focus and a limit. I actually find it restrictive. Feedback is important but sadly it is time-consuming to do it in a detailed



way. The pro-forma is for bureaucratic reasons: regulation and proof of submission (Education)

Crook, Gross and Dymott (2006) suggest that the trend towards greater 'proceduralisation' in higher education pedagogical and administrative practices has led to a 'decoupling' of teacher and student by minimising their points of contact. The data here and the accounts given by students in the previous section seem to bear this out. A nursing lecturer mentioned two problems tutors face in the use of feedback instruments and the provision of quality feedback:

New staff need guidance on how to mark. There is a misconception that marking is easy. In fact there is quite a lot of skill to it. If the pro-forma meets the requirements then there is no problem with it; *but there is still a skill in using it*. I don't like the idea of forms replacing writing on scripts. It is clearer for the student if the writing is on the script because the reference is clear (Nursing) (Italics added for emphasis)

The lecturer's comments encapsulate tensions already alluded to in this chapter and pointed to in chapter four. Firstly, quality assurance requirements which proscribe the writing of comments on students' scripts are incongruous with teachers' normal (and preferred) practices obliging them to (often reluctantly) use these instruments. A respondent from nursing mentioned that in some cases the structured pro-formas are not used at all. In some cases, it appears, there is resistance to their use within a large and disparate school such as Health. A symptom of this ambivalence is that there is little or no effort, it would appear, given to supporting staff with these practices (cf. Morley, 2003; Yorke, 2005).

## 6.2 Students' views

The following student encapsulated several aspects of the student experience:

For your own sanity you have to visit the tutor. You can't get enough from the form on its own. It's too vague. It's difficult for the lecturer to write in-depth comments for each student. They should stress that you go and speak to them after each piece of work has been submitted and returned

*What would you change about this feedback form?*

I'd get rid of 'partly achieved'. It's the most vaguest thing I've ever seen. There should be a line or some space for the tutor to qualify what he has written and why he has chosen one or the other. It seems that the form is based on administration. I think students read the mark but other wise they don't take that much

notice. There is a vagueness that frustrates people. (third year, joint honours, Humanities)

Forms are vague, lack depth, serve to discourage students from seeking pedagogical support and seem to be administrative formalities. Another student account reinforces this perception: students receive mixed messages and the practice leaves a lot to be desired:

Tutors often leave out the ticky box stuff. In our study group students don't bother because if something is 'partially achieved' there is no elaboration on it. I've never had a tutor write a comment that relates to a ticky box. They possibly use them as a guide. They don't make it explicit and they expect you to sort it out. Students want explanation. You can get an essay where all the 'partly achieved' boxes are ticked. But if the mark is good I won't look any further. (second year undergraduate, joint honours, Humanities)

The result is a clear expression of disengagement with the feedback process echoed in numerous instances throughout the student data. The next extract is taken from a group interview with two students who produced pro-forma sheets with tutor comments on during the discussion:

*What would you say about this form?*

E) The stuff on the left hand side [the pro-forma categories] has been crossed out as if the comments [global] have been written to cover all those areas

*Do you understand these statements clearly, for example*

*'appropriate depth of analysis' [feedback comment on the form]?*

H) Yes

*Did you always know what a comment like this meant?*

H) No, not in the first year. I didn't have a clue what they were about. I didn't know what the things on the left hand side meant until I got a mark for it.

*What if you had got a low mark, say in the 40s?*

H) I'd be knocking on the door for an explanation

E) There's no analysis here, just very general comments

H) Normally mind, we do get the essay back with comments in the margins as well.

E) That's better. I spoke to a student in our year who got a high mark and usually does well in his work. Everything on the left-hand side of the form was crossed out. The comments on the right next to each category just read 'as usual'! I think they [tutors] have a sense of humour too! [both laugh] (third year undergraduates, Sociology, mature-age)

The excerpt indicates that the form has become superfluous in terms of communication for these third years. The students mention that getting a high or a low mark to some extent helped them with understanding the criteria against which their work had been judged in earlier stages. However, had poor marks been the case they would have needed clarification and contact time with staff. In the anecdote recounted the teacher ignored the protocol of the form which he replaced with a more personal and tacit gesture to the student indicating a mutual understanding which goes beyond the documentation.

### **6.3 The language of assessment and feedback – a comprehension gap?**

The data in this section reflect the extent to which meanings are shared by teachers and students; alternatively the extent to which there is a comprehension gap. Shared understanding, as the final example in the last section indicates, is a key element in the communicative interaction between tutors and student writers. It is a central concern of the present research and occurs throughout. The form and presentation of assessment criteria and formal requirements are sources of consternation for students. In the following example an unmodified form is presented to students without any explicit clarification. It is as if the teacher sees it as a simple check-list: a set of self-evident components in the assessment process.

They use a pro-forma. There are boxes with 0-10 and criteria next to each one. In the lower box it is 'describe', in the middle it is 'describe and compare' and in the higher boxes it is things like 'analyse' and 'evaluate'. People don't really get it. If you asked students what these words mean I can guarantee 90% of them wouldn't really understand them (second year undergraduate, Health and Nursing, mature-age)

This example recalls the reservations expressed by a lecturer earlier about using feedback instruments and becoming skilled in providing feedback. It is not just feedback *per se* but the register and discourse of academic life for non-traditional students:

The question alone frightens you half to death! All these big words. You would like it in layman's terms but I suppose that wouldn't be academic. No one wants to admit they are not sure what things mean; no one wants to stand out.. (first year, nursing diploma, mature entrant)

Once again the visceral fears of students come out when it comes to understandings and asking for 'support'. Another nursing diploma student expressed similar views:

When tutors use words like 'critical evaluation' nobody challenges them. Teachers when they try to explain words like 'analyse' don't do it in the same way. 'Analyse' and 'discuss' – they don't really mean different things do they? Feedback is very useful but if you ask for extra tutorial time you simply get directed to the study skills centre (first year, mature-age)

Another mature-age student explained why he had booked a session with the study skills adviser:

I came to get some feedback on my assignment. I got 50%. The marker had put question marks on much of the work. I had to guess what half of them meant. This is always a grey area. I put it down to me not coming from an academic background (Social Work, second year)

In this instance the student appears to blame himself for his problems with the inexplicitness of the feedback he received. The self-perception of this student can be compared with data from an interview with traditional A-level entrants in the second year of a single honours Sociology degree:

*Is the word 'structure' clear to you?*

S) Yeah, clear

A) An essay structure is clear, yeah

*What is that then?*

A) It is the use of sections and paragraphs: the introduction, main body of it and then the conclusion where you bring everything together and try to conclude the essay in a concise fashion

S) It is how to put together an essay or exam – this is what I am going to say this is what I have said and how I have said it

*Has anybody ever really explained words like this to you?*

In the first year we had a 'skills' module. There was some help with essay writing and understanding titles in that

S) The Enabling Sociological Study module helped [semester one, first year]. But really at A-level you get a feeling for these words; 'discuss' and 'explain' for example

These rather younger, traditional students are clear about both academic requirements and the tacit meanings of feedback terms which they attribute to their prior socialisation. On two occasions interviewees produced front sheets with tutor

comments on them. One was a second year student who could make no sense of the following comments on his history essay:

... it lacks proper academic subtlety,  
...an endemic vagueness  
...writing skills will make or break a piece of work of this length

The student felt that the pro-forma categories were vague and concluded that the tutor obviously felt the same: s/he had consistently ticked on the line between two of the boxes all the way through. An international student (from China) was left guessing when confronted with “it does so in a systematic and logical way”. When asked to explain the comment “Well structured and argued” the student pondered “is this telling me I have done well in the essay or is it suggesting to argue and structure more?” Asked why she hadn’t consulted her tutor directly she replied “I would like to ask my teacher but he is too busy”.

## **7.0 Teachers’ views about the language they use in feedback interactions**

This section presents some excerpts from the data that reflect how teachers view the language they use in feedback communications and its efficacy. The following respondent, who has over thirty years teaching experience in a traditional discipline, is aware that certain students are unsure about the terms used in relation to written work in higher education:

I must say that on occasions, particularly with first year students and sometimes with mature students I will use a word they do not understand. Then it is necessary to explain in some sorts of ways. But I would rather continue to use the word, as it is one that we use by convention rather than try to put it into simple language as it were (History)

This teacher embraces the need to help students with their expression apparently recognising that students do need support with their writing. On the other hand, there is a feeling that this well-intentioned approach misses attention to underlying problems a student may have with their writing coursework at the level of epistemology and authority. Sometimes teachers expressed doubt about students’ reactions as if they were being deliberately obtuse:

I have favourite words. 'Structure' is a word I use a lot. Some students say they don't understand it. I think they pretend not to understand the words I use (Humanities)

Others seem to be creatures of habit on one hand and faithful to formal expectations on the other. Once again feedback is perceived as to some extent a contrived and controlled activity in which certain forms of expression are selected according to mandatory requirements rather than a perception of clear communication. Teachers, nevertheless, persist with their idiosyncratic uses of words based on the assumption their students will have got the idea:

One word I use a lot is 'subjectivity'. But I wonder if they really know what it means? I really hope they do. I cut and paste. There are stock phrases that have to be in there. The issue is how you construct that (Sociology and Criminology)

As was noted in earlier sections of this chapter, in practice-based areas teachers have had to be more aware and modify their practices:

Feedback has to be related to performance criteria. I strive to give a quality product. I try not to use too many big words. But there are times you have to use the 'buzzwords'. Sometimes students are stuck at a level and can't move up. But the notion of level is confusing; there are students who write above their level! (Health and Education)

An interesting point made by this teacher is that a correspondence between expected levels of capability and achievement and appropriate feedback are not always congruent. This provides another insight into why teaching staff find the use of structured forms and the application of assessment criteria problematic. The teacher's use of 'buzzwords' is indicative of a lack of ownership over, and identification with, the language of feedback. In the following excerpt a teacher in a related discipline area describes how she modifies her written feedback:

Students may not follow or use feedback because they can't understand it. The language is too difficult; too abstract. Sentence structures might appear too complex for them. I modify my feedback language accordingly. A comment like "this essay is carefully articulated" would be used with a good student and with a weaker one I'd say "your writing style is developing" (Nursing)

The next respondent has a clear opinion and recognises an important dimension to the socio-discursive space and the communicative and pedagogical efficacy of feedback:

Things like ‘argument’ and ‘analysis’ mean different things to non-traditional students. When dealing with students who haven’t come through the traditional system it is important to be explicit about words like ‘coherent’ and ‘structure’ – give explanations and definitions. *There are problems in cross-shared degrees and modules.* We shouldn’t confuse ‘useless’ formalism with ‘vital’ formalism. Students need to follow the logic of the discipline. *This is the main authority, not authority for its own sake.* (Sociology) (Italics added for emphasis)

## **8.0 How far are teachers questioning and adjusting their practices?**

In this final section data are presented from teacher accounts that indicate how staff are adjusting to, and recognising in more substantial ways, the difficulties faced by students in feedback and learning interactions. A lecturer in a traditional discipline reflects on her tutoring role and appears to be questioning the implicit, and varied, meanings associated with the language of feedback central to student learning and academic literacy development. She seems ambivalent about her role as tutor and about traditional practices:

Students don’t use tutorials like they used to. I have found I am working round their writing. There was one student who came and told me she couldn’t write. I went through a piece of reading with her and focused on how the reader is guided by the writer and the ways in which things are signposted. The student realised how this is done and took the example away with her. But later I asked myself if this wasn’t too formulaic... Students sometimes ask me “what do you mean by structure?” This is one of the most obscure of all academic words. It doesn’t say anything really. Often I have to look at their [written] work to get a sense [understand another tutors comments]. Sometimes it is about the organisation of the sentence; other times it is the overall structure. We have ended up with the pro-forma. *It encourages shorthand in feedback.* For example, ‘structure’ is overused...I advise students to make use of the tutorials. If we are going to acknowledge that there is broadening access it is not going to be an Oxbridge arrangement. *It is about finding innovative ways to support students with their writing.* What students lack is confidence in flagging up the various twists and turns in an argument. I didn’t have to tell her

[the student] that this is a discipline based on argument and evidence (Sociology and Criminology) (*Italics added for emphasis*)

The teacher is clearly aware of the challenges students face in diffuse programme areas like hers and is sympathetic to their confusion. She is unaccustomed to addressing these issues and uncertain about her approach. She clings to emphasising the epistemic conventions of the discipline in the tutorial and recognises the importance of pedagogical interactions through tutorial meetings. However, there is a discernable sense of uncertainty ('if we are going to acknowledge...') overall and awareness that something 'innovative' is needed to address issues in the experience of both students and teaching staff. Another lecturer in a traditional humanities subject reflects on his own practices and the subtle but distinct ways they have had to change:

I make it a point of principle that I don't return work to students with written comments until I have spoken to them. I have moved away from content in most cases, except perhaps in the final year, to concentrate on structure and process because I think that this is going to be more important to students in the long-run than the other way...

*Do you get questions from students about those higher education words like 'structure' and 'argument'?*

More often I volunteer that information myself as it is obvious from the weakness in the essay that they don't understand what is involved. It came as quite a shock to remind myself of what some second year students are not capable of. It does seem to be quite clear that they confuse 'assertion' and 'evidence' for example and they don't understand what a consistent argument is and that they don't really understand structure. (History)

This lecturer has had to question his assumptions on returning to teaching after a sabbatical period. Students are not demonstrating the levels of assumed knowledge that he once took for granted. The above excerpts in particular highlight problems that students have with epistemologies, genres of feedback and implicit meanings but also highlight the sorts of adjustments that teachers are currently making to their practices in order to cope with the requirements of the system and the demands of students.



## **9.0 Summary and outline of the salient findings from the data analysed in this chapter**

The data indicate that while there appear to be templates for what should be included, structured forms for feedback can, and do, vary in design and detail at the discretion of departmental and divisional heads. In addition this documentation is often subject to reformatting, change and on-going discussion at the departmental level about the suitability of the forms and their compatibility with course requirements and assessment practices. In large areas of the university feedback practices at all levels appear to be heterogeneous. The existence of ostensibly 'rigorous guidelines' also seems at odds with teachers' natural approach. Some take a principled approach others feel that there are 'no real rules' and have learnt informally through contact with peers and moderation practices. Teachers seem to respond in two ways to structured formats: they either work with them or they attempt to circumvent them in various ways. A linked finding is the use of structured forms does not seem to be informed by prior research or piloting. This raises questions: is the institutional message about forms clear at the departmental and divisional level? If not are there implications for continuing professional development as some respondents whose data are included here suggested?

The evidence of this research suggests that practices may even have negative effects. Firstly, standardisation restricts writing on scripts and reduces teacher comments to a minimum. Secondly, forms do not recognise that words such as 'structure' are contextually understood - discipline and even module specific. Neither teachers nor students have any way of knowing this from the forms *per se* and their use obscures this consideration by assuming a transmission model of teaching (Fairclough, 1999) which sustain monologic practices (Lillis, 2006) not only between teacher and student but between teachers and their colleague across taught programmes. The evidence also suggests that the use of forms can lead to routinisation in the provision of feedback, compounding the negative effects of the preceding points. Students are sceptical and assume forms are based on administration rather than supporting them with their learning and academic literacy development.

The evidence also indicates that modularisation militates against the optimal effectiveness of written feedback (cf. Higgins, et al, 2002). Teachers experience a sense of unease with the feedback and marking system. They are aware that there are

differences in practices and expectations within as well as across programme areas and worry about telling students one thing when another tutor tells them 'something different'. Teachers appear to play safe by sticking to the specifics of the assignment and justifying the mark even though this information has little feed-forward value. It becomes the responsibility of the student 'to take advantage' and 'ask enough questions'.

A linked finding is that there are other agendas in the feedback process that are not explicit: the bureaucratic reasons behind feedback practices – 'the formal requirements of the system'. Teachers are aware that colleagues and even externals may read their comments, and this influences how those comments are framed and written. Teachers have to go to some lengths to 'justify the mark' not only to the student but also to others in the process to whom they are accountable. This appears to be an over-riding factor in the move to greater consistency in practices and the encroaching 'language of the grade descriptor' in the wording of feedback. The fact that teachers are serving more than one master may not be obvious to students or discussed with them other than in exceptional circumstances (Carless, 2006; Haggis, 2006). This chapter has demonstrated how each of these factors directly impinges on the practices of feedback – its availability, delivery, official function and framing (Crook, et al, 2006). In Nursing there are moderation and standardisation committees and feedback is scored on the basis of its clarity. The notion of clarity, however, is not fully explained. What is implied by this practice is that there has to be a measure of control; mitigating levels of disparity in the writing, framing and extensiveness of feedback rather than critically assessing the nature of communicative practices and the meanings that teachers associate with the framing and wording of what they write. The data indicate that teachers are inclined to view the poor take-up of their feedback as weakness in the student (rather than the system). It results in myopia in the way such problems are rationalised. The same thinking that sees problems in student writing – a productive ability – applies to students' use of feedback – a receptive one. The values and communicative practices of the institution are givens; the behaviour of students is problematised.

Approaching tutors for clarification and amplification on comments appears to be easier for some students than for others. Non-traditional students are often confused by the language of feedback but feel that it is their fault if they are unable to interpret or deal with it. This feeling can be compounded by being given so much

‘support’ documentation in the form of guides, handouts and other paraphernalia in the early stages of study, the attitudes of tutors working with an implicit induction approach and even peers who think that institutional practice of mystery is part of the experience of higher education and espouse an attitude that could be summed up as ‘you shouldn’t be here if you aren’t up to it’. Uncertainty is manifest in two incompatible forms of behaviour: a constant concern about expectations and an apprehension of approaching tutors the tutor and appearing ‘foolish’. On the other hand, the image that emerges from the interviews with some mature-age students is one of assertive and pro-active individuals exasperated with contradictory practices across modules and who struggle to demystify the language of feedback. This reflects a student experience which is more complicated than the simple perception of ‘poor/weak’ to ‘better/more able’. A dichotomous view largely framed and sustained by the model of learning as implicit induction and a transparency notion of language. Student who have written a good essay would prefer more detail for formative development but they, too, are caught in the cycle of deprivation (cf. Hounsell, 1987). This extends to other areas of the discourse of higher education. Students may be exhorted to write, in order to demonstrate their learning, meet criteria and satisfy outcomes, at the appropriate level but cannot connect with this formal and remote discourse. Students want more than comment and criticism, or to be left to compute through logical deduction or inference what is intended; they want to know ‘how’.

Students are no longer using tutorials for course content but are taking the opportunity to talk with tutors about their writing and the challenges they face. There is evidence that teachers are questioning their assumptions about students and adjusting their practices. The tutorial system is subtly changing and teaching staff have to contend with levels of enquiry from students they do not normally associate with their role as university teachers. The data suggest a model of learning as implicit induction is failing some students. They have two options: either increased contact with tutors or extra curricular support. The conditions in higher education at present mean that the former – the practices associated with the old elite system – is a privilege that neither students nor teachers can expect and depend on. The next chapter focuses on the latter option – the system of learning and study support.

# **Chapter Seven**

## **Learning and study support and student writing and academic literacy**

### **1.0 The organisation of this chapter**

The presentation and organisation of the data in this chapter are as follows:

- In section 1.0 there is an outline and description of university wide, generic support with data which reflect on how this is perceived by lecturers and students.
- Section 2.0 considers university policy on study guidance and describes in some detail relevant aspects of an example introduced to students in level four in a department which is modularised and highly interdisciplinary. This is followed by a critique of this source using an ‘academic literacies approach’.
- Section 3.0 presents data on how study guide materials are experienced by student writers and lecturers and their perceptions about the role and efficacy of this kind of generic support.
- Section 4.0 explores in more depth, specifically how lecturers feel about generic support for students both within the programmes they teach and outside the curriculum.
- Section 5.0 focuses on the issues of limited resources and increased demands which came to the fore in the interviews. This section contains accounts of how teachers adjust their practices and provides some insights into how they view the challenges of student diversity in terms of teaching and programme management.
- Section 6.0 presents data on the student perspective and considers their answers to being asked what they would prefer to see more of in terms of support provision both inside and outside the curriculum.
- Finally the salient findings from the research are elaborated and discussed.

## **1.0 Generic support**

Generic support in the university where this research was conducted is conceptualised and construed as flexible, accessible and reactive for a number of reasons. The first criterion is the requirements of the university's infrastructure. The university is a large central campus with a number of satellite sites inside and outside the city area. It is divided into Schools which differ in size and complexity. Secondly, the organisational structure of the university is periodically in flux. This is in part a response to the need to respond dynamically to change and internal agendas related to adjusting and reviewing provision. Deans of schools have considerable latitude to effect internal change such as altering the composition of departments and moving divisions out of one area into another. Department heads, divisional heads and programme leaders are able to influence the taught curriculum and manage local affairs within certain parameters but in organisational terms they represent layers of functional management (they are not decision-makers, rather implementers of institutional policies and practices). Thirdly, the vicissitudes of the higher education market-place impact on strategic level decision-making: departments and divisions expand, merge with others or contract according to success in attracting students, their fiscal viability, funding and readiness in responding to current higher education agendas and policy changes.

University policy (Guidance and Learner Support) also stresses fairness and equality; all students should have, in principle, the same opportunities for, and access to, support. These factors underpin the university's commitment to generic support in a shifting and responsive organisational environment. There are issues around feasibility and accountability. When there is considerable change in assessment procedures and new modules are created within new or altered degree structures there are concerns over students' rights and appeal processes in an increasingly accountable higher education environment. Departments and individual teachers have to be circumspect about what they can claim to cover and achieve in their degree programmes. On the other hand, this seems dissonant with the university's policy on openly and actively encouraging innovation in teaching and meeting the challenges of diversity described in chapter four and the creative ways teachers have achieved this

in terms of new modules and assessment practices described and discussed in chapter five.

Given the complex infrastructure of the university the key skills agenda is embedded in the curriculum. In this context student writing pedagogy is subsumed into an institution-wide framework for transferable skills linked to, and to a large extent driven by concerns with 'graduate employability', 'skills for employment', 'personal progress files' and the gamut of current political and policy concerns of higher education more generally. The mandatory inclusion of modules associated with, and propagating these concerns in the curriculum is constricting space for the inclusion of other things. The consequences of this have been alluded to in chapters four, five and six. The university has modularised to accommodate change and facilitate adjustments to its provision; modularisation has led to an increase in assessment requirements (summative rather than formative as there is less time and space for the latter); there is a disjunction within programmes and in the experience of both teachers and students. The impact on the system overall is summed up in the following:

Teaching is mainly geared to assessment; we teach to these and students write to them (Business School)

### **1.1 The e-learning portal, library and student services**

This support has been itemised and described in chapter four. The e-learning portal (Blackboard) contains a number of communities. Student Services use this technology for various non-academic support services to students such as careers advice and student welfare. The e-portal is maintained by IT services in conjunction with the library learning service. In theory the three areas (student services, library and learning services, and the university IT group) are supposed to work collaboratively. However, one spokesperson within student services was unclear as to the extent this is the case:

They could work together I'm not sure. There is some degree of collaboration for example between ourselves and Library Services.

Library Services manage an on-line system for support entitled Skills Plus - Key Skills for Information Literacy. The following, taken directly from the published handout on this service encapsulates its real purpose:

Skills Plus is a self-directed course designed to improve your learning skills and to help you to find good quality information for your assignments, projects and dissertation

It is divided into three pathways: information skills, study skills, IT skills. Under study skills there are sections on essay writing, report writing, instructional words and avoiding plagiarism. The material is the same as that included in the Guide to Effective Study booklet (described in chapter four). A representative of student services offered the following view:

The role study skills perform at the moment is largely reactive. It is working on a one-to-one basis in accordance with demand. If it were to be working more in the curriculum it would be over-stretched. Academic writing in the discipline – the style, the way the argument is expressed – well, it is the role of the lecturers to teach that material

In the course of a focus group session these students compared their experiences after the first year of study:

B) I think we are getting there [referring to academic writing]

A) It's practice and learning the right format

*Have you had any explicit help with learning that?*

B) We've had tutorials on general aspects but we haven't had a lecture or seminar or anything that deals with 'this is what we are looking for in academic writing' It would be really helpful if we had

A) But I think that at university if you have A-levels they assume you have that knowledge

B) To me it has been a completely different writing style to what I am used to

A) Well, I've done a previous degree so maybe I'm used to academic writing. I feel it is easier this time round because there is more help available compared with when I did my first degree

*What form does that help take?*

A) There is more tutor contact. The library is a lot more user friendly and there's Blackboard and e-learning; it's fantastic! You get all the course information and extras like how to write academically (first-year under-graduate nurses)

In this exchange, A, who has previous HE experience, is very positive about the generic support the institution offers. She is aware of the implicit nature of expectations. B on the other hand, who has no previous HE experience, still feels slightly uncertain ('we are getting there') and wishes more explicit help or guidance had been given. These students are about to enter the second year of degree study; one has adjusted to the situation, the other may go on experiencing difficulty with writing on the degree. Such observations raise the question of who really benefits from generic support. The evidence seems to suggest that the student who already has the firm basis and background is the one with the potential to gain most: the one who can become the independent/self-directing learner that the official discourse of the institution holds up as its ideal.

## **1.2 The study skills centres**

The materials available in the study skills centres have been developed by support specialists, are generic in content and free to students. Those that focus on student writing are reproductions under copyright licence of well-known published skills materials. Materials on essay writing are at two levels: starter level and development level (following the layout of the material in the published texts from which they are taken). There are other guides. One entitled 'how to write an essay' is three pages long, separated into six sections (title, outline, gathering material, planning, writing drafts, reviewing) and consists of bullet pointed items 'advising' the student writer. Other material on writing consists of free handouts on use of English (commas, colons, semi-colons). All the material is disembodied and generic in presentation. There is no evidence of any context or background, disciplinary or otherwise. A study skills specialist explains how she sees the situation:

The format of this material as well as the content raises issues. We are a kind of little island in a big sea. We aim to facilitate by providing students with advice and pointers. We need to look at the feedback they get and pin them down on issues. Students need to be encouraged to engage with the literature and assessment criteria. *In reality the relationship [with students] seems to be a teacher-student one. It seems to be at odds with the general move to the autonomous learner.* They want to know: 'is it good enough' and 'have I passed?' I can't answer that question. *Our*



*publicity is termed in what we can do; we don't say what we can't do. (Italics added for emphasis)*

This can be juxtaposed with the following account from a student on the perceived benefits of taking her writing to the study skills specialist:

With lecturers there is the expectation you know what you are doing. We have these sessions but I'm not sure what they are about or how to link this into the assignment. When I read my writing it doesn't sound right. When I go to the study skills centre they give me alternative ways to say it. The adviser will reassure, saying it is at the same level as other students. Advisers know what sort of standard is expected

She went on to elaborate what she felt are the weaknesses in her writing – presumably this is something that has been drawn to her attention by tutors:

I just tend to write and write. My telling is OK. It's the structure of my sentences. I tend to write over-long sentences because I want to get ideas together. Also I've had a couple of experiences where I thought I had really grasped it [the assignment] but failed the assignment for not understanding the question. The big words in assignments confuse. (mature-age, nursing diploma, first year)

The student has a perception of the service and an expectation of what the study skills adviser can do to help which is only partially shared by the specialist herself. The provision of 'support' is misleading and students, especially those in their first year, may be confused about the purpose of non-embedded support provision. It raises an important question on one level about the nature of the message given to students and the implicit understandings assumed and on another level about the ideology and dominant goals of the institution. The evidence suggests that students have unrealistic expectations of the role and capabilities of the study skills service. The student's concerns seem to be more about the form of her writing. She is trying to approximate an academic style, which she seems to equate with 'over-long sentences, but can not (yet) quite control it. She experiences difficulty with implicit expectations, knowing what to write and what to leave out and how to decode essay titles. This has had a deleterious effect on her results and her first year experience. The study support specialist attempts to induct students, like this one, into the expectations of the academy by focusing on assessment criteria and supporting them with their written expression; but it does not appear to be what students are really looking for.

## **2.0 The paraphernalia of advice on study: an example at Level 4**

It is a QAA Code of Practice and university requirement – in accordance with equal opportunities and the ethical criterion of ‘fairness’ - that students are given study guides. Together with the module descriptors they are a documentary source of reference for students about module information and requirements, learning outcomes and assessment, support, reading and generic advice. In this study a number of guides were offered to the researcher by staff interviewees. It is not possible to enumerate and describe all these in detail. They vary in length, detail, style and presentation. This variation occurs within disciplinary areas where there are several subject divisions. A student following a modular degree structure with a wide range of module choices may, therefore, receive several module guides on a semester-basis, depending on the modular structure in the department. The guide, which is about to be described in this section, was presented by a member of the teaching staff in the division as the one which is used to, quote, “help student in the department with their writing when they start their studies”. In addition, several module descriptors were accessed electronically to see if any references were made to writing requirements or separate module guides with these details: no references were noted.

The following is a description and overview outline of a study guide designed for students at level four of study across degree programmes within two closely linked divisions. It is an area which is both modularised in structure and interdisciplinary in nature. In this area students are expected to write extensively in their degrees – for example they have to submit essays, reports, projects – as well as variously perform other forms of assessment such as presentations and group work activities. The guide in question is for the ‘tutorial module’ and is organised around eleven group tutorial sessions over the first year of study. It is generic as it caters for students on all degree programmes within the joint divisions. However, the spectrum runs from theoretical to applied: many, if not most, students following modular degree structures will write both essays and reports for assessment. The guide is 87 pages in length. Over the course of the year, students will receive additional guides (for example, the researcher was given additional guides on ‘good field notes’ as an A4 sheet with prescriptive advice, and ‘project design’ - a bound, booklet-style mini-guide). A second guide that students are given at level 4 is the ‘Undergraduate

Personal Progress File' which students maintain periodically in conjunction with seminar sessions. There are six tutorial sessions over the course of degree study – two sessions each semester. Students keep a record of their development as potential graduates, making explicit levels of attainment in 'key skills' areas, generic and discipline specific, practical experience, detailing CV preparation and formulating 'goals' beyond study, amongst others. It is clearly linked to the graduate employability agenda.

'Essay Writing' is the second 'tutorial' in weeks three and four. In the course of the first semester students complete and receive feedback on three essays for formative development. A member of staff in one of the divisions describes the system as follows:

We have a portfolio in the first year and attached to this are fortnightly tutorials throughout the year. There are three written assessments. The percentages are different. The first is largely formative and worth 5%. The second is worth 15% and requires more detailed work on essay and report writing conventions and referencing. The third is worth 25% and for this they really should have everything as it really does count. Some staff give the first essay [title] again and tell the students to go and build on what they have been told [the implication is that not all tutors do this]. The students have to produce project reports and a presentation [at the end of the module]

The variation in input and diverse assessment requirements students are exposed to over the year are evident here. The interviewee also informed the researcher that students across the divisions come from a wide range of backgrounds: sciences and humanities, traditional A-level entrants, mature students and returnees to education. In the guide each topic for tutorial is referenced to official 'learning outcomes' and these are included as an appendix to each topic section in the guide. It is made clear that students have to fulfil these to meet assessment requirements:

The assessment is based on having achieved a set of learning outcomes associated with key tutorials. Your tutor will sign the relevant spaces at the end of each of these tutorials, **where there is evidence of the outcomes having been achieved**. (bold type in the original)

The introduction to the tutorial module study guide states:

the aim of this guide is to stimulate thought and reflection upon academic and personal development in year one, and in so doing, form a basis for good practice in the remaining two years...The ideas in this book are not intended to dictate to you how to develop your study skills; they are suggested guidelines and an indication of what we feel is 'good practice'.

This seems to capture the ethos of study skills; their incremental, tangible and self-evident nature; once students have been introduced to the 'skills' they need they can be built upon logically and naturally. The introduction also positions the student as follows:

As universities are moving increasingly towards 'student-centred learning', you will need to work more independently and take more responsibility for finding out what you need to know for yourself.

The first tutorial on 'writing skills' focuses on note-taking in lectures with generic advice on what 'good learners' do and some techniques for note-taking followed by some questions for reflection. There is a URL directing students to a web page for more ideas and advice. There is a text box for tutorial notes and, finally, a box with learning outcomes requiring a tutor's signature to verify they have been 'achieved'. The second tutorial on writing is entitled "grammar, spelling and good writing practices: the importance of good writing". There is an introduction addressed to the user:

Getting a good degree is not just about becoming knowledgeable. It is about showing that you can order, relate and articulate knowledge and ideas, whether in an essay, project, mini-project or other activity. But students tend to be much more concerned about **what to write** than **how to write it**. Developing your writing skills early will eventually save time and help you get better results. You cannot produce a good piece of work off the top of your head; it requires time and effort and you need to think about what you are doing. If you know you are a good speller try to word process where possible and use the spell checker, but beware – do not rely on this, so use of a dictionary maybe essential! Use a thesaurus to widen your vocabulary. The suggestions in this section are intended to help you develop a good written style and to steer you towards 'good practice' in essay technique (bold type in the original)

There follows a 'writing it right' section divided into

- spelling (distinguishing between homophones such as ‘there/their’, ‘affect/effect’ and a few other examples);
- writing numbers; grammar (plurals and apostrophes),
- syntax (paraphrased as ‘the structure of sentences’ presumably in case students do not know the word ‘syntax’ and providing an example of where two sentences should be used rather than one and reminding student writers that their sentences should contain an active verb),
- punctuation (commas, full-stops, colons and semi-colons), paragraphs (‘it’s a single idea or argument; avoid making them too short or too long’),
- typefaces; common abbreviations (e.g. and .i.e. are the examples given) and;
- the avoidance of slang – in effect telling students not to write as they may speak. The example given is the avoidance of ‘actual’ for emphasis; common in speech but not acceptable in formal writing.

The guide then moves onto a section entitled “Inclusive writing: how to avoid bias and stereotyping”. This appears to be included because it is an equal opportunities issue rather than a discipline-specific one. Students are warned against using woolly, unrepresentative and imprecise expression and stereotyping. A number of negative examples are compared with more acceptable expressions of the same meaning to raise students’ awareness of their use of language generally in this respect, and in relation to the topics and subject matter in the discipline.

A further section addresses “good practice in essay writing” and comprises a number of guidelines. It is prefaced as follows:

*The advice given here should be useful in ordinary circumstances when you are required to write ‘an essay’. Sometimes individual lecturers may have particular requirements which are slightly different; if this is the case they will give you separate advice (italics added for emphasis)*

It is not clear why ‘an essay’ is written within inverted commas. It can be assumed that the term is open to interpretation. Teachers, and presumably, the author(s) of this guide may feel that the term is an elastic one; the student user may not necessarily share this assumption. The section goes on to enumerate, briefly explain, advise and illustrate with one or two examples in each case, where necessary, good practice as: understanding the question, researching, planning, introducing your essay, structure,

staying relevant, writing style, making and supporting arguments, concluding your essay, bibliography and referencing (the reader is referred to a sub-section later in the guide) and a final summary section. Each section contains items of advice in bulleted form. There is an appendix entitled “Key words in essay questions – what exactly do they mean”. It is alphabetically ordered and begins with ‘account for’ and ends with ‘to what extent’. Each term is defined generically. There is no contextualisation. Presumably students have the opportunity to ask for this in the tutorial session(s). Students users are told in the guide that essay titles may contain a combination of these terms and warns: “It is therefore essential to understand exactly what the title requires you to do”.

A text box is provided in which the student plans the essay as a basis for the ‘second tutorial’. The guide includes the “criterion-referenced marking guidelines” for the user to reference. There are also two specimen pieces of writing of five hundred words for comparison. Presumably this is for general reference and may be the focus of a tutorial exercise. There is a fairly lengthy section later in the guide on “Referencing and citation in written work”. The term ‘plagiarism’ occurs three times in bold type (within a short sub-section on ‘Plagiarism’) and once in upper case and bold type (within the text, not as heading). There follow four pages of advice on how to quote and reference and how to compile, arrange and punctuate bibliographies using various sources with examples.

## **2.1 Applying an ‘academic literacies’ critique**

In what follows the largely descriptive outline of the guide provided in the previous section is critically deconstructed following Lea and Street’s (1999) ‘academic literacies’ critiques of texts and practices. The main purpose of the exercise is to explore the explicit and implicit theoretical and ideological frames used by lecturers to inform their own practices and their advice to students about how to write. The critique is theoretically informed by work in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) allied to the academic literacies approach. A second purpose of the exercise is to understand how such texts appear to students and ‘outsiders’.

The rhetorical stance of the author(s) varies considerably throughout the guide, sometimes with contradictory effects. The introduction contains sentences addressed directly to the student that emphasise the need to develop ‘good practice’

and adjust to the 'student-centred' ethos of study in the university. It is stated that the guide is 'not intended to dictate' and that guidelines are only 'suggested' yet each section culminates in a form of assessment by which a reader can verify that learning outcomes have been met. The section on essay writing initially adopts a chatty and common-sense tone. The use of bold type draws a distinction between 'what to write' and 'how to write it' but the subsequent advice is focused on reminding students to 'word process' and 'use the spell checker'. There is the exclamation mark in the text which introduces a change of tone: finger-wagging and exhortatory.

The author(s) indicates that the advice given is generic and includes hedges such as 'in ordinary circumstances' and mentions 'particular requirements which are slightly different'; students will need to seek 'separate advice'. In this way the author tacitly admits s/he/they is/are unaware of individual tutor practices within and across the divisions and the extent to which students get any further support with (academic) writing.

The remainder of the advice in this section of the guide is separated into headings outlined in section 2.0. Almost every item of bulleted advice begins with an imperative verb – 'Do, Do not, Try to, Never/Always (do)...etc. The advice on 'good practice' is general and brief - four sentences on 'Planning', for example, culminate with "all essays should have a clear structure which consists of an introduction, a systematic body of analysis and a conclusion". This appears to do little more than restate the standard tri-partite model of the essay that (traditional) students are already likely to know (although the implicit assumption appears to be that students in fact do not know this). There are few interactive elements within the document overall.

The only guidance or information given about different writing requirements is that students will have to find out for themselves in the course of their undergraduate studies. The prescriptive points concern only the technical and generic features of writing an 'essay'. There is no mention of the purpose of writing essays in the subject and the epistemological basis for study such as what constitutes an argument or how to state and develop a case, for example. There is only a limited attempt to contrast basic text types such as essays and reports. The term 'essay' is in scare quotes implying that expectations, text types and writing practices in general are widely heterogeneous. The level of generality and outright ambiguity is noticeable to any reader and rather invalidates the copious prescription occurring throughout.

When the document addresses the legal requirements of the university's assessment system any trace of a convivial tone vanishes. The discourse becomes quasi-legalistic and its seriousness is reinforced by the use of bold type. The connection between referencing and citation in student written work and the danger of plagiarism is made explicit: "The University has strict penalties for plagiarism and any other form of cheating".

The evidence reveals that with these kinds of documents students are given no indication of the varied and specific nature of writing requirements by the sources themselves. In this guide, given to students in level four, the student writer is addressed as a new entrant in the institution but the writing requirements of different disciplines are not specifically mentioned or alluded to. In fact the formal literacy capabilities of students are implicitly presented as being well below this level of discussion. A deficit model of the student writer is present throughout the document and a narrow view of literacy permeates the sections of the text analysed in this research.

The primary goals of this documentation are to foreground official policy with respect to referencing, citation, the avoidance of plagiarism, satisfying 'learning outcomes' and assessment criteria. The evidence bears out Lillis's (2006) claim that such documentation is configured and used to promote dominant institutional goals and is monologic in the way it addresses the student. The guide also appears to be an example of the 'exclusive approach' (Lea and Street, 1999) where such texts unwittingly (or perhaps wittingly) operate to exclude the student through sterile prescriptivism, an authoritarian stance, formal configurations of textual information and an implied deficit model of the student writer. In such contexts students are left to work out at what level these texts are operating; for example, do they apply to the institution as a whole, specific subjects or individual tutors. Such texts are rarely part of the teaching and learning process.



### 3.0 What do students and teaching staff make of it all?

#### 3.1 The student experience

Many students appreciate the existence of study guide material as this comment by a second year humanities student indicates:

*Are guides useful?*

Very. There are bibliographies that you can use. If you get enough books the essays almost write themselves. I would like to see more the guidelines as being more general rather than point by point, and rely on feedback more. It puts people on the same playing field. Writing an essay is about the books. I picked that up. (second year, History)

The student seems to be comfortable with the requirements of writing in the discipline. The reference to the ‘same playing field’ is unclear. He could be referring to his own confidence as a student writer and his awareness that there are others who are less accomplished. He clearly had little difficulty ‘picking up’ the know-how to write history essays. On the other hand this respondent is a joint degree student so he may be referring to a certain dependence on guides in a modular structure where tutorial time and feedback are limited. This second year joint degree student received more guidance in one area than in the other

In Politics there are certain [clearly not all] modules that have a detailed guide. This is a bit prescriptive. They tell you in the guides exactly what you should do. There is nothing similar in History; no specific module guides with advice. I rely on feedback. I’ve had the same tutor for the History modules all the first year

Politics is more specific about its requirements whereas History relies more on implicit induction. This seems to reflect the attitude of those who write the guides. In Politics there may be more concern over modularity especially in joint degree structures. The student seems to prefer the system in History – feedback and tutorial contact – to the ‘prescriptive’ guide. He feels he has benefited from regular contact with a tutor over the year. The same student seems to understand the situation facing tutors:

You just have to accept that tutors are teaching a lot and have other responsibilities. They have to follow procedures and the uniform standard. In the handbook there are four or five pages on plagiarism and then the assessment guidelines and that's it. One of our tutors includes just a handful of sentences on writing and then suggests students read George Orwell's guide on writing good English. It's left at that; there is nothing built upon

Where module guides tend to be substantial in length (see section 3.0) students have mixed reactions. This single honours third year student in Applied Sciences comments:

Too much is thrown at you at once. It's boring, just a load of words. I used it a lot for checking my referencing, but that's about it! When it comes to reading and writing for the degree tutors give us extracts from books and journals in order to look at specific things and see how they are written. In the tutorial module the teacher would give us readings every week. We would consider questions such as: what is the writing trying to say? What are the important points? This helped with reading, and, I guess, writing. It's all new when you come to university from school. The tutorial module in the first year was compulsory. After that it is personal tutorials in the second and third years, once or twice a semester

Here it is clear that the module guide is perceived as almost superfluous even during the first year. The tutor has other practices (which seem to correspond to a socialisation model of inducting students into the literacy practices and epistemology of the discipline) which are not in the guide, nor is there any reference to this extra component of the tutorials. The guide itself seems fatuous to another student on the same course and in the same year as the student in the last excerpt:

It's just a general thing they hand out. Once it has been given to us it isn't really mentioned again. By the end of the first year you are expected to know about referencing. Once you know how to play the system it is easier.

Module guides (such as the one described in section 3.0) include the marking and assessment criteria; students consult the criteria to determine what is wanted. Good referencing skills are the panacea. There seems to be an assumption that students pick up on how to write essays in the first year; after that they really only need to know the marking and assessment criteria to check what is required. This could explain the dismissive way the student refers to the guide as 'just a general thing'. A student on the same degree programme and in the same year made this comment:

Teachers often tell you to refer to the booklet [guide]. By giving you a booklet it makes it your responsibility to be prepared!

An interviewee from the School of Health produced a module guide in the course of an interview and it became part of the discussion. It comprised a synopsis of the module (the aim, what it covers and how it is assessed); a section on the 'aims of the module' (which is the first sentence of the previous section repeated); a set of five learning outcomes; an outline syllabus; a description of the 'learning, teaching and assessment strategy (how, and by what means, teaching and learning will take place); two pages on the assessment strategy (with key submission dates in bold type); finally there are the generic assessment criteria for level 6 (the level at which the module is delivered). When invited to comment the student said:

We need more on the assessment criteria in the module books. This sheet is so vague. We get these green books [referring to the cover] for every topic. They tell us about the assignment and the assessment criteria which is the same thing in all of them. There is limited tutorial support for at least two of the modules. We have been told by some tutors that we can have group tutorials but there is no time for individual tutorials. They say they are over-stretched and there is a time issue just getting the assignments in on time. One of our classes has seventy in the group.

This student is in the third year of study – level 6 – but still has concerns about the assessment criteria. She wants more clarification. However, the situation she described and the evidence of the module descriptor she produced in the interview imply that at this level there is the expectation that students will have moved beyond these questions. This palpably is not the case.

You are supposed to be working at level six; but nobody actually explains what that is!

There are pressures on time and resources and opportunities students have to ask questions and seek clarification from tutors are limited. This student was interviewed in the study skills centre and had two important assignments to get in over the holiday. This requires tutorial time but it is not available. The study skills centre is filling the gap.

Some students are aware of their own particular learning styles and preferences and actively chose to seek extra-curricular help as a result.

To me you can't use a web-site to help you. I feel I am wasting my time looking at an electronic page. Reading books on how to do it is just confusing. The main guide is talking to a lecturer. In the tutorials the tutor will read through it and say something like 'you can mail me a draft', but that's it! We are such a large group. There was a tutor who went through the question with some students and told them what to put in section by section. Everybody thought that was fantastic! (second-year degree, Nursing)

This is what a student on a joint degree in social sciences (first-year) had to say:

The guidance and guidelines weren't clear. I was the only student who asked for clarification. I was referred to Blackboard [e-learning portal]. I prefer talking to a lecturer or a support tutor

Neither of these two students has adjusted well to guides and web pages. This appears to compound their sense of marginality and heighten their dependency. Rather than becoming 'independent learners' they simply feel frustrated. The following student respondent mentions one issue students have no control over:

They keep bringing out new versions of them [guides] and there are differences. The thing is they don't tell you about it – they go and tinker with it without letting you know. I've got four versions and they are all different. They are canny; they don't put a date on them. You have to buy them and they're expensive. They change the goal posts ( first-year, nursing diploma, mature-age)

The data in this section reveal the different experiences student writers have with guides and the paraphernalia of support. The evidence suggests that students at best see them as sources for general information (reading lists, assessment details and criteria, and so on). When these documents are over-long students are disinclined to use them. In addition a lot of students have learning styles that are incompatible with independently accessing guides and guidelines: they just prefer being told and having their questions answered. The impression comes through that this material increases the distance between tutors and students – it makes it the student's 'responsibility'. The well adjusted student can benefit; it seems to make little material difference to the non-traditional student.

### 3.2 The views of teaching staff

There is awareness that the student body is both increasing and subtly changing even in traditional discipline areas, and this entails more ‘guidance’:

We are getting students who are getting grade C or B at A-level. But the kinds of skills these students have and the level of understanding is greatly diminished. So we can’t make assumptions about their skill, their capacity to write essays or their level of understanding.

*How far are practices discussed at the departmental level?*

As a division we meet twice a semester. We did well in our teaching quality assessment and at that time some of these issues came to the fore. Staff evaluate modules they teach and fill-in boxes. Often this is about improvements and up-dates but occasionally somebody will be honest and say ‘need to revise the module guide to ensure students understand more clearly what we are trying to do and provide more support through Blackboard, etc’ (History)

A colleague puts a different complexion on it:

Something like ‘study skills in the humanities’ needs to be there although it obviously not that effective in my experience. The truth is a lot of students simply don’t need those guides. We really stick to informal guidance from semester two [first year]

The implicit induction and deficit models of student learning are strongly represented in the comments of both teachers. The former concedes that more diversity is an issue but it is a matter of lower standards among entrants. The second respondent is overtly sceptical about study skill add-ons and the willingness of students to use module guides. The traditional practices of seminars and less formal interactions are preferred. Another respondent based in the humanities expresses a general scepticism and indifference to study skills, although not to students as the last two sentences indicate:

Students do a study skills module. It is based on the assumption you can teach people to write in one go. It’s a poor premise. It hasn’t been changed or up-dated since it was produced ten years ago. It was originally taught by visiting lecturers. The really useful thing I can do as a lecturer is to mark students’ work as efficiently as I know how. Learning support should be done by lecturers

Although this teacher concedes it is a 'poor premise', his view of language and writing as a transparent and autonomous medium in the discipline is revealed in a later comment:

We are in higher education. Teaching reading and writing is not what we do.

A tutor in an applied discipline area made his sentiments clear:

We can't get rid of the skills thing, or replace it. We think it should be done here [in the department] but the decision was taken to concede to the better provision made by the university. We are squeezed in terms of resources. We would like people to come in and talk to students about the epistemologies and genres in sociology but there isn't time. Learning is becoming part of a community. Bolt-on, non-integrated support is not good enough (Social Sciences)

In another discipline they have dropped a mandatory 'skills module'; only, it appears, to replace it with something similar:

There is now no skills unit in the first year. There is a 'methods in the social sciences' module. There was a perception that there was some resentment among students about 'study skills' modules. When it comes to writing I advise students at the end of lectures how I want the work structured. I give guidelines on writing and handouts. I put my stuff on writing techniques in the module guide. Professional jargon is being used in descriptors and guidelines given to students. I am not writing for the student but for the institution. There is within these parameters a fluency that helps you write them [guides and descriptors] as quickly as possible

*Are they useful to students then?*

Not really. A more general kind of description about a module delivered in a language closer to everyday speech is better. Increased bureaucratisation, work-loads and time constraints make this difficult to do (Politics)

Writing might be addressed in the new 'research methods' module but as a (transferable) 'skill' all students (across subject areas) taking the module will (it is assumed) acquire. Writing is represented as a transparent medium. The tutor is left to his own devices on how to advise students about their writing. Other tutors may do it differently or simply omit any advice on 'writing' in their guides and handouts. The obligation to use 'jargon' is distancing him from what he thinks is appropriate for students. It offers 'fluency' and an ease which, under increased pressure from

workloads and lack of time, is straight forward, convenient and complies with institutional practices. While this is consistent with 'hands-on' and 'embedded' approach regarded as engendering more effective learning, it seems driven by another agenda which permeates practices in the university: employability. This can conflict with subject specific priorities. One teacher respondent in an applied area made explicit her concerns about this:

Employability has been a big concern. The more generic skills we include the more subject specific skills we lose. We are trying to get them to do both but it is hard to get the space on the curriculum (Applied Sciences)

Teachers may be frustrated that they cannot share and impart their appreciation for ('good') writing with students. This is implicit in the case of the lecturer who suggests to first year students in the course guide that they consult George Orwell's text on English style and usage. Another example is the approach taken by a Business School lecturer who tested international students on the use of the apostrophe and then added the best-seller 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves' to the reading list.

#### **4.0 Lecturers' perceptions of the role and efficacy of generic support**

There is a clear recognition that study skills are part of the landscape. But there is ambivalence about how skills stand in relation to embedded support. Within departments some staff have had more to do with the introduction of skills into degree programmes and are aware of discrepancies between generic learning content and disciplinary requirements:

It is an area we have had quite a lot of discussion about recently because we are revising it. We have come to several conclusions. One is that there are a number of areas where generic support is extremely useful. When supplied by the library for example, in terms of IT, which we couldn't do as well ourselves so we want the students to take advantage of that. On the other hand we want some more subjective material because the generic material we are supplying even across the humanities is a) not exciting to students, b) not engaging them, c) not helping students. Either they think they know it already, which might be the case, or they are bored or can't see the point. We recognise that developing study skills materials is absolutely essential; it's got to be done in the modules but it has also got to be done separately (Humanities)

There is a clear conflict in the above account as to where 'generic' ends and 'embedded' begins. There is an over-riding association, given earlier practices and priorities, of study skills with generic provision but it is clear this is not satisfactory any longer in this teacher's view. The following teacher identifies clear problems specifically with student writing where he feels extra-curricular support is needed:

Sometimes we supervise dissertations in areas we don't know very well. I don't think a lot of our students know where to put a paragraph. They don't understand what constitutes a paragraph. They are not well prepared enough before they come here. I think the solution has to be bolt-on generic skills input (Social Sciences)

Later in the interview, however, the same teacher alluded to other complexities which go beyond the association of study skills as remediation for students with 'technical' difficulties:

We have many joint degrees with other departments. The system of writing or their structure [in the other disciplines] is not the same as ours. Is there any real synergy between the two? Do Film Studies or History do a 'skills for sociologists' module? I don't know. We want to cut the extraneous stuff and make the module as embedded as possible but there is a problem with joints and the assumptions you can make (Social Sciences)

The teacher at this stage moved away from a simple deficit conception and identified the underlying problems students face at the epistemological level and the complications that arise in course switching (Lea and Street, 1997, 1998). There is a note of exasperation that the 'system' stands in the way of the sorts of change teachers want to make. A colleague in the same department emphasised this concern:

The pick and mix of the module system doesn't help. This can be confusing – for example referencing: what is the accepted code of practice? Many who attend tutorials are looking for feedback on structure. They ask 'tutor, can you look at this and see if it is written properly'

In the above excerpt there is a clear indication of the pervasive confusion students experience around their writing across courses and the extent to which promulgated criteria obfuscate rather than clarify for both students and teachers. Students are preoccupied with the form of their writing and need consistent reassurance from their



tutors. Teachers respond in different ways. Some are aware of the pressures but assumptions are resilient as the following excerpt indicates:

Contact time is very much reduced. Students who want support have to seek the supporter rather than the other way round. There are major problems with some students in just understanding what we mean by adult education (Nursing)

This teacher's use of 'adult education' indicates that he regards it as an indivisible notion. His understanding is fashioned by the ideology and discourse of learning support at the institutional level, the practices that he is obliged to follow and the pressures he clearly experiences in catering directly for students' support needs. In the following excerpt a teacher is overtly sceptical about aspects of the system:

Blackboard is not support. Research into the effectiveness of study support hasn't been done. Stuffing so much contact time onto ICT doesn't really work... Key skills came in ten years ago. We pay lip service to it. There is a generic support module with things like 'self analysis'. This is bulls\*\*t. The attitude is 'let's tick some boxes to show this has been done'. But when you actually speak to students they will tell you that it hasn't [been done] (Business School)

The School of Health, Communication and Education is the largest in the university. The generic support module that is available to students – PICS – has been described in chapter four. Generic support is extensive, particularly in the first year of study. Student nurses, both degree and diploma, have guidance facilitators who work with them as a group and individually throughout the first year. Nevertheless, the same overt scepticism noted in the last excerpt is evident in what this teacher had to say:

We don't think Blackboard is really effective but it suits senior management. With our distance and part-time students we rely a lot on e-mail contact. In addition to formal study skills support and tutorial there is also a system of support through peer groups – the back exchange, where previous students give general and support to those currently studying...When students seem to have persistent problems with writing we use the study skills service. We expect them to put things right. But they are not always good at that. They have failed to pick up on dyslexia is some of our students. Even A-level entrants have this problem. I've had students who can't write using paragraphs. These are some of the difficulties we need them [study skills] to sort out. I think that

difficulties like this are extensions of what they are allowed to get away with in schools (Nursing)

A perception is evident in the above that persistent difficulties with writing are rooted in the poor literacy training students bring with them to the academy and that these 'problems' are external in origin and can be 'put right' by support specialists. This allows the teacher to dismiss concerns students may have at a deeper level of epistemology and knowing what to do as deficits that can be addressed by non-embedded support. Students' academic literacy needs appear obscured and submerged by the inclusion of other forms of 'support' which are detached from the curriculum and mainstream teaching and which prioritise other aspects of students' learning. The teacher is clearly sceptical about the efficacy of non-embedded support and concerned that problems are not 'picked up on' so requiring academic staff to take responsibility at a later stage. It seems unsurprising, therefore, that students in certain curricula areas are getting mixed messages from their tutors about where and to what extent they can and should seek help. An interviewee from the Business School explains his perception of the situation:

*What about study guides and handbooks?*

We don't have a particularly coherent or uniform policy on that one. There are generic support modules but we also rely on student services. Individual tutors will respond individually. Common [to all modules] material is separated off. There are course specific handbooks but they are focused on the programme structure. They don't say anything about what I would call 'the learning process'. They are mainly information and there are some examples of assignments that have got good marks. The main thrust is talking about learning objectives. Handbooks have been produced but, to my knowledge, none address how to write in the discipline

Information in abundance is available to the student but it is 'separated off' from mainstream teaching. The 'learning process' is neglected. Attempts to support students with their writing are token: models of 'good' writing that students are expected to assimilate separately from any explicit instruction. The purpose of this material seems to be to ensure that students are given all the information they are deemed, at the institutional and departmental levels, to need and there the responsibility ends. Students are expected to cope.

## **5.0 Resources and demands: how teachers perceive the issues and are adapting**

The final question in the interview schedule with academic staff asked respondents to consider openly what form they think learning and study support should take in general and with particular reference to student writing. Teachers were better at identifying the problems rather than solutions. A recurrent concern in the teacher data was the perennial issue of resources:

Resources –time and money – are added burdens on an already over-stretched system. We would be much happier if these issue about study skills and the ways in which students write were taken care of by others (Humanities)

There are issues of cost and fairness with extra provision for students. More contact is not really feasible because of workloads and time constraints. Student numbers have risen three-fold in the last few years. There is also an issue with top-slicing. Departments feel that they are already paying for a study support service. We need better provision but it needs to be built into the costs (Business School)

Both excerpts reveal the pressures and conflicts staff experience. The first respondent conflates study skills and the ‘ways in which students write’ as non-curriculum issues. The second respondent indicates how this kind of thinking is reinforced by institutional practices requiring departments to pay for ‘services’. Resources are seen as in short supply. In the following excerpt there is an indication that this leads to a sense of frustration about implementing effective support and identifying particular needs:

We don’t address the student experience when writing and we don’t explicitly recognise different types of student in the provision. Individual module tutors don’t have time with the pressure of work and class sizes. It is more difficult to spot if students are having difficulties until it is too late. We need to identify more clearly the issues students face when they embark on the programmes (Business School)

In areas where there are high student in-takes, greater levels of student diversity and large class sizes programme leaders feel they have few options but to recognise differences and improvise as a lecturer in the Business School explains:

We should recognise there are different groups [of students] coming in and then deal with it. We could lay on special classes for these students. But like most universities we are tight on resources. Another solution is to aim lower with the weaker students. Consider a dissertation. If you have a unified approach we assume that all students are capable of getting, say, 50%. But another point of view is that with weaker students they will often do badly because they are doing something really beyond them. We should be pragmatic and match our expectations to the level of the student. We should aim at getting them a pass providing it is at an acceptable level and according to the right criteria. We can focus on the better students but be sure the weaker ones get a minimum pass.

This encapsulates a real dilemma: how to preserve standards and get students through. The teacher's suggestion is well intended, almost altruistic but at the same time questionable. It is based on the notion of 'good' and 'weak' students; those who can benefit and those who are 'doing something beyond them'. The compromise emanates from thinking about student learning as implicit induction. Some students will penetrate the mysteries of the discipline, what the teacher implicitly wants and how to write accordingly; others – the 'weak' ones - have to be catered for differently once it is apparent they have not attained the 'level'. The same respondent later added:

All colleagues will get students initially to work at the top-level. If it becomes apparent that the teacher and the student have parted company intellectually then we focus on the basics. Many colleagues just lose interest in students who aren't up to the level. The programme leader is left to pick up the pieces

The particular tensions this individual experiences in his capacity as a programme leader and his frustration and lack of control are evident. His views and the solution he offers here are a personal response. The resources issue emerged in the data almost across the board and impinges on what teachers feel they are capable of doing:

Most of higher education is going the way of getting students through degrees with fewer resources. One to one tutorials are the best way to support student writers. To develop their writing in the department it has to come from the department. But workloads and lack of resources constrain being able to do things the way you want to do them (Applied Sciences)

Increasingly teachers are left with little option but to rely on institution-wide and department specific generic and extra-curricular support; but there is little conviction in the minds of many:

There is a lot of support for students but attendance rates are very low. Quantity doesn't mean quality. Support needs to be integrated with mainstream instruction. (Psychology)

## **6.0 What are students' views and what do they want?**

The final question student respondents were asked is what they would like to see – or see more of - in terms of support and provision for writing and learning. In spite of the ostensive abundance of generic support there are students who still feel at a loss, as this first year, social sciences, joint degree student explains:

I want there to be more help with assignments and specifically what is needed: what the question asks for... There isn't enough help in how to structure essays and what kind of academic language we should use. There should be more 'how to' support even at the level of the sentence.

He has had to go looking for this support and appears to experience confusion and frustration in the process. The same concerns are implicit in the comments of the following traditional students:

There has to be more one-to-one tuition for students. I know this is costly but I can't see a better way for some students. There needs to be an awareness of different approaches and styles of writing (third year; single honours, Applied Sciences)

A lot of the literature is quite patronising. They have to find a medium between study skills and this kind of thing. I think they should provide us with something more explicit on what they expect from our writing (second-year, joint degree, Humanities)

Both respondents indicate a clear awareness that support is required for students in general and that there should be greater explicitness. Neither student is satisfied with nor endorses a non-embedded study skills approach. The following data are from a focus group session with two traditional students speculating (because they have never needed to go) on the value of going to the study skills centre for help with academic writing and what more could be done to help student writers:

S) The centre is very non-specific. They can't be too specific, can they? I tend to think they can only tell you generally how to write academically – how to lay out paragraphs and structure a piece of work. But they can't tell you how to write a sociology essay as opposed to a history essay for example. It is important to get the information from the people who set the essays about the approach to take. The study skills people can only advise you generally. I think mature students [non-traditional students generally?] rely heavily on lecturers and talking in tutorials.

A) It is very much a one-way process. Only at the end of the lecture is there scope for questions. But people don't feel comfortable asking questions in a lecture. There is only so much you can learn from a lecture or piece of paper with things written down but in a seminar there is scope to ask questions and for discussion

S) The lecturers should tell you what they want with regards to specific questions so students can feel more confident. Lecturers have to give a lot of lectures; that is really what they do. They assume students will be able to write or get the hang of it. If we can't, well, there is the study skills centre...

The limitations of taking your sociology or history essay to the study skills specialist seems obvious to these students: it is not an effective option when implicit induction fails the student. Lecturers are basing expectations on assumptions which they need to reassess. Students need time and space to obtain the support they seek. The real solution is embedded support and what lecturers are prepared to do. An international student and direct entrant to her degree programme made the following comment:

I just go there [study skills centre] to get access to the internet. It is useful for the listening skill but it is not very useful for the writing skill (Sociology)

In practice-based disciplines such as Nursing with degree structures designed around placement and practice and where writing requirements vary in form and purpose the opinions of students have a consistent tenor:

I think they should spend more time helping us with assignment writing. They should point out links and go into more detail about academic writing. They should spend more time and give us lectures and tutorials on what to do and how to break down questions. They tell us we have to use an 'academic style', well what is that? We've been wondering what exactly it means (second year nursing degree, mature-age)

Furthermore, they want it in the curriculum:

There should be more support in the first year especially for mature students because some of us have been out of education for years and years. This is a point of view shared by many students. I'm a mother and a provider. I have to balance my time. Having to find out the hard way is less of an option (first-year nursing diploma, mature-age)

## **7.0 Summary and outline of the salient findings from the data analysed in this chapter**

The evidence indicates that teachers are constrained to use generic study guides, handouts and the customary and obligatory paraphernalia of study given to students in particular in the first year. Beyond that students receive or can access, individual module guides and descriptors which are given over to content and take the form, by and large, of a diet of course aims, module synopses/overviews, assessment details, teaching strategies and learning outcomes in accordance with a university template on practice. No guidance is given concerning writing in the discipline in general and what may be required at the departmental/divisional level in these sources. Programme leaders and module tutors feel restricted in the extent they can not only include, but also talk about writing pedagogy and embedded academic literacy support in the curriculum.

Teachers are given to thinking about the first year of study as a period of preparation for the remainder of degree study. Once that period is completed (and implicit induction achieved) then there is no need to support students with their academic writing: the 'responsibility' shifts to the student. A conception of student writing as an autonomous skill is in turn reified by its treatment as a separate and transferable skill in institutional discourse, documentation and in the configuration of 'service' provision. Lecturers fail to see or choose to ignore, a connection between 'poor' student writing and implicit induction as a model of learning, or that there is a role within the discipline for student writing pedagogy. .

A clear finding is that there is wide-spread ambivalence among teaching staff and in some cases outright scepticism towards current practices; institutional agendas over-ride departmental preferences and initiatives. Resources are mentioned as an

issue, especially staff shortages set against rising numbers of students. What is also implied in the data is that this state of affairs plays on other issues lecturers may have and compounds a sense of reluctance to enter into discussion and voice concerns. For example lecturers they are openly sceptical about the e-learning platform but they have to work with this technology draining time and effort many would, by their accounts, prefer to dedicate to developing embedded support. In fact the very premise on which a lot of generic material is based is perceived as false and teachers want to take back control. The problem is also contextual: too many hybrid degrees and complications around the sorts of assumptions teachers can make. Generic skills support becomes a default option and restricts lecturers as agents of change.

A linked finding is that particular texts such as guides and descriptors do not necessarily reflect the beliefs and preferences of tutors. Teachers may show their opposition by circumventing these requirements. Confronted with the obligation to include so much 'jargon' in his official guide and descriptor documents a lecturer abdicated the responsibility to address his concerns about student writing in these sources. Instead he adopts a social practices approach and routinely provides his students with handouts and information during lectures on writing requirements and expectations for his own taught modules; his sincere concern to help student-writers forces him to act independently of the 'system'. In the guide he produces is a gesture to his concerns: Orwell's work on style and usage. When a teacher states that 'teaching reading and writing is not what we do' it is possible to detect how the discourse and practices around 'skills' and 'support' lead to muddled thinking. His implicit concern is that study skills continue to address 'basic literacy' deficits, rather than it becomes the responsibility of academic staff. An implicit induction mind-set, a sense of language as largely a transparent medium and the discourse and practices of skills appear to militate against him being able to conceive of a synergy. He is however, conflicted when he states 'learning support should be done by lecturers'.

The student data reveal that the purpose behind guide/guideline texts appears unclear and undifferentiated to students and reinforces a perception that the function of the documentation is primarily to remind students about rules and formal requirements. A linked finding is that the language of official documentation means little to students. They are unsure what references to levels of study mean and find it difficult to decipher the language of assessment criteria and learning outcomes independently. They cannot get help with these basic questions from their tutors and



turn, of their own volition, to study skills specialists for support. A cycle of dependency evolves in which the non-expert is required to be a surrogate ('in reality the situation seems to be a teacher-student one'). Students are referred to guides or Blackboard where they encounter a welter of assessment criteria and top-down language which mystifies them. These sources are revised periodically but it is up to the student to keep pace. Students whose 'learning style' does not predispose them to implicit induction generally or having to read paper-based and electronic sources are likely to become marginalised or disengage. Even traditional students who participated in this research could see the limitations of the system: a lot of the literature is quite patronising in content and tone. Student writers are most concerned with 'how' they should write: the implicit meanings of essay questions and what lecturers really want. What they are expected to do is hit the ground running, meet assessment deadlines early in their courses and manage the academic and practical components of their course from the outset. The academic support they get is often decontextualised study skills: induction lectures often organised through non-embedded support services rather than tutorials and guidance, support documents which emphasise institutional priorities in terms of assessment criteria, learning outcomes, module aims, stipulations around referencing and the consequences of plagiarism.

The accounts given by teachers' in this research reflect an attitude of expediency and accommodation. The pressures associated with limited resources, time and workloads emerged continually in the interviews, as well as issues and complications thrown up by modularity in degree programmes. The dilemma faced by the business lecturer in section 5.0 illustrates a real problem and one that has ramifications for the university and higher education policy on support. In effect the lecturer is advocating a form of segregation. The intention is altruistic: to get all students to pass (and, implicitly, to adjust the system to accommodate all students under widening access). On another level of thinking it is a highly questionable solution. It would introduce a form of streaming so that, in effect, students would get a different quality of education within the bounds of the same institution: stratification not just across HE sites but within institutions. If it were to be made a reality it would, arguably, contravene an ethical policy of fairness and equality for all which is the premise of the university's guidance and support policy and of higher education policy nationally. It calls into question the vaunted ideal of the student as

‘independent learner’ and the ideology underpinning that reasoning. As noted in chapter four, this terminology is ubiquitous in departmental and module support and guidance literature. The skills agenda conveniently complements this notion and justifies the institution’s investment in technological solutions to the challenges and demands of the current situation. It all seems so neat within a certain mind-set; but there are fundamental concerns. They are:

- how student learning is best facilitated, especially in meeting the challenges of increasing student diversity;
- the complex, specific and contextualised nature of learning, writing and academic literacy development in the discipline;
- contests over the best way to address student writing pedagogy and academic literacy support within the institution,
- the extent to which student writing – perennially at the heart of learning and assessment - can be reduced to discrete and decontextualised skills and competencies

The backcloth to this debate needs to be kept in mind – an education system that has grown in size and social diversity but without a corresponding increase in resources. Nevertheless, the solution seems to lie in the curriculum and a return to more discipline-specific and embedded practices.

# Chapter Eight

## Conclusion

### 1.0 Overview

At a conference this researcher attended in 2006<sup>1</sup>, Ron Barnett opened his plenary address with a simple statement:

Universities will study everything but themselves

Traditionally, research into the student experience has focused on how students adapt to the contexts of teaching and learning and the qualitative ways in which ‘learning’ can be enhanced. There is an emphasis on how students can be helped to adjust, become involved and develop as independent, critical and reflexive thinkers, for example; and how learning outcomes can be engendered. The traditional norms and values of higher education are tacitly endorsed rather than challenged. The values of the institution are givens; the attitudes and capabilities of students are problematised. The central importance of power relations and the situated and relational nature of learning and academic literacy development are often down played, occluded or ignored. A critical perspective germane to a focus on learning and academic literacy development as social practices and integral to an ‘academic literacies approach’ shifts the emphasis to the wider institutional context. The present research adopted a case study approach as a research strategy and described and critiqued the institutional context: its broader practices; its fundamental values and beliefs and how these are manifest in practices associated with student writing and assessment; in perceptions of, and beliefs about teaching, learning and student academic literacy; in the communicative practices and procedures between tutors, students and the institution, and; in attitudes and approaches to student ‘support’ within, and outside, the curriculum, all of which have enabled this researcher to look in more detail at the

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<sup>1</sup> iPED Conference, Coventry University 10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2006

processes, interactions and textual sources which, outside formal teaching, constitute the fabric of the teaching and learning interactions in a university.

The ethos of the university is encoded in the discourse used in its documentation for students and teachers. It is fashioned by, and, in turn, endorses, the institution-wide practices of (increasingly) modularised degree structures, bolt-on student support provision and a proliferation of textual sources. These features are mutually reinforcing but militate against more embedded practices. The situation is sustained by an implied deficit conception of students' literacy needs, a decontextualised approach to teaching what are represented as generic and transferable aspects of academic practice around student writing, and a transparency notion of language. There is wide variation in student writing and assessment requirements, which appear to be in exponential relation to the growth of interdisciplinary study, joint degree programmes and modularisation especially in applied and vocational areas. Yet the discourse of the institution predominantly expresses a decontextualised, generic skills conceptualisation of student writing. This reflects, at one level, dominant institutional goals, and, at another, an underlying theory of language as transparent and autonomous (Street, 1995; Fairclough, 1999). It determines how academic literacy and issues around student writing are framed conceptually and discursively.

The backcloth in the contemporary context has to be borne in mind: a higher education system that has massified in its size and its structures but with unequal levels of funding. In the current context the emphasis appears to be on unquestioningly and uncritically implementing policy, allocating and maximising the use of resources, add-ons and service provision, managerialism and overseeing short-term change. It is a *modus operandi* for academic management, but, from the perspective of this research, there are serious questions about the nature of the learning-teaching interface and the educational function in general. Based on the evidence presented in the foregoing chapters, the conclusion of this research is that student writing and academic literacy development need to be embedded in disciplinary teaching and play a role in continuing professional development in HEIs. The points that follow strengthen the case for this position and suggest how it might be achieved.

## **1.1 Extending and valuing pedagogic research**

HEIs are caught between conflicting demands. On the one hand, they are required to implement higher education policies and comply with agendas – ‘key skills’, ‘life-long learning’, ‘graduate employability’, and the like – and, on the other, they have to take responsibility for developing and enhancing their own teaching and learning contexts. The findings reported here suggest the tension is leading to incompatible consequences in teaching-learning. Innovation in assessment and writing practices appear to be based on improvisation and expediency as much as educational purpose; more a case of compliance than genuine change. On the other hand, the data demonstrate that teachers are adjusting their practices in direct interactions with students to meet the pressures but are often left to their own devices.

This study argues that further research is needed in order to inform debates about how to effectively manage learning and teaching and develop appropriate academic practice on the ground, support teachers as well as students, and promote higher education reforms to those ends. Seeing the ‘issues’ in higher education as revolving around the mass introduction of ‘non-traditional’ students, on one hand, and the management of resources, systems and personnel, on the other, seems an insufficient basis for both research and qualitative improvement in the sector. Yorke (2005: 49) emphasises the potential for research and scholarship in educational change which, he argues, is as valuable within universities as research into the practice of other professions and the subject matter of disciplinary areas. There is an important caveat: it is the commitment of individual teachers to their students that is critical to student success. Yorke’s words evoke Ashwin’s (2006) sentiments and optimism for the future. On the other hand, there are factors that impinge, detrimentally, on teachers’ sense of what they do:

Research into the effectiveness of study support hasn’t been done. Stuffing so much content onto ICT doesn’t really work... Some teachers don’t really know what they are doing. The politics of education interfere. (teacher data)

## **1.2 Problems around student writing and academic literacy need a higher profile**

A regular and consistent finding in this research is the lack of understanding around meanings, epistemologies, inter-subject practices around feedback and

marking and expectations that exist in the mass, modularised and disparate higher education system of today. Despite the institutional rhetoric of transferable skills and articulated learning outcomes the uncertainty teachers feel is palpable. The underlying difficulties students experience around their writing and learning with discourses, meanings and epistemologies are obscured. There are clear examples in the teacher data of the difficulties teaching staff encounter with communication and collaboration across disciplines and subject areas. Changing this state of affairs would influence attitudes and approaches to teaching not only individually, but, more importantly, collectively.

The research reveals discernable differences in how teachers view, subjectively, student writing in the development of students' 'undergraduateness' and the role it has in their futures. However, this seems to obscure and even over-ride the role of writing in the context of disciplinary learning. Teachers adjust and modify assessments in accordance with their own views. On the other hand, there is another imperative: getting students through. A culture of improvisation is discernable. Teachers justify their choices and actions with recourse to utilitarian convictions about what works, what they think is in the students' best interests, and their 'learning styles'. Less obvious, but nonetheless present in the findings, is that teachers are also operating in compliance with other agendas and within ideological constraints imposed on them. The teacher data indicate that there are issues on the ground that are not openly discussed among tutors and do not seem to be included in discussions and deliberations at departmental meetings. Students are 'not using tutorials like they use to'. Instead they are asking for clarification and explanation and requesting help 'around' their writing. Teachers are uncertain how to respond. They may assume students know what underlies expectations they struggle and are uncomfortable with adapting their pedagogical styles fashioned, as they are, by assumptions, underlying beliefs and pervasive and constraining institutional practices.

The student data reflect widespread uncertainty about epistemology and authority in the context of disciplinary writing. Students experience difficulties with assignment titles and briefs at the epistemic and semantic levels. Institutional practices such as the promulgation of assessment criteria and the specification of learning outcomes conflict with the situated practices and tacit expectations of teachers. Ground rules are underspecified. Students on interdisciplinary courses in applied areas and those following joint degree courses are caught in a double bind.

The data show that students adopt practical strategies to circumvent their uncertainty. They fall back on their own devices and resort to ‘playing the academic game’. This is questionable because it constrains real and meaningful choice and suggests that the ethos and reality of participation are limited in inadvertent and subtle ways. Students are unable to challenge or change the power relationship between themselves, the institution and its practices. It also suggests a need to articulate the nature, epistemology, communicative practices, genres, and student academic literacy expectations within disciplines to make explicit and share competing, or conflicting, understandings and expectations. This should reflect in practices around descriptors, guides, feedback forms and assessment criteria and open up discussion and contestation between teachers, and teachers and students providing all parties with tangible terms of reference around which real dialogue can develop (cf. Lea, 2004).

The possible benefits of such an approach would be to make teaching more interesting to subject specialists and more engaging for students with positive effects on teaching and learning and student engagement more generally. There are hints in the data of the association of this thinking with ‘dumbing down’ and ‘spoon-feeding’ and the threat posed to the traditional values of higher education (Haggis, 2006). Changing attitudes is, therefore, an important hurdle but there is abundant evidence in this research that teaching staff are aware of the issues and open to change. However, it is important to raise awareness about student writing without segregating it from the curriculum. This study suggests an approach is needed which challenges both the traditional role and parameters of disciplinary teaching and the established mind-set associated with student support and study skills, manifest in institutional discourse.

We need to identify best practice and include it in our courses and teaching and get education back on the agenda... We have to stop reinventing the wheel [referring to bolt-on support] (teacher data)

### **1.3 Changing the discourse of learning and study ‘support’**

The discourse of learning and study support is based on an implied deficit view of student needs in higher education and around their writing and academic literacy needs in particular. This is reinforced by the ‘falling standards’ view in the public domain (refer to chapter two). It is tacitly endorsed by institutional practices around bolt-on provision in the form of study skills modules, student services support,

generic study guidelines, the e-portal, writing centres and other variations of non-embedded support. For many academic staff this frames not only how the issues are conceptualised but the way they talk about them, as is evident in this research. An important consideration is the message teachers transmit to students about extra-curricular support. Orr and Blythman (2003) suggest constructing a discourse through 'partnerships' of academic teaching staff and 'support' specialists to help change perceptions and raise awareness. There needs to be both the willingness and opportunities for dialogue to this effect. Research is important if this is to be realised. Simply imploring the institution to reconsider the importance it accords to, and the labels it uses to describe, support is unlikely to change the status or perception of learning and study support and the role of non-disciplinary support specialists as more than auxiliary to the disciplines and to teaching generally (cf. Turner, 1999).

A second, more immediate and, arguably, more important area for attention are the texts around generic advice, assessment, course-work module guides and descriptors students receive. Such texts serve to position students as voiceless, anonymous and powerless when they work 'exclusively' (Lea and Street, 1999). Texts are 'inclusive' when they engage students more empathetically and become integral to teaching-learning interactions. The data indicate that the terminology that has become the active vocabulary of teachers in feedback interactions is not shared and understood by students ('what is level 5?'). In such cases, as the student data in chapters four and seven indicate, students are given to simply disregard texts. Indifference on the part of both teachers and students is compounded by institutional priorities which see such texts as extraneous to formal teaching.

Chapter seven revealed that learning and study support services are configured to adapt to the infrastructure of the university. Services are more confederated than integrated. Generic support is reactive rather than proactive. This is a constraint on innovation and curriculum change. Teachers tend to support separating provision around student writing and the more generic conventions associated with academic literacy development from the teaching of disciplinary content on practical grounds: there is no space on the curriculum for more integrated provision. There is awareness among teaching staff that top-down 'systems' approaches are not satisfactory and responsibility should transfer back to them but they are preoccupied at the operational level and unable to influence higher level decision making (Trowler, 2002). The evidence indicates that students receive a plethora of documentation containing mixed



messages about expectations at different levels – institutional, departmental and individual tutor. They find textual sources unclear and undifferentiated. They find it hard to read off from these sources about how to write in particular ways that reflect disciplinary expectations and the specific requirements of individual tutors across the diverse and modularised degree programmes they follow. They realise that teachers are ambivalent: guides are rarely part of the teaching/learning interface. Dialogical interventions are few; textual sources and ‘services’ abound. A cycle of dependency develops: students want to know ‘how’ but only get informed about ‘what’. Aspects of the system seem to militate against genuine and meaningful participation for many students and may stand in the way of their success in higher education.

Study skills is patronising to students. It abstracts out an organic process and disconnects it from the real context. I would dump it in the bin. Learning and study support should be embedded (teacher data)

#### **1.4 Embedding academy literacy in the curriculum**

The evidence of this research indicates that modularisation creates fragmentation in the teaching process. Teachers are unable to take an overview of the curriculum or the effectiveness of their own practices over the longer term and they feel restricted, and even inhibited, in what they feel they can do, and achieve, with students. Constraints are imposed by stipulations regarding the content of module descriptors and practices around assessment and marking. Nevertheless, practices vary both across and within departments. This is accentuated where programmes are inter-disciplinary and modularised and joint degree structures operate. The picture that emerges from this research is one of top-down rigidity and control but flexibility at the departmental and divisional level where heterogeneity in practices is permitted and improvisation is encouraged (e.g. ‘rewarding teaching’ schemes). This situation appears to be compatible with the ‘staircase’ metaphor employed by Trowler (2002). Practices on the ground are implemented in different ways according to the contextual factors and particular interpretations by staff at the departmental level. On the other hand, the reciprocal or bottom-up element implicit in the metaphor is limited by the weight of procedures associated with learning and teaching interactions. Other agendas, such as accountability, transparency and compliance with top-down agendas are prioritised (Trowler, et al, 2005; Orr, 2005; Morley, 2003).

Students have perennial concerns around plagiarism, marking and assessment procedures but cannot get the level of support from tutors they want. Instead they are often directed to textual sources and support services. Furthermore, they are frequently unable to make sense of the materials designed to support their learning and academic literacy because those materials do not resonate with the situated and contextualised practices they experience.

In theory an embedded approach could be liberating for disciplinary specialists and an explicit approach to student writing pedagogy can facilitate inter as well as cross-disciplinary understanding and discussion by bringing differences to the fore and mitigate some of the problems identified in this research. If students can enter a degree in Sociology and Film Studies, for example, then the curriculum needs, as a teacher respondent in chapter seven mentions, to recognise the challenges this presents. Disciplinary specialists need to think outside the confines of their own disciplinary and specialist teaching areas and understand and engage with the concerns of students, rather than leaving them to ‘find out’. The evidence indicates that teachers think ‘study skills’ should be done ‘in the disciplines’ but are confused about what this means and what ‘academic literacy support’ entails. They lack the confidence, but not the willingness, to cope with student learning and literacy demands outside subject knowledge teaching. It is an institutional responsibility to facilitate this level of change.

Students are making sense of their learning within their own contexts. This is good but they need to be able to demonstrate that learning within the subject discipline. Support needs to be integrated with main-stream instruction. They [students] need appropriate guidance. Generic study skills stuff is absolutely meaningless for students (teacher data)

### **1.5 Reassessing approaches to teaching**

The importance of teaching and the attitudes, values and practices of those who teach, are crucial to debates around teaching/learning in the current environment. Pollard (2003: 179) asks the question: “how supportive is the learning context?” and underlines the importance of the interpersonal climate within any learning setting to learning taking place. Teachers need knowledge of both the subject and the learners

and to have some empathetic knowledge of their frames of reference (cf. Haggis, 2006; Yorke, 2005; Northedge, 2003a and b; Lillis, 2001; Lea and Street, 1999; Hounsell, 1987). If student writing and learning is situated, specific and contextualised then learning and literacy development has to be embedded in disciplinary teaching and curricula. Current practices and policy initiatives, on the other hand, seem to be taking us in another direction.

The adoption of instruments such as proformas as a basis for teaching interactions is driven by top-down quality assurance requirements but appears to be more a case of, as Yorke (2005) sardonically puts it, quality 'assurance' rather than 'ensurance'. Structured feedback instruments appear to impose standardisation and restrict what teachers are able to communicate. They are based upon a view that language is transparent (although meanings are intended as surmised from the nature of the learning task and related to promulgated 'intended/desired/required', etc 'outcomes'). A tendency towards routinisation and disengagement is the consequence for both teachers and students. There are also indications in the data that forms are not understood by staff (in particular in applied/vocational areas where staff need most support). The situation is compounded by quality assurance requirements, such as second marking and moderation processes and external monitoring and intervention. Teachers are made responsible for, but detached from, what they do in the feedback process (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Modularisation, levels of assessment and the increasing fragmentation of degree study compound these effects. Teachers have little control over the situation and there is sometimes a tendency to adopt a within-the-student explanation for misunderstandings in communication or inefficacies in procedures (cf. Crook, et al, 2006; Biggs, 2003).

Students are exasperated by the vagueness of forms and the lack of opportunity to engage in dialogue with their teachers. Uncertainty over the meanings of feedback comments and the language of assessment criteria is wide-spread in the student data but most prevalent among non-traditional students in applied and emergent areas. The data reveal that all students are negatively affected in qualitatively different ways: caught in a cycle of deprivation (Hounsell, 1987). In the worst cases it becomes a question of attaining marks and knowing what to do for subsequent assessments, in other words, getting through. Neither feedback nor feed-forward (Sadler, 1989) practices satisfactorily fulfil an educational role.

Haggis (2006: 521) advocates bringing to light the “more subtle aspects of higher education pedagogical cultures” which, consistent with the academic literacies approach, revolve around discourse and power in the teaching-learning interface. Haggis calls for more attention to process; explaining to students not ‘what’ (i.e. content information) but ‘how’ and bringing to the fore the complex, subtle and largely invisible aspects of process through which disciplinary aims are realised. These are the questions that students are left to sort out themselves within a model of learning as implicit induction. The situated and contextualised nature of learning is more important than generic skills and notions of ‘learning to learn’ intrinsic to study skills and non-embedded support. What matters are “the embedded, processual complexities of thinking, understanding, and acting in specific disciplinary contexts...” and how these can be “...explored as an integral part of academic content teaching within the disciplines themselves” (p. 530). Such an approach emphasises ‘educational’ rather than ‘learning’ processes *per se*. However, as Haggis (p. 533) notes:

As with other attempts to understand culture, it is most difficult for those whose practices and attitudes themselves make up the culture to see how that culture is operating

Any challenge or call to reassess pedagogical styles is likely to meet with opposition on the basis of higher education lowering standards. It conflicts with the higher education’s elitist instincts and there maybe endemic grass roots reluctance centred on teacher self-perception, expectations and assumptions about students and educational standards, and, at a deeper level the goals of, and values associated with, a university education. On the evidence of this study, this researcher has a more optimistic view of teachers’ willingness to countenance change and their awareness of education in supporting learning for an increasingly diverse student body

We are telling them *what they are not doing* well and what they *should be doing* but we are not really telling them *how to do it* (teacher data. Italics for emphasis)

## **1.6 Student academic literacy and continuing professional development**

Difficulties with expectations, understandings, communicative practices, higher education protocols and procedures are not confined to students. The present research reveals that academic teaching staff have disparate understandings of academic practice and even the literacy norms of their disciplines and subject areas. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of explicitness about what those norms are, how to communicate them to students and by the inter- and multi-disciplinary nature of study in many departments with high levels of modularity in degree structures. The disparity is obscured by an overlay of uniformity around practices, ostensive 'transparency' around assessment criteria, specified (and often improvised) 'learning outcomes', the language of guides, descriptors and structured feedback forms and the rhetoric of 'transferable skills'. Teachers often disagree about the meanings of the terms they use as the data in this research project consistently reveal. What is required is a clearer foundation of understanding and reference around assumptions, expectations, academic practice within the teaching of the subject.

What continuing professional development (CPD) should be, how, why and what interests should be served is a complex and contested matter. Much in-service CPD is driven by quality assurance rather than asking teachers about their real concerns. It is too often associated with procedures, classroom skills and management, standards and evaluation, institutional audit and bureaucracy. However, the evidence of the present study suggests that there is a need to reconsider where the emphasis should be. In the contemporary context of higher education the position and experience of many teachers in areas of professional/practice-based education is not dissimilar to students they teach (cf. Baynham, 2000). This reinforces the importance of dialogue about student writing and academic literacy in teaching and learning more broadly. There are obvious potential benefits for new or novice teachers in higher education and those in the practice-based disciplines in particular.

We need to change attitudes. We work isolated from each other. At the macro level we need to recognise that there should be more understanding. It begs the question: does the university understand the problem and is it willing to do something about it? At the micro level individual staff needs to understand that maybe there is a role for them to do as educators. We need to question our understandings of ourselves and our practices (teacher data)

## **2.0 Limitations of the present research**

Lea and Street's (1997) original study in the mid 1990s was a large scale ESRC funded project. It used a qualitative ethnographic methodology which enabled the researchers to encapsulate a fuller, richer description of practices, texts and discourses associated with student writing support and pedagogy in two institutional settings. Although the work has been described as 'pioneering' and the findings as 'seminal' and there is a recognition among researchers in the field of student writing research that further studies of the same nature are needed (Lea, 2007), similar research has not ensued. Lea and Street's approach is difficult to emulate in an individual doctoral research project. The present study attempted an 'academic literacies approach' but in a modified form (refer to chapter three).

An academic literacies approach shifts the locus of research from the student to the institution and its practices and beliefs as manifest in its texts and discourses. The attitudes and approaches of academic teaching staff and textual materials produced at institutional and departmental levels supporting students with their writing and assessment are important sources of data. The present research therefore placed an emphasis on interviewing academic staff and that number grew in size and diversity in the course of the field work. The number of interviews obtained (48 staff and 35 students) exceeds that of the Lea and Street study (23 staff and 47 students). Lea and Street pointed out that the short length of their project "limited the full in-depth ethnographic approach which such research could warrant" (1997: 4) and described their work as an ethnographic type approach. The present study shares this limitation: it is not a comprehensive institutional case study. An ethnographic methodology was applied and although salient texts and practices which reflect how the relationship between writing and knowledge is understood in a particular institutional context were critically analysed, the research explored only a sample of attitudes on the ground. Certain prominent and diversified university departments are not represented in the data. The inclusion of those areas in the research may have yielded some additional insights into how practices and beliefs operate. The researcher was, initially, cautious to limit his investigation to discipline areas where access would be more straightforward. Interviewing staff in the School of Health posed no problem but direct access to students involved lengthy formalities. All said,

the sample of both staff and student interviewees is extensive for a study of this size and scope and representative of the university's provision: a traditional, an applied and an emergent, vocational/practice-based 'discipline' (refer to chapter three).

At the operational level there are perennial problems with large scale qualitative research. Such studies are limited in scale and scope and most are small scale (Lillis's (1997) study with a group of non-traditional students from ethnic backgrounds was a small-scale study but longitudinal) owing to issues and complications associated with the extent and the boundaries of research and negotiating access. Large scale research projects are more commonly quantitative with restricted qualitative studies as part of a mixed design. This is the case in 'approaches to learning' research which focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of students through the use of large scale questionnaires, attitude scales and 'inventories' but which are perceived to have numerous shortcomings (Trigwell and Richardson, 2002). It is, therefore, in the opinion of this researcher, important to interrogate current practices and institutional priorities as well as explore attitudes and beliefs on the ground through qualitative research designs as this continues to be an important gap in research overall.

An overarching problem with educational research is its marginal and adjunctive status in the academy (cf. Yorke, 2000, 2005, refer to section 2.2 in this chapter). Furthermore, a change in the climate and conditions in higher education have made studies along the same lines as Lea and Street's original investigation a more challenging proposition. Agendas associated with the wide scale policy changes since the end of the last decade have been reinforced by subsequent education policy statements (e.g. the 2003 Government White Paper and the 2006 Leitch Report) which have, arguably, created an inhospitable climate for critical research and debate. Higher education has become more homogenised and standardised with more emphasis on explicit top-down aspects of the system (cf. Trowler, 2002; Ashwin, 2006) as the present study has revealed.

There are problems at a more entrenched level. Denscombe (2003: 39) mentions a preconception that case study and qualitative ethnographic research produce 'soft-data' lacking the rigour associated with quantitative and statistical procedures and producing description rather than analysis and evaluation. Aspects of the present research could be complemented by quantitative work. Hartley and Chessworth (1999, 2000) advocated a mixed method approach to researching the

questions raised by academic literacies research. Textual sources could be analysed as corpora using technical tools to determine linguistic frequency and collocation, for example. However, this would yield only descriptive data removed from the type of investigation and analysis that was sought in the present study. Hammersley (1994) points out that in ethnographic research quantification and statistical analyses typically play a subordinate role to verbal descriptions and explanations. Robson (2002: 487) points out “the ethnographic approach is typically exploratory... well suited to unfamiliar, the new and the different” Given the level of change that has occurred in higher education in the last decade in terms of increasing student numbers, new priorities and agendas for the role of higher education, expanding provision, modernisation, diversification and innovation in curricula (refer to chapter one) a case must exist for more ethnographic studies (refer to the rationale underpinning the choice of a critical ethnographic approach in chapter three). It was the exploratory and revelatory nature of Lea and Street’s original work that led to a paradigmatic shift in thinking and reasoning about student writing in higher education and the importance of language and literacy in student learning.

Case study and qualitative ethnographic study approaches are open to criticism at two other levels. Firstly, the presence of a researcher influences the natural setting and so may compromise the authenticity of the data and the findings. Secondly, interpretation may be informed by the theoretical and ideological position of the researcher. The former is difficult to refute in any context of research. However, the choice of a case study approach was to enable this researcher, as far as possible, to study the phenomena in its natural settings and to understand how others perceive and understand the practices, processes and artefacts of a cultural context. The second point raises the question of how objective or scientific this approach can be. As Berg (2007) points out, all social science researchers make subjective decisions about how the research is designed and oriented and therefore “objectivity... lies someplace other than in the kinds of decisions made by researchers regarding various aspects of the research strategy” (p. 295). In qualitative case study and ethnographic approaches objectivity is closely linked to reproducibility and generalisability.

This suggests that more research along the same lines as the present study is required to judge the extent to which the findings are generalisable to other contexts. The findings of a case-study require subsequent research to corroborate them (i.e. multiple cases). The present study corroborates the findings of the Lea and Street



study and has added more by critically examining additional (in particular top-down) practices that have since become established features of the institutional landscape. Further research is always required because case studies provide a snapshot (Yin, 1994). There is no guarantee that findings will be the same at any two points, or between any two settings (Denscombe, 2003). Certain aspects of the institutional context of this doctoral research may be particular, such as the infrastructure of the university, the hierarchical elements in its organisational structure and the extent to which it embraces and has inaugurated into the fabric of teaching and learning current policy agendas (key skills in the curriculum, the use of ICT and the strategic way it follows and implements the recommendations of the QAA). Also distinctive is the predominantly applied nature of the majority of its provision and its profile as a 'new' university. Nevertheless, many of the structures which are examined in this research project such as modularisation, changing degree structures, and the reduction of face-to-face contact between tutors and students, the proliferation of documentation and the growth of non-embedded support are common features of HEIs. Of even more significance in academic literacy research are related practices that are also common across HEIs. These include: generic study guides, templates for module descriptors, the automation of teaching materials and texts for students, the use of pro-formas for feedback, and an emphasis on the role of centralised student services. As Ashwin (2006) points out this seems to be the future of higher education across institutions irrespective of social concerns such stratification and inequality. This is the fundamental validation of the research methods employed in this doctoral study. All in all, therefore, the present study is less about the functioning and peculiarities of a particular university and more of an investigation into the experiences, awareness and concerns of those involved in teaching and learning interactions in universities: the lived reality of being in higher education – as a student or a teacher - in the contemporary context.

In this respect the present research raises further questions. What does this study not tell us that we need to know? What is driving change beyond the institutional context? What other sorts of research would complement this work? The first and second questions are linked. Higher education is globalising as the on-going nature of the Bologna agreements testify and the movement towards a unified higher education area in Europe is inexorable. It is beyond the bounds of a case study research project to engage extensively with these questions; nevertheless, many issues

identified in this research to do with practices and processes affecting teaching and learning and the experience of participants are the basis of emerging concerns in research. With regard to the third question, the findings of this doctoral research project imply two things: firstly, pedagogical and higher education research needs to grow in status and recognition (as claimed in section 1.2 above); secondly that a reorientation is needed so that research perspectives begin to coalesce. This study has considered the literature on higher education research more broadly in order to link the concerns of the research with wider issues in the contemporary context (e.g. Becher and Trowler, 2001; Trowler (ed), 2002; Morley, 2003; Ashwin (ed), 2006). The present study espoused a contextual and macroscopic, institutional case study approach (Lea and Street, 1997, 1998; Lea and Stierer, 2000). Other studies into student learning and literacy have taken a different focus. Reid, Francis and Robson (2001, 2002, 2005), for example, emphasise in their research the unequal power relations between student and lecturer which, they claim limits genuine participation and achievement for certain groups. The researchers focus on the representation of the student voice in academic writing (cf. Lea, 1998; Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 1997; Womack, 1993; Bartholomae, 1985) emphasising in particular gender and personality in student academic performance and in the provision of assessment feedback (cf. Hounsell, 1997a, 1987). This resonates with Lillis's (1997, 2001) research with non-traditional students in which she advocates challenging the conventions of academic writing to facilitate the student voice, newer ways to mean and the opening up of disciplinary content to accommodate alternative ways of representing knowledge (also English's (1999) work with an international student writing in History and Ivanič's (1998) extensive work with mature women students). The research mentioned above indicate the extent to which student writing research is developing as a field and contributing to debate about higher education practices in the current context of widening access and lifelong learning. These approaches to researching academic literacy use qualitative interviewing techniques and, or, the analysis of student scripts as sources of data. In this respect research corresponds to a new strand in student writing research as social practice identified by Lillis, (2000, refer to section 2.2 in chapter two) – i.e. that students' texts are worthy of research and that those texts are as much about social relationships as propositional knowledge. While the data and discussions in chapters five and six in particular draw attention to these kinds of issues, the examination of student scripts has not been a feature of the present research.

A concern driving pedagogical research at the time of writing is the efficaciousness of HE assessment practices (e.g. Yorke, 2005; Mclellen, 2004; Knight, 2002) and the role of formative learning practices such as the provision of effective feedback in the current context (e.g. Crook, Gross and Dymott, 2006; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Hounsell, 2003, 2007). A social constructivist approach to learning is usually espoused in proposing solutions. This is embodied in the current notion of 'assessment *for* learning' (e.g. Biggs, 2003, Cowan, 2003; O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004; Rust, O'Donovan and Price, 2005; the ETL (Enhancing Teaching and Learning) Project currently active in several HEIs). It is enshrined in the documentation on assessment at the university where the present study took place (refer to 3.0 in chapter six). The present research did not set out to argue, nor does it conclude by claiming or taking the position, that social constructivist and 'aligned' approaches to learning and assessment militate against the teaching, learning or acquisition of academic literacy. Research which aims to advance pedagogical practice, facilitate learning and conceptual change in the practical domain and address issues associated with learning holistically and across curricula (cf. Meyer and Land, 2006) is important and should be promoted more vigorously (as has already been argued here) and more embeddedly (as is argued next). The present study has revealed that there are numerous factors which complicate that learning which need to be viewed and addressed through different perspectives and approaches in order to broaden understanding, stimulate debate about higher education practice and motivate further research. In this sense critical research is complementary, rather than simply oppositional to established approaches and current initiatives (cf. Ashwin, 2006).

What directions for research in the medium term are implied on the basis of the present research? The interviews with teachers suggest that further research in learning and teaching in the current context could focus on social positioning; attitudes related to teacher background (e.g. joining higher education from other areas of work); identit(ies) and self- and other perceptions; and how teaching career longevity affects attitudes and perceptions. These are factors relevant to assessing cultures of learning and teaching and they impinge on staff and staff, and staff and student interactions. How do teachers' experiences of support in this context influence their attitudes to, and understanding of, the challenges students face as writers and their academic literacy development? The ways in which texts for students are constructed, their discourse and the way they position students (and teaching staff)

can be the focus of more extensive analytical research. Developments in the analysis of corpora and academic genres in the field of applied linguistics can play a part. Chapter six focused on discursive practices around feedback between tutors and students. Feedback as a metaphor can be further deconstructed and replaced by alternative metaphors which might help to shape new conceptualisations of this pedagogical interaction. Lillis's notion of 'talkback' (2001; also Scott, 2000a) in order to talk students into essayist literacy and make language visible ('dialogues of participation'), is an example of this conceptual and discursal reframing. Other metaphors of learning and teaching and the how they are understood can be the basis of exploratory research (Haggis, 2004b). These notions could be piloted in pedagogical interactions more extensively to provide a more empirically based understanding of how they could be effectively implemented. It would involve altering the traditional discourse of higher education in substantial ways. In the opinion of this researcher further research along the above lines is important if attitudes and values are to be challenged, truly innovative methods and pedagogical approaches for student writing, learning and academic literacy development can take root, and terms like 'best practice' and 'excellence' in teaching can genuinely become matters of serious discussion and practical intent.

### **3.0 Contribution of this research**

The present study is a contribution to the growing and still developing field of research into student learning, writing and academic literacy development in higher education in the following ways:

- 1) Firstly, it is a rich source of data drawn from a series of interviews with staff and students and supplemented by a critical examination of documentary sources which embeds research into student learning and academic literacy in the practical domain. As such it emphasises the relevance and potential contribution of qualitative, case study and ethnographic approaches in researching practices and beliefs in higher education and to research in educational development in HE more broadly.
- 2) Secondly, it draws attention to the role and importance of language in teaching and learning research and pedagogical practice in HE.

- 3) Thirdly, it represents a versatile research strategy suited to the challenges and complexities of the current environment and a possible blueprint for future and on-going research of a similar nature in HE.

The present research builds on and adds renewed breadth to previous ethnographic research in providing a fine-grained, thick description (Geertz, 1973) of how, within one institution, academic literacy in general and student writing in particular are perceived, understood and practices enacted. The fine-grained nature of the description comes from the breadth and level of analysis covering a range of textual sources as well as details on individual tutors' practices gleaned from the interviews. The institution is the bounded social setting and the means through which thick description is obtained. By adopting a case study approach, which is eclectic in its methods and which studies phenomena in their natural settings, different facets of a culture can be examined and connections between them can be identified. In addition, the dual status of the researcher as an 'outsider' to the disciplinary contexts and many of the institutional practices studied enabled him to see what is 'familiar' to 'insiders' as, strange, incomplete and problematical on one hand while allowing him, as an insider, to be openly accepted by the members of that culture on the other. In this way it can be said that the present research adds a new dimension to research in academic literacies, writing as social practice and in teaching and learning more broadly. It adds to Street and Lea's original work in exploring anew the contribution of ethnographic based research to educational development in HE and significantly goes beyond earlier studies (such as those of Lea and Street (1998), Lillis (2001)) in both its focus and its breadth of inquiry. This dimension is important in the development and furtherance of research, both empirically and methodologically as will be outlined in more detail when considering the third contribution claimed in respect of this research. In addition, an ethnographic approach allows us to explore the lived realities of both an increasingly diverse student population and academic teaching staff across a wide and disparate range of teaching and learning contexts, facilitating an examination of relationships, experiences and understandings in the academy in a period of change and transition. Finally, this study also reveals the value of a case study approach to higher education research. Yin (1994: 40) mentioned that "the case study remains an unappreciated and underutilized research tool" in educational research which is often employed with "uneasiness and uncertainty". The

reasons for this have been alluded to in the previous section on the limitations of this study. However, this researcher would like to challenge this established perception and claim that it is precisely an institutional case study approach, as exemplified in this research, and conducted in multiple settings that is the key to embedding and democratising learning and teaching research in HEIs in the current and developing context of higher education.

Another contribution of the present doctoral research has been to highlight the importance of language in researching the experience of teaching and student learning and literacy development in higher education. Research and theorising in academic literacies and literacy as 'social practice' have highlighted the deficiencies in recent agendas and curriculum initiatives. Three particular findings of Lea and Street's (1997, 1998) original ethnographic research captured the imagination of this researcher and motivated the present study: students' problems with writing/learning in higher education are often at the level of epistemology rather than technical 'deficits'; academic staff often have difficulty explicating what makes a piece of writing good, bad or indifferent and what they mean by the familiar linguistic tools they use to mark and communicate their judgements to students on their work (and to each other); that the 'student experience' (and as this doctoral research has revealed, the teacher experience) is further complicated by 'course switching' requirements in an increasingly modularised (and commercialised) higher education environment. Other areas of higher education learning and teaching research are continuing to push the boundaries of understanding but the problem of language is mostly evaded. For example, Meyer and Land (2002, 2005, 2006) include language in their inventory of 'troublesome knowledge' which impacts on how well students are able to grasp critically important 'threshold concepts' central to understanding their subject and progressing through busy and disparate curricula. They ask, "How might we best assist our students to gain understanding of such concepts?" (2002: 417) but circumvent any real discussion of language which they regard as 'inherently problematic' compounding conceptual difficulty and 'obliging those who seek to teach or clarify concepts to deploy further terms, metaphors and concepts...' (2006: 14). They state:

...the choice of language used to introduce threshold concepts, and indeed used in the naming and explanation of the concepts themselves, can be troublesome and present epistemological obstacles (p. 28)

This reasoning represents an impoverished view of language in teaching and learning in general and appears to take no account of developments in discourse and genre research in academic settings (e.g. Bhatia 1993, 1999; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Swales 1990), or insights into language and education in the developing and diverse field of cognitive science. A growing area in the latter is cognitive linguistics in which figurative language is regarded as central to thought and understanding (Ortony, et al, 1993; Lakoff. 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Cognitive linguists in this tradition maintain that language and thought are indivisible and that thought is inherently figurative. Language reflects how we conceptualise phenomena. It is not chaotic but systematic and can be studied empirically. Theorists maintain that figurative language is a tool for metacognitive development (e.g. Sticht, 1993) in problem solving (e.g. Schön, 1993) and in engendering cognitive change (e.g. Petrie and Oshlag, 1993; Mayer, 1993) in learning and education. Metaphors and metonymies abound in the presentation, elucidation and transmission of discipline specific knowledge at all stages of instruction and educational attainment and progress.

Meyer and Land's point seems to be that many students may not fully grasp important concepts which are fundamental to understanding in other areas of the curriculum (the frequently used example is the metaphor of 'opportunity cost' in Economics) which, as a consequence, deleteriously affect the quality of learning, students' performance as well as their perseverance and completion. Meyer and Land's work makes a valuable contribution and there are implications for discipline-specific teaching and for reflective practice (Meyer and Land, 2005; Land, 2008). Research at present, however, is positioned on the periphery of academic disciplines with an emphasis on manipulating and enhancing 'environments'. Specific attention is given to areas such as feedback, assessment and curriculum design. It is important that this adjunctive status is transformed. Two points are drawn into focus: firstly, for pedagogical research to be effective it has to be embedded in disciplinary teaching and bottom-up: it has to be 'owned' by those who teach, organise curricula and who are directly responsible for engendering learning in students; it is they who are responsible for making the essential difference (Yorke, 2005, 2003). Secondly, pedagogical and student learning and literacy research needs to recognise the importance of language in education and begin to engage in empirical research into

effective teaching and learning from that perspective. Language is not simply 'troublesome': it is central to learning and understanding as well as effective communication.

The National Student Survey (instituted in 2005) places a clear emphasis on teaching and communication in developing and supporting student learning. The quality and efficacy of feedback has been a constant problem in consultations with the student body. Language and effective communication are central in recognising and understanding the learning and literacy needs of an increasingly diverse student body. International students experience a double-bind: they need to access difficult aspects of disciplinary knowledge, the discourse associated with its exposition as well as the informal register of the lecturer/lecture (and their native-speaker peers). It is applied and emergent discipline areas across HEIs which are currently attracting ever larger numbers of entrants from diverse linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds (Cortazzi and Jin, 2004). Biggs (2003) distinguishes between approaches to teaching international students as 'accommodating' and 'educating'. Attention to how language is used in teaching interactions (and not an overt emphasis on deficits in (international) students) and its role in learning and cognition resonates, in the opinion of this researcher, with the latter, rather than the former, notion (Bailey, 2008, 2006, 2003). It also resonates with the mission and aims set out in the Higher Education Academy Strategic Plan for 2008-2013 for the development of quality learning which are intended to be realised through evidence-informed approaches to enhance the student learning experience and raise the status of teaching in HE.

This researcher would like to claim something unique in the approach he has taken in this study, and the contribution it makes to the development of higher education research in the contemporary context. A retrospective on student learning and academic literacy research is useful at this point. Phenomenographic (as it became known) research developed to investigate student learning in British higher education at a time when democratisation and the admission of wider student numbers was in its infancy in the 1980s. It facilitated the growth of what has become more commonly referred to as 'the student experience' or 'experience of learning' research. At the time this was new terrain and orientation. Hounsell, for example, (1997b: 238), commented on the 'teacher-centredness' of research at that time and a perception of students as "shadowy and insubstantial figures". The success of phenomenographic/experience of learning research spread to other higher education



systems, for example Australia (Entwistle, et al, 1997), consolidating 'phenomenography' and the theoretical constructs associated with it as orthodoxy. The extent to which phenomenography is a 'method' is unclear (Marton and Booth, 1997). It is perhaps best defined as simply an empirical tool (Svensson, 1997) in which the 'dominating method for data collection' (Trigwell, 1998) is the individual, open and dialogical interview. Furthermore, phenomenography or what is sometimes referred to as 'phenomenographic like' research (Trigwell and Richardson, 2002) has accreted over time a wide spectrum of research methods and additional theorising. Nowadays the label 'approaches to' (Marton and Säljö, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) is more frequently used and connotes mainstream theory and practice. Greater emphasis has been placed on measuring and quantifying the 'student experience' reinforced by an overlay of *a priori* reasoning and conventional wisdom in the literature about 'what the student does' (e.g. Biggs, 1999), 'formative learning' and 'congruence' in assessment (e.g. Biggs, 2003; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006), self-assessment (e.g. Falchikov, 2001; Boud, 1995) and e-learning (e.g. Laurillard, 2002).

There are a few problems with this kind of educational research. One, it is rarely read and understood, first hand, by academic teaching staff who prefer to follow their own instincts and convictions about what is best practice (Yorke, 2005, 2003). Second, it is imbibed by centrally located educational specialists in HEIs who are not disciplinary specialists but whose role it is to disseminate notions of 'best practice' to others and foster collaboration and understanding. Thirdly, it often filters down to non-research active staff in expanding service and administrative areas of non-embedded learning and study support to inform practice and understanding in those areas. Furthermore, as Hounsell (1997b) points out, a diffuse overlay of thinking prevalent in the educational research literature compartmentalises how institutional practices are viewed and implemented in policy terms and so militates against holistic or joined up thinking, or which takes into account the particulars of local context in HEIs (cf. Trowler, et al, 2005; Trowler, 2002; Becher and Trowler, 2001). It is a fact of life in educational research and practice that conjecture, trial and experimentation precede the empirical work which is necessary to ascertain the effects of innovation and the requirement for further research (cf. Hounsell, 1998); hence, the practice of research can be contested.

There have been critiques of the abstract theorising and methodological processes of the 'experience of learning' research (e.g. Webb, 1998) and its hegemonic status (e.g. Haggis, 2003, see chapter one). A lack of focus on sociocultural practices and structural factors overall has weakened the authority (if not the pre-eminence) of mainstream theory. The changing context of higher education is raising new challenges which have been convincingly taken up by the academic literacies and writing as social practice researchers (e.g. Street, 1995; Jones, et al, 1999; Lea and Stierer, 2000; Lillis, 2001) offering new perspectives. As pedagogical/educational research gains in prominence and importance (less of a 'cloistered and unsung virtue' as Yorke (2000) described it), more researchers are beginning to question the discourses, taken-for-granted assumptions and values of higher education and mainstream theorising associated with experience of learning research. A more critical stance is evident and more willingness to focus on the relatively under-examined aspects of teaching and learning in HE such as power and engagement, in the contemporary context (e.g. Ashwin (ed), 2006; Ashwin and McLean, 2005; Yorke, 2005, 2003; Morley, 2003; Mann, 2001). It is an informative exercise to critically consider how two established paradigms for researching the higher education experience - phenomenography or 'approaches to' and 'academic literacies' or student writing as social practice research - compare and contrast on a number of counts. The table on the next pages attempts to do this in a measure of detail.

Table 4: Comparing and contrasting two established research paradigms

	Academic literacies and student writing as social practice research	Phenomenography or 'approaches to' research
<b>Theory and origins</b>	<p>Theory of student writing at university: identified three models for student writing, and underpinning theories of language that (implicitly) inform how texts are written for students. Draws attention to the more occluded difficulties students may have with writing, learning and assessment at the level of discourses, epistemologies and power. Writing/learning is emphasised as situated and contextualised social practice. Does not assume that students are acculturated unproblematically into the academic culture simply through engaging with the discourses, genres and practices of HE. Has established 'student writing' as a research field and broadened this to include students' written texts and the (social) relationships that exist around those texts as viable areas of research (Lillis, 2000, 2001; Reid, et al, 2001, 2005)</p> <p>Draws on literacy research with adults, critical social theory, critical linguistics and participatory/Freirian notions of education, emancipation and social justice.</p>	<p>Theory of student learning. A focus on the variation in experience and understanding is "the central tenet of phenomenography" (Trigwell, 1998). This becomes the unit of analysis and the main result of a study. Based on a non-dualist, second order/from the inside view which seeks to describe the world as the learner/subject experiences it (Marton, 1981). Largely underpinned by notions of 'deep', 'surface' (Marton and Säljö, 1976) and 'strategic' (Entwistle, 1987) approaches to learning/in learners. The above hypothetical concepts are used to reflect students' different conceptions of learning, different conceptions of the object of learning and different conceptions of themselves as learners. Each one can be qualitatively changed/ reengineered or simply monitored for change over time</p> <p>Is rooted in (educational) psychology: experimentation and objectivity in research and constructivism in learning (moulding learners and teaching environments to desired outcomes) - a strong residue of behaviouralism implicit</p>
<b>Method, approach or what?</b>	<p>Academic literacies is defined as an 'approach' rather than a method (Lea and Street, 1998) An ethnographic approach to research derives from Anthropology. Strong on theory drawing on new perspectives on literacy. An emphasis on analysing textual practices in higher education (Lea and Street, 1999; Lea, 1998). Research has taken a social practice perspective and usefully focused on opening up literacy practices in the academy, e.g. researching meaning-making in students' written texts and exploring the social and cultural experiences that certain non-traditional students bring with them to higher education which may restrict or inhibit their participation (Lillis, 2001).</p> <p>Qualitative rather than quantitative: analytical rather than enumerative</p> <p>Open and eclectic methodologically e.g. Lea and Street's ethnographic style or case-studies (Lea and Street, 1999; Lillis, 2001) Hard to emulate and replicate on a large scale. For this reason much subsequent research has taken the form of small scale research. There are some quantitative elements in related research approaches; e.g.</p>	<p>Marton and Booth (1997: 111) state: "Phenomenography is not a method in itself, although there are methodological elements associated with it, nor is it a theory of experience, although there are theoretical elements to be derived from it... Phenomenography is rather a way of – an approach to – identifying, formulating and tackling certain sorts of research question, a specialization that is particularly aimed at questions of learning and understanding in an educational setting". Others refer to the 'principles and practice of phenomenography' (Prosser, 1993) and to its 'philosophical and theoretical foundations' (e.g. Richardson, 1999; Svensson, 1997).</p> <p>Qualitative: rigorous qualitative analysis is a hallmark (Entwistle, 1997) However, a lot of research under the aegis of 'approaches to learning' uses techniques such as inventories and questionnaires. Assumption that qualitative research provides a limited evidence base. On the other hand, persistent and growing scepticism about the adequacy and value of quantitative methods (e.g. Trigwell and Richardson, 2002).</p> <p>An 'empirical tool' with established procedures. Can be conducted with small research samples: individuals and/or small groups. Versatile. Easy to do. In large-scale projects a reliance on one-size-fits-all instruments to measure and quantify students' approaches, intentions, understandings, etc. Lack of conviction about</p>

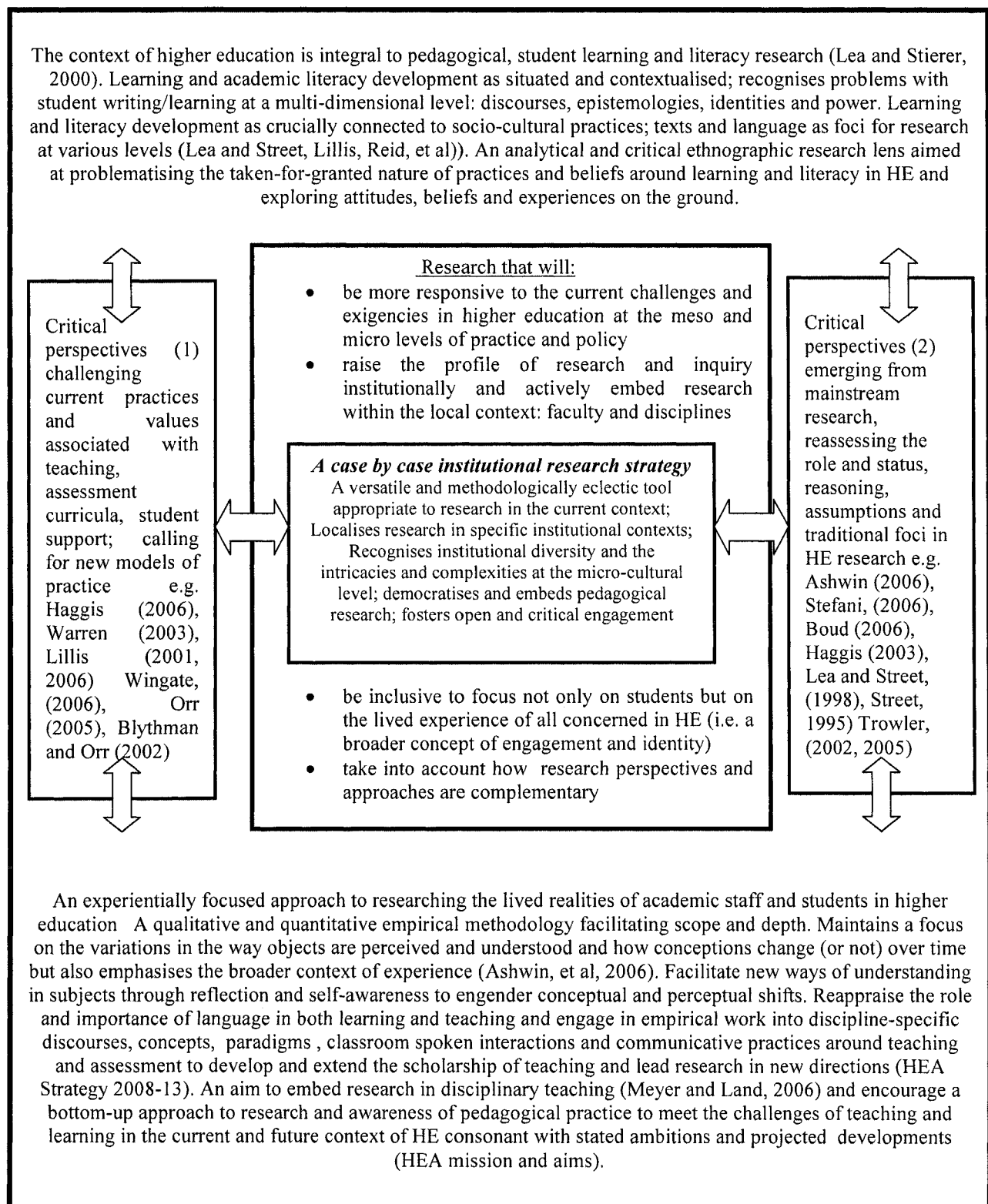
	Reid, et al, analysing large numbers of students 'essays' but restricted in breadth.	reliability and replicability of this aspect of research (e.g. Richardson, 1990, 2002)
<b>Contr – ibration to higher education learning and teaching research and practice</b>	Has raised critical awareness of higher education practices especially around the teaching of writing and why students may have difficulties with writing and assessment requirements. Challenges a 'deficit conception' of (non-traditional) students and opened up the 'problem' of student writing to new perspectives and analysis. Constitutes a critical lens through which to research higher education in the current context of change and expansion.	Has significantly increased understanding of teaching and learning in HE. Emphasis on improving teaching and learning environments. Focuses on the objects and processes of learning across fields of study with the applied aim of identifying the conditions that facilitate conceptual shifts and transitions between ways of thinking. Can be applied to a wide range of higher education topics and fields as well as variations in experience of aspects of learning and teaching. An underlying aim of moulding teaching and learning environments and student 'intentions' to achieve desired understandings in teaching/learning contexts.
<b>View of higher education implicit</b>	Regards the academy as culturally diverse and practices as heterogeneous. Research focuses on uncovering cultural diversity around practices and texts. The context of higher education at the present time is integral to research (Lea and Stierer (eds) 2000).	Deals with individuals – conceptions, perceptions, understandings. Is less concerned with cultural diversity and tacitly endorses the view that the academy is homogeneous entity whose norms and values are givens.
<b>Role of language</b>	Takes a critical approach to language/literacy – i.e. language is not an autonomous and transparent medium and meanings are socially and contextually constituted (Street, 1984, 1995). Places this view at the centre of research and the critical perspective. Has drawn attention to the nature of language in policy documents and educational discourses in HE on this basis. An emphasis on a sociological view language and critical social linguistics but little apparent interest of other perspectives on language understanding, e.g. research in cognitive linguistics which could be instrumental in exploring ways of knowing and understanding relevant to pedagogical research and resonant with current policy on embedded and collaborative approaches to change and inclusion.	Does not challenge or problematise the nature of language. Although language is important – i.e. conceptions, perceptions, understandings and 'experiences of' are expressed through language - the contested and varied nature of language is not a focus of research. On the other hand the validity of phenomenographic method – open, exploratory and dialogical interviews – is a source of internal debate (Säljö, 1997; Richardson, 1999) and critique (Webb, 1998). A limited view of language persists in recent research into the conceptual complexities of learning in HE (Meyer and Land, 2005, 2006). This can be redressed by considering the potential of cognitive linguistics in educational research to give more depth and breadth and orientate applied research and empirical inquiry in new directions.
<b>Status in higher education research</b>	Subsequent to Lea and Street's (1997, 1998) and Lillis's (2001) original work little new or recent, 'on the ground' work of the same nature to build up an evidence base. Offers critique but little in terms of 'design' and practical applications (Lillis, 2003). Has become mired in circuitous debates about how, where and in what fashion writing should be 'taught' in HE. Has, arguably, been marginalised by the adoption of solutions and structures from other educational systems, i.e. writing centres, which are gaining in (uncritical) acceptance. A tribe of 'writing/literacy' specialists: established but not fully acknowledged in educational research; insular.	Research is extensive, wide-ranging and well established. Trigwell and Richardson (2002) point out that phenomenographic research has provided us with a vocabulary for talking about the different ways in which students engage with the business of studying in higher education. Ashwin and McLean (2005) point out that deep/surface, for example, is popular in development units responsible for assisting teachers because it offers the possibility of creating an environment that might induce students to seek meaning and understanding (cf. Meyer and Land, 2002). Widely acknowledged and recognised in educational research; hegemonic.

<p><b>A critique of each approach or tradition</b></p>	<p>While effective as a critique frame problematising aspects of higher education policy and discourse by drawing on critical social linguistics it is vague about feasible and realisable options for pedagogical practice. Ignored by educational developers on this basis.</p> <p>The theorising within academic literacies positions itself as 'oppositional'. Encourages doctrinaire attitudes to higher education debates rather than stimulate wider research in the practical domain. To what extent does this theorising link up with the real concerns and experiences of the broader community in HE, i.e. the lived realities of teaching staff in the mass system? Has yet to be explored.</p> <p>A predominantly non-research active following outside the disciplines. Embraced in principle but not well understood otherwise – 'academic literacy' is a term that has simply replaced other labels such as 'study skills' in learning and study support parlance: no substance. It is unclear in practical and pedagogical terms what this research really supports. HEIs do not experience widening participation and student diversity in the same way or the same extent. Therefore the theorising espoused by academic literacies researchers appears contemporary and resonates with notions of inclusion and participation but may not relate to or resonate with the lived concerns of practitioners in learning, study and literacy support domains who attempt to work productively with academic staff and students in their own contexts.</p> <p>An overt concern with non-traditional students and social justice issues has led to the adoption of innovative research strategies deemed appropriate such as individual case-studies or personal histories and narratives. Controversially positioned as 'soft' research on this basis and 'non-mainstream'. Appears ethnocentrically focused. Universities do not experience widening participation in the same ways. There is a case for systematic, comparative research across HEIs. In addition, research is more readily valued when it is perceived to be relevant to all students (in spite of the obvious stratification that exists and will continue to grow, across HEIs) and to fostering collaboration and development in teaching and learning which may lead to change and innovation at the institutional level. This could be achieved by embedding student writing and academic literacy in the curriculum</p> <p>On the other hand, research needs both focus and depth and to build a rich description of the context or phenomena being studied. It is important to capture the local and the particular if research is to be useful at the meso and micro level of policy formation and the implementation of coherent change and development (Trowler, Fanghanel and Wareham: 2005; Trowler, 2002; Lillis, 2002).</p>	<p>Appears to productively support pedagogical innovation and change. However, much of the largely <i>a priori</i> reasoning by researchers and educationalists from within this tradition is accepted uncritically and unreflectively by educational developers, managers and support specialists in HE.</p> <p>Regarded as 'elitist' as it promotes a certain view of 'good learning' rooted in the Western enlightenment tradition (Ashwin and McLean, 2005; Lillis and Turner, 2001) Occludes aspects of the student (and the teacher) experience (Haggis, 2004a). Presents students in HE as those who are 'able' and capable of 'transformations' (Marton, Dall'alba &amp; Beatty, 1993) and the 'others' (McLean, 2001)</p> <p>A significant research active following with an interest in gaining research awards and recognition within a predominantly non-research active area. Reproductive: maintains traditional hierarchies – professional academics engaged in pure research, specialist educational developers established within formal structures, a non-research active majority in learning and study support and student services; the latter groups often unable to have influence or voice in what is going on. Nevertheless, the discourse and largely <i>a priori</i> reasoning underpinning 'approaches to' is losing its authority. Perceived as out of touch and unable to generate new insights (Haggis, 2003)</p> <p>Extrapolates from small scale studies and/or over-elaborated studies focused on measuring and quantifying student responses. Trigwell and Richardson (2002) enumerate shortcomings: investigations have typically involved relatively small samples of students (around 30); generally provided no concrete results about the frequency distributions of approaches, conceptions or orientations to learning or about how these characteristics might vary with other characteristics of the student; published accounts of research typically provide very little information about the students involved, or how they were selected, recruited, etc; studies may be quite unrepresentative of the populations from which they have been drawn; small sample sizes also mean that studies lack statistical power. The use of large scale questionnaires and inventories in researching student 'approaches' rely on technically sophisticated processes and inference and only provide 'generalised' accounts of 'deep' or 'surface'. Analysis and interpretation are unclear. Raises doubts about the veracity and usefulness of research findings.</p> <p>On the other hand, recent thinking holds the potential to orientate applied and pedagogical research in new directions (Meyer and Land, 2006; Land, 2008)</p>
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It would seem that the time has come to review the toolkit for researching higher education teaching and learning. Stefani (2006:117) calls for a 'reconceptualisation' of teaching and learning practices as "theoretically informed, critical and interdisciplinary activities" in a manner that will promote the scholarship of teaching and learning "across the disciplines". In considering both the contribution and the short-comings of two distinct 'approaches' it is possible to determine what is missing in research more generally and to ponder how an adjusted research paradigm could be conceived and implemented. Consonant with the conclusions this research has drawn a new paradigm would entail research which could be embedded and localised and driven from within disciplinary teaching and the concerns of those located in that ambit. The present research has the potential to be a blueprint for a paradigm shift: one that theoretically and empirically builds on past and more recent research approaches and incorporates current debates but adds something new and transformative in terms of versatility, applicability, focus and fitness for purpose.

Such a paradigm would unite aspects of existing traditions synergistically rather than seeing them as contradictory and irreconcilable. Emphasis would be placed on the practice and practical outcomes of applied research to engage with the complexities and specifics of context. It would recognise the problems students face with language and their acculturation into higher education and adopt a critical stance, raising awareness and influencing practices at the institutional and departmental levels through analytical work. It would continue to explore the qualitatively different ways students experience and conceptualise learning and teachers their teaching and combine this with an understanding of the ideological nature of literacy. It would bring depth and breadth to that research both qualitatively and quantitatively. It would value educational research and theory but allow for critique and debate, enabling teachers to make an informed appraisal of their own and wider institutional practices. It would recognise institutional diversity and localise research with the practical intent to improve learning and teaching in ways which are directly tangible, meaningful and contextually appropriate. It would engage and enable academic staff and those from outside the disciplines at the grassroots in the scholarship of teaching and learning and create the conditions for dialogue, collaboration and inclusion (Trowler, et al, 2005; Trowler, 2002; Ashwin, 2006; Stefani, 2006; Higher Education Academy strategy and aims, 2008-13).

Figure 4. A conceptual representation of a case-by-case institutional research strategy.



The outer level focuses on the two research approaches mentioned in this study and constituting largely contrasting perspectives: ‘academic literacies’ and the ‘experience of learning’ research. The bi-directional, vertical lines to the left and the right indicate how critical perspectives have emerged around, or been influenced by, these two approaches. The first set of critical perspectives (1) has emerged from the concerns of teachers and researchers about the values and practices of higher education at the operational level; the second set of critical perspectives (2) includes internal debates around the theorising associated with, and largely dominating higher education research to date. The bi-directional horizontal lines to the left and right connecting the inner sections to the critical perspectives on either side indicate the emerging nature of thinking about research: how critical perspectives and the different views of researchers are coalescing at the moment around some common themes which are crystallised as the four points given. At the kernel is a new concept for higher education research – a case-by-case institutional research strategy - as conceptualised by this researcher and prototypically exemplified in the present study.

There are, however factors which potentially militate against the development of research along the lines suggested here. Research into learning, teaching and the effects of current practices in higher education is at present a peripheral activity undertaken by those located outside the disciplines or where the research-active community is adjunctive. This situation is compounded by the growth within the higher education system of a service-sector whose function is operational and whose role is construed as reactive rather than proactive. This is apparent in the growth of non-embedded support for students in the form of ‘services’ and ‘staff development’ with formal accreditation processes imposed from without, usually with little consultation or grounding in adequate research. There is clear evidence, on the other hand, that higher education policy is revaluing the role of teaching and pedagogical research. Nevertheless, there is a continuing tension within the sector over this question and the extent to which current values and practices support this shift. Furthermore, the way in which teaching ‘quality’ has been implemented and, as the present research reveals, is perceived and experienced by staff in particular is in need of review. These are related issues which, in turn, negatively impinge quality of the student experience and their engagement in the current context.



The environment continues to be in state of flux and tensions and incompatibilities in policy and practice persist. This alone reinforces the case for on-going organisational and pedagogical research. If interest in teaching and learning practice and research has crossed the threshold towards greater visibility and acceptance this might open up new possibilities for all those engaged in the higher education endeavour for quality improvement, innovation and change. The evidence of this research project suggests that anything other than this aspiration will struggle to address the concerns it has raised. The solution is to enhance the status of pedagogical research and teaching in higher education by giving all staff – in the disciplines and those in non-embedded areas - a larger and more proactive stake in the enterprise of research and the identification of ‘best practice’ in teaching, student learning and literacy development. In this way a vision of teacher-researchers (cf. Ashwin, 2006) and teacher-scholars (cf. Warren, 2003) whose interests and aspirations are interwoven with improving learning for their students through reflective and innovative teaching can be realised, change and inclusion can genuinely be effected, inefficiency of processes and procedures in large scale systems can be improved, disengagement and disaffection among students and academic teaching staff can be addressed and the experience of learning and teaching can be celebrated by all concerned.

# Appendix 1

## Pilot Study Questionnaire

### Student writing questionnaire

To all respondents:

Please complete the questionnaire with reference to your discipline and areas of teaching

A key term used in this research is text-type. This refers to any form of student writing that is accepted for assessment purposes. The most common form is the 'essay'. A generic and generally accepted feature of the traditional essay is that it is a complete, coherent and seamless piece of writing.

The items are mainly relevant to teaching undergraduate students (but not exclusively). Where you wish to make a comment or qualification to your answer, please do so in the space provided and continue on a separate sheet (please attach) if you wish.

### Questionnaire items:

1. Is the essay the most common text-type that students are required to write in

a) your discipline  
(e.g. History)

Yes

No

Don't know

b) your subject area/module  
(e.g. specialist area  
or module(s) you teach)

Yes

No

2. How many subjects/modules do you teach?

How many require essays?

3. For the subjects/modules that require essays, what proportion of the assessment does the essay represent? (please tick the appropriate box)

Total  
assessment

More than  
half

Half  
assessment

Only minor

4. What other text types are used for assessment? (e.g. reports, case-studies, portfolios, reflective journals, etc). Please state.

5. In the subjects you teach what proportion of the total assessment mark is accounted for by essays?

Subject and level	% essays	% other written forms	% non written


6. Rate the statements set out below by using the following scale:

- 1 = Very important in student writing*  
*2 = Of some importance but not always necessary*  
*3 = Neither important nor unimportant*  
*4 = Largely unimportant*  
*5 = Completely unimportant*  
*6 = Not relevant/no comment*

- ☐ a) Students writing in your discipline area need to demonstrate a position, stance, attempt to persuade or take a general line of contention overall in what they write  
☐ b) Students need to be able to demonstrate this at the level of text structure and organisation  
☐ c) Students should demonstrate this in their writing by reference to source material to both support their points and demonstrate understanding  
☐ d) Students should demonstrate this at the level of paragraph and sentence to show a clear link or line of thought in their writing

7. What other features render student writing effective? Please comment.

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8. What factors inhibit students from writing effectively in your discipline? - using the rating scale below rate the statements:

- 1** = a main, consistent factor.   **2** = a frequent factor.   **3** = a factor but not a real issue.  
**4** = sometimes but rarely a factor.   **5** = not at all a factor.   **6** = not relevant/no comment

- ☐ • General ability to write clearly in English, spelling, punctuation, etc  
☐ • Knowing how to structure and organise an essay  
☐ • Interpreting the rubric of assignment titles  
☐ • Understanding and adjusting to the conventions of writing in the discipline area  
☐ • Understanding and applying discipline specific concepts and ways of talking about things  
☐ • Using source material  
☐ • Referencing and using the ideas of others

- ☐ • Responding to what they believe the tutor expects of them in their written assignments
- ☐ • Other ( please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

9. Are there any specific problems you encounter when assessing student writing in your discipline area? Please comment.

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10. The term 'argument' is widely used in academic work. Consider the items a, b, c, and d in question 6 above and decide if you would classify these as 'argument' in student writing in your teaching area(s). Tick the boxes below.

a.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
b.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
c.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
d.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Is there any comment or qualification you wish to add?

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Thank you for your support with this research.

I would like to scaffold the questionnaire with subsequent, short semi-structured interviews. Please let me know if you agree to be interviewed.

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Department and subject area \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Please fold, staple and return in the internal mail

Many thanks

Richard Bailey  
 Senior Lecturer/Northumbria PhD research student  
[Richard.bailey@unn.ac.uk](mailto:Richard.bailey@unn.ac.uk)  
 Ext: 7157

Pilot study tabulated data and comment  
Table1

Department	Responses	Specific modules	Interview agreed	Other details
Newcastle Business School (NBS)	5	Travel and tourism mgmt, hospitality, Self and manager development, Marketing (X2), Strategic mgmt	4	One of these programmes is a PGD for in-service leading to post graduate study. All four interviews completed.
Education	2	English/Primary Placement	2	Only one interview completed
Nursing	4	Adult nursing (X 4)	4	A mixture of full and PT courses. In-service courses. Pre-degree/diplo ma courses. Three interviews completed.
Sociology	3	Criminology (X2) Social theory		Two interviews completed
Informatics/ Computing	3	Information/communic ation , media studies, information systems	3	Two interviews completed.
History of Art	2	History of Art	2	Two interviews completed
History	3	Cross-section	3	Three interviews completed
English	3	Cross-section	2	Two interviews completed
Built Environment	3	Construction and project mgmt, Quantity surveying	1	One interview completed: MA project mgmt; very practically based

Table 1 is self explanatory and provides a tabulated overview of the pilot research in terms of the discipline areas involved, the number of respondents per area, the specific modules each respondent teaches on and the number of those who agreed to be interviewed subsequently. A final column provides detail on the range of modular areas such as part or full-time, degree or diploma (NBS and Nursing) and the number of respondents who were in fact interviewed.

Table 2

<b>Department</b>	<b>Text types</b>	<b>Essays only modules</b>	<b>No essays</b>	<b>Essays, other text types and non-written</b>
<b>NBS</b>	Press releases, PR strategic plans, dissertation proposals, reports, case study analyses, reflective journals, portfolios, short answer questions, essays.	5	11	3
<b>Education</b>	Essays, reflective journals, portfolios	6	2	0
<b>Nursing</b>	Essays, portfolios, team assignments, problem solving exercises, workplace assessment reports, reflective diaries, learning contracts, practical skills assessment, clinical portfolios, case studies	6	9	7
<b>Sociology</b>	Essays, reflective journals, seminar logs	1	2	7
<b>Informatics/computing</b>	Student project reports, reports and logbooks of work experience, explanations of IT products made by students, submissions to on-line discussion boards, portfolios, academic papers in the style of a journal article, essays	1	6	1
<b>History of Art</b>	Essays, presentations, exhibition review, visual analysis	0	0	7

<b>History</b>	Essays, presentations	6	0	10
<b>English</b>	Essays, portfolios, journals	6	1	1
<b>Built Environment</b>	Essays, reports, portfolios presentations (posters and powerpoint), case studies, drawings	2	3	9

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the text types used in departments and across modules elicited through the questionnaire. The diversity is greatest in applied areas: Business, Nursing, Computing and Built Environment. Even in traditional humanities areas such as History, English and History of Art there is diversity. However, overall it is clear that the essay is the most frequent text type for student writing and assessment purposes. The figures seem to support the contention that the essay is the dominant genre and default genre in student writing (Womack, 1993). The data reveal that the essay is the most common text type in student writing and assessment across the disciplines represented in this survey. It is worth noting that while in some areas such as History and History of Art the essay is the main genre but this does not come across from the tabulated data; there are some anomalies and apparent contradictions. It was an objective of the interview phase to explore this in more detail.

Table 3

<b>Factors inhibiting students writing effectively</b>	<b>Main, consistent factor</b>	<b>Frequent factor</b>	<b>Factor but not a real issue</b>	<b>Only sometimes a factor</b>	<b>Not a factor</b>	<b>No Comment</b>
<b>Literacy – general writing ability, spelling, punctuation, etc</b>	5	15	5	2	0	0
<b>Structuring and organising an essay</b>	3	18	5	1	0	0
<b>Interpreting the rubric of assignments</b>	1	8	11	5	0	(2 wrote don't understand)
<b>Understanding and adjusting</b>	4	10	8	4	1	

<b>to the conventions of writing in the discipline</b>						
<b>Understanding and applying discipline specific concepts and discourses</b>	6	8	7	4	2	
<b>Using source material</b>	3	15	7	2		
<b>Referencing and using the ideas of others</b>	7	15	4			1
<b>Responding to what the student thinks the tutor wants</b>	1	5	9	4	4	4
<b>Other</b>	See below					

Table 3 reflects responses to item 8 on the questionnaire which asked academic staff to rate factors given as inhibiting the effectiveness of student writing according to a rating scale. A glance at this is sufficient to see that the highest occurrence is in relation to literacy in terms of general writing ability, spelling, punctuation, etc, using source material and referencing and using the ideas of others; each of these is scored highly as a frequent factor. However, structuring and organising an essay appears to be the most concerning single factor with nineteen responses. In all four areas no respondents have indicated that the statement is not a factor

Only two areas elicited a spread of responses: interpreting the wording of assignments and responding to what the student thinks the teacher wants. The former appears to be a subject of indecision with ten indicating it as a frequent factor and fifteen as a factor but not an issue or only sometimes a factor. The latter is the only statement that shows a spread across all the statements on the rating scale. The two areas where respondents indicated that the statements were not a factor (understanding and applying discipline specific concepts and responding to what the student thinks the tutor wants) were in the practical discipline areas of Computing and Built Environment. In both areas assignments and expectations are clear and



specified. Taking the data overall the first three items elicited the most responses with the second eliciting the most responses in the frequent factor category.

In general the data reflects a greater concern with levels of basic literacy (spelling, punctuation, general ability to write clearly) in module areas where there is a requirement to write essays: History, English, History of Art, Marketing, Marketing and Tourism Management, Social Theory and undergraduate student writing in Sociology and Built Environment as well as some pre-degree/diploma courses in Nursing and Business. It appears to be less of a concern in areas in which there is more emphasis on assessed practical and creative work in areas such as Built Environment and Computing; areas in which success at the subject is less dependent on extended writing, or more specifically, writing essays.

The final category was referred to as 'other' and respondents were asked to specify. The following is a list of the comments that appeared on the returned questionnaires: "fear of writing the wrong thing" (Informatics and Computing); "differences in the meaning of terms used when teaching a multi-professional group" (Nursing); "students often say: I know what I want to say but can't put it down on paper (Nursing); "time-mgmt" (Nursing); "all the above improve as the programme progresses" (Nursing); "knowing how to distinguish wood from trees in information" (Art History).

Table 4

6. Rate the statements set out below by using the following scale:

- 1 = Very important in student writing*
- 2 = Of some importance but not always necessary*
- 3 = Neither important nor unimportant*
- 4 = Largely unimportant*
- 5 = Completely unimportant*
- 6 = Not relevant/no comment*

- ☐ a) Students writing in your discipline area need to demonstrate a position, stance, attempt to persuade or take a general line of contention overall in what they write
- ☐ b) Students need to be able to demonstrate this at the level of text structure and organisation
- ☐ c) Students should demonstrate this in their writing by reference to source material to both support their points and demonstrate understanding

- ☐ d) Students should demonstrate this at the level of paragraph and sentence to show a clear link or line of thought in their writing

### Summary of the rating scale

Out of twenty seven respondents:

For statement a) 13 chose 1; 14 chose 2; 1 chose 4

For statement b) 21 chose 1; 6 chose 2; 1 chose 6

For statement c) 23 chose 1; 4 chose 2; 1 blank

For statement d) 19 chose 1; 7 chose 2; 1 chose 3; 1 chose 6

The summary of responses indicates that most respondents believe argument is best supported in student writing by reference to source material and this best indicates student understanding. Most respondents indicated that all four statements are ‘very important in student writing’. In English, History and History of Art all but two respondents rated all the statements as ‘very important’. In Nursing, Education and Computing there was a similar consensus with all respondents choosing 1 or 2 from the scale (only one chose 6 in connection with statement d. on the scale and this probably indicates ‘no comment’ or at least no further qualification was provided). In Sociology, NBS and Built Environment nearly all respondents chose 1 or 2 for each of the statements although in Business there was more variation between these two items from the scale. There was greatest variation in response to statement a. overall. This could well have something to do with the variation in text types and the requirements of assignments: for example, case-study assignment require argument to justify deductions and support the drawing of conclusions but do not require the writer to take a stance or persuade in the way the discursive essay might. However, one respondent in Marketing specifically mentioned that a good case study answer persuades the reader on the basis of the material or case. One respondent (History) wrote: “6a is strange; it sounds like students should be biased; forwarding just one argument”, indicating that a disciplinary requirement in History is to consider different and opposing ‘arguments’. There were some discrepancies in interpretation of statement a. revealing, perhaps, some underlying differences in how the notion of argument is conceptualised (alternatively this could be regarded as a design flaw: the statement is seen as unclear or wrongly worded?).

The purpose of the rating scale was to elicit responses on how broadly ‘argument’ is understood in student writing and the extent to which the term can be specified in different ways (the four statements, a-d, provided). Item 10 asked

respondents more specifically if they would classify the statements (a-d) as argument in student writing (and, by implication, in their discipline areas and their own teaching) and took the form of a dichotomous scale.

Table 5

10. The term 'argument' is widely used in assessing student writing. Consider the items a, b, c, and d in question 6 above and decide if you would classify these as 'argument' in student writing in your teaching area(s). Tick the boxes below.

a.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
b.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
c.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
d.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

#### Summary of the dichotomous scale:

Out of twenty eight respondents:

Total: YES: 75. NO: 26

The results show overwhelmingly that 'argument' in student writing is conceptualised in the various ways reflected in statements a-d. However, a significant number of respondents expressed disagreement with some of the statements; indicating a 'yes' to some but a 'no' to others. The range here indicates that what lecturers mean by the term 'argument' is variable: that staff appear to have different understandings of the concept of 'argument' across disciplines but also within disciplines. It follows from this that the meanings transmitted to students are also likely to vary.

#### **Open Questions**

Two items on the questionnaire were designed to elicit more qualitative responses:

*Are there any specific problems you encounter when assessing student writing in your discipline area?*

*Are there any further comments or qualifications you wish to add?*

In Art History comments included the need for students to produce good syntax, spelling, choice of words, accurate referencing and bibliography to improve their writing. Style, spelling and grammar were mentioned by both respondents. It was also mentioned that students seem increasingly unable to write clear, properly constructed sentences. In English grammar, sentence structure and plagiarism were mentioned as well as accuracy (correct use of English?). Plagiarism is “on the increase” in History. A key ability teachers look for is a balance of the types of reading (books and journal articles) and demonstrating this breadth of reading this in the history essay. Structure, referencing, grammar and a wide vocabulary were mentioned by respondents in Sociology. Referencing and the use of the ideas of others is a problem students have at all levels.

Respondents from Built Environment mentioned poor grammar and weak spelling among (undergraduate) students. One teacher mentioned that a specific problem was trying to be consistent between accepting use of English problems between UK and overseas students. One respondent made no comments. Both respondents who teach on undergraduate courses where the essay is a frequent text type declined an interview. In Business responses included poor English, mastering the report style, correct referencing and citation, attention to detail and checking work, and the integration of academic concepts in a critical/evaluative manner into discussion. One teacher mentioned the difficulties overseas students have in developing an argument because they are used to the reproduction of ideas. Another comment mentioned that it is possible to argue without a clear text structure but that the argument will not be persuasive. Coherence and logical structure and a tendency by students to make sweeping statements unsupported by evidence were mentioned by teachers from Education.

In Informatics and Computing the voice of the student was mentioned in giving their own opinions and responses backed up by logical argument and justification. It is the student’s response that brings the essay to life. The way students incorporate referenced work is often a problem and sometimes students have difficulty in structuring their work. General IT skills are often lacking. Spelling and grammar are problems particularly due to a high proportion of overseas students. In Health and Nursing literacy in terms of referencing, grammar, spelling and syntax

were mentioned by three of the respondents. Also mentioned was the perennial need to relate theory to practice and using evidence to demonstrate clinical competence. Another problem was the difficulty students from different disciplines have in adapting to the conventions of academic writing in Nursing.

### **General reflections on the quantitative data**

A number of science and technology areas were not part of this initial study; the focus was on traditional humanities, applied and social science and emergent, practice-based discipline areas. As such the pilot study does not represent the full continuum of disciplines. On the other hand it does cover most of that continuum and includes significant areas that are inter-disciplinary, subject to modularisation, and innovation in terms of assessment and areas where changing practices in higher education are having high impact. Table 4 indicates, as mentioned, a high instance of the association of weak student writing with transcriptional features (spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, the use of 'Standard English') and with referencing and using source material. These are the most visible features of student writing and indicate a deficit conception of the issues from respondents. Tables 4 and 5 have been extensively commented on. Discipline specific understandings of the term 'argument' were elicited but there appears to be variation and uncertainty in precisely how the term is used in connection with student written work. The open questions invited further comment and reflection. However, overall the data seem to support a conception of student writing issues in terms of the deficit model (Lea and Street, 1998).

### **The interview data.**

Twenty of the questionnaire respondents were interviewed. The spread of the interviews can be seen in Table 1. The interviews were semi-structured although there were broad concerns around which the process centred. The interviewees were encouraged to express their views on these and other issues that emerged in the interview. The aim was to get in-depth responses and allow space for the interviewee to explore and articulate their views. A list of areas of interest was prepared beforehand and this formed the basis for the interview/discussion. This was based largely, but not exclusively, on the questionnaire data. However, in practice this

became incidental and the interviews followed a similar outline in all cases. In some cases this sheet was given to teachers to skim over before the interview began. This gave respondents an idea of the issues of interest and some control over how they wished to answer or discuss these. The interviews were scheduled to take about twenty minutes. In fact the average interview was about forty-five to fifty minutes. In some cases the interviews lasted longer than an hour and up to an hour and a half. All the teachers interviewed were open and enthusiastic participants

The following are the broad and fairly elastic headings that were used to structure the interviews and categorise the data:

- Student writing/Writing in the discipline
- Modularisation/effects of modularisation
- Non-traditional students
- Transferable skills and practices
- Learning and study support

Extensive data were obtained through the interviews and a substantial part was included when the full thesis was written up; in particular in chapter four.

## Appendix 2

### Documentary sources

The documentary sources which formed part of the research are listed below

#### 1. Official University documentation

*Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice at Northumbria University* (September, 2004) (<http://northumbria.ac.uk/lta>)

*Northumbria Learning and Teaching Strategy 2003-2006 and Learning and Teaching Strategies and Policies* document (<http://northumbria.ac.uk/sd/central/lts>)

*Modularised Framework for Northumbria Awards*. Northumbria University academic Registry

Policy for Guidance and Learner Support (<http://northumbria.ac.uk/staff/ssd>)

Student Services @ Northumbria; Plagiarism  
([http://northumbria.ac.uk/sd/central/stud\\_serv/ssc/writing/plag](http://northumbria.ac.uk/sd/central/stud_serv/ssc/writing/plag))

#### 2. Student and Library Services

*Your Guide to Effective Study*. Published by the student services (study skills) and academic registry learning and teaching support

*Skills Plus: Key Skills for Information Literacy*. Library and Learning Services

*How not to plagiarise – a guide for students*. Library and Learning Services.

Generic materials for students provided by student services: Essay Writing and Report Writing ('Starter' and 'Development' packs); How to write an essay; How to write a Report; generic use of English advice sheets (e.g. the colon, the semi-colon, the comma, etc)

#### 3. Generic study skills material in taught programmes

Skills in the Humanities (used in History, English, History of Art, Politics and Film Studies). Study Skills booklets: Introduction; Writing; Essays; Reading; Notes and Summaries

Professional Information and Communication Skills (PICS) (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; 2006-7). [used in all areas within the School of Health, Community and Education Studies]. Study Skills Workbook – Section 3: Academic Writing, and Section 4: Citation and Referencing

Division of Geography and Environmental Management. Tutorial Module: Study Guide – Guidelines for Good Practice (Level 4)

Module descriptors for: Skills in the Humanities; Enabling Sociological Study;  
Enabling Criminological Study (each for academic year 2005/6)

4. Departmental specific documentation: assessment submission and feedback forms

Humanities Programme Area – Written Assignment completion and feedback

Sociology and Criminology – Assessed Work completion and feedback

Health, Community and Education Studies BA Joint Honours, Assessed Work

Qualifying Social Work Undergraduate – Assessed Work

Health and Nursing – Assignment Moderating and Feedback Form

Diploma of Higher Education in Nursing Studies/Registered Nurse – Practice  
Portfolio Moderation and Feedback Form



# GLOSSARY

## Key terms in the thesis

**Academic literacy** - A term which is used widely in higher education contexts outside the UK where there has been an increase in student access and participation; it is now gaining currency in the UK context. Gee (1996) defines academic literacy as indicating a fluency in particular ways of thinking, doing, being, reading and writing which are peculiar to academic contexts; learning in higher education involves adapting to these requirements. Warren (2003: 46) defines academic literacy in practical and pedagogical terms as “making transparent to students the knowledge-making and communicative practices of the subject area” in the context of disciplinary study.

**Academic literacies** - Lea and Street (1998) contend that in order to develop a complex analysis of what it means to become academically literate it is important to examine the understandings of teachers and students about their own literacy practices. Lea and Street identified that, in the past, research into student learning in higher education fell into two main areas: the acquisition of core study skills and academic socialisation or the learning of disciplinary genres and discourses. They suggest a third model – the “academic literacies model” – which points towards and addresses the complexity of academic literacy practices for students in the higher education. Student writers are exposed to a range of generally implicit assumptions about how they should write and the nature of academic knowledge and learning that is the background to, and which is brought to bear on, the various writing activities and assessments expected of them. This foregrounds the social and institutional relationships around writing rather than the acquisition of skills and genres. Lea and Street identified three thematic categories from their research with staff and students. Firstly, they problematised writing as the acquisition of a (transferable) skill set which can be externalised from disciplinary teaching and remedied (when deficient) by study skills or other forms of (extra) curricular provision. This conceptualisation takes no account of the interaction between students and institutional practices and how knowledge is constructed through writing. The second is concerned with student-tutor interactions and implicit understandings related to essay titles, the meaning of feedback and contestations over who they can be in their writing. The third theme is overarching and concerns the implications of modularity, diverse assessment practices and procedures at the institutional level for student writing and

learning. These concerns have motivated, and provided the focus for, the present doctoral research.

**Student writing as social practice** – Coffin, *et al.*, (2003:10) point out that student writing always occurs in a social context “at both a more local, intermediate level and at a broader social and cultural level” They define three ways in which student writing in higher education can be defined as social practice: firstly because student learning and writing is always embedded in relationships around teaching and learning which have a bearing on how successfully the student learns how to write and communicate in particular ways. Secondly, conventions about (academic) writing have been socially determined over time. Thirdly, student writers are learning how to adopt an identity in order to think, do and be in the sense outlined by Gee (1996). Lea and Stierer regard the social practice perspective as an important conceptual shift in the study of student writing and learning and a “powerful tool for understanding the experience of students and teaching staff, and for locating that experience in the wider context of higher education at the present time” (2000: 3).

**(Implied) deficit model.** Based on the perception that more students from more diverse backgrounds account for there being more problems with literacy and writing in higher education. The framing of student writing as a problem in this sense lends itself to the skills and remediation approach to learning and study support. The problem is conceptualised as being primarily textual emphasising the surface features of writing and the most visible of academic conventions

**Text type** – A generic term which is used to encompass a wide variety of written assignments and refers to any form of writing that students are expected to write for assessment purposes and which may vary according to disciplines, departments and even the requirements of individual teachers. The term is used interchangeably with ‘genre’ in some instances. Genre is a debated term in applied linguistics and carries various connotations which are not part of this study. Text types may be common to any number of subject areas but may not be understood in the same terms: this holds not only across but within disciplines

**Essayist literacy** – (Gee, 1996; Lillis, 2001) is used to indicate a privileged literacy practice in formal institutions. Lillis points out that the privileging of this form of literacy also constitutes continuity for students coming from (white) middle class backgrounds but a discontinuity and barrier for those from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds. Lillis (2001) cites Gee (1996) in remarking that almost by definition privileged practices are not taught to those who already know them; hence formal institutions tend to privilege those who

are already privileged in society (and marginalise the rest). Student writers in the academy are simply expected to pick-up or work out what 'good writing' should be. Lillis (2001) also uses the term "implicit induction" to describe this phenomenon. This practice serves to propagate the "institutional practice of mystery" (cf. Bartholomae, 1985).

**Ideology/ideological** – Tight (1989) equates ideology with beliefs about the role and purpose of higher education and corresponding models of provision and practice. In this study the phrase 'ideological orientation of the university' is used with this meaning but connected to a broader understandings associated with New Literacy Studies and autonomous and ideological views of literacy (Street, 1984, 1995). The former regards literacy as a technical skill independent of, and transferable between, contexts. "The ideological model, on the other hand, does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power" (Street, 1988: 60). Lillis (2001) calls for a critical examination of how particular literacy practices hold sway in higher education and the extent to which they are 'ideologically inscribed' (cf. Clark and Ivanič, 1997). The term 'ideological' is applied to dominant/mainstream values and practices within HE (Haggis, 2003, 2006) associated with student learning and educational goals and is also used in the present research in this way.

**The Learning Society** – This is a core theme in the 'Dearing' Report (1997) which calls for higher education to assist in developing and sustaining a competitive national economy in a global context characterised as changing, unpredictable and with ever increasing levels of 'international competitiveness'. The response is 'higher levels of education and training' with the aim of preparing people to manage and control their 'working lives' and contribute throughout their lives to the 'knowledge economy'. Dearing's 'vision' is a society where the capabilities and talents of all people are valued and in which they can continue to develop as 'lifelong learners' with the 'will' to go on learning. This implies that the teaching function in higher education has to maximise learning. Effective teaching is achieved through the better use of information technology, more explicit and formalised approaches to training for lecturers and research and development into learning and teaching. The White Paper on Education in 2003 called for the setting up of 'learning and teaching committees' in HEIs to oversee the inauguration and implementation of appropriate practice. A core element in setting up the learning society has been a focus on key skills in supporting the future success of graduates 'whatever they intended to do later in life' (Recommendation 9). A feature of Dearing is a concern to increase the participation in education and training of hitherto under-represented groups (ethnic minorities and lower social class groups in particular) bringing a social justice element into a predominantly economic conception of the 'learning society'

Barnett (1998; 11) pondered the real intent and consequence of the salient prescriptions of Dearing:

The call for a national Institute\* could turn out to add still further to the development of higher education as a means of control; the call for the greater use of information technology could end up as a search for a technological fix; and the call for the systematic training and development of teaching competence could turn out to be another example of the 'audit state in operation

Barnett (p. 19) pointed out that Dearing is not about how higher education can help bring about a learning society but how it can take its place 'in' that society. It suggested this could be achieved by "...injecting more precision as to the practices and standards in higher education". Barnett advocates a more emancipatory conception of the learning society – "...a genuine higher learning fostering human propensities *for* change and contestability..." (p. 20). Barnett conceded that such an educational strategy "would call for a revolution in our conception of higher education" (p. 21)

**The Higher Education Academy.** The \*Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) was superseded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2004 merging into one certain other bodies. The HEA produced a Strategic Plan in 2005. The original aim was "to clarify our focus and priorities and to demonstrate our effectiveness to stakeholders... In our mission we stress the primacy of improving the student experience." The Plan stressed its commitment to the following values: equality and diversity, partnership, sharing good practice, accountability, transparency, an international perspective, maintaining high standards of service. The Academy's mission was stated as six strategic aims and objectives with an overarching aim to help higher education institutions "provide the best possible learning experience for their students" based on "the best possible evidence about how to improve the student learning experience". The 2008-13 document represents an important development in terms of the Academy's rationale and ambitions. There is a focus on the "quality of students' learning experiences" but a clearer emphasis on "the sharing of effective practice" and "the status of teaching". The academy calls for the identification, development and dissemination of "evidence-informed approaches" to enhance theory and practice around teaching and learning.

**Key Skills** –The key skills agenda in higher education (set out in Dearing) was intended to add more breadth to the curriculum in accordance with the ethos of a learning society (see

above) and in response to the perceived and express demands of employers about graduate employability. It has been actively adopted by many new/post-92 universities in particular. A core notion is transferability; hence 'transferable skills'. This sustains the skills agenda and has enshrined itself in the value system of those HEIs which have actively gone down the key skills route. However, 'transferability' is an assertion rather than an empirical reality (Hyland and Johnson, 1998). Two elements in particular have permeated institutional discourse and practices. Firstly, student writing is officially viewed as a set of skills and competences which are formally emphasised in assessment contexts and documentation. This reinforces a perception of writing as a detachable skill largely independent of, and incidental to teaching disciplinary knowledge/content. Secondly, student problems with writing and their solution are viewed as textual. Whitstone (1998: 317) asserts that "too much is asked of key skills" and the "many, and sometimes competing, purposes that their advocates have in mind". Whitstone calls for more consideration to be given to wider curriculum reform. In addition, 'learning to learn' emphasises a value system of student self-sufficiency and independent learning which is reflected in institutional discourse and practice around learning and study support more generally. Rawson (2000) challenges a misplaced emphasis on a society of 'self-managed learners' and calls for a society of 'self-determining learners'. This can be achieved only through greater dialogue and discussion between teachers as educators and students as learners around power relations, what is acceptable knowledge, involvement in, and design of, assessment strategies.

In some HEIs key skills are taught, and therefore take up space, in documentation related to the curriculum. Lillis (2001: 172) points out that the skills agenda is contributing to stratification across HE sites with many new universities as "skills marked spaces". Peters (1999: 57) comments "It is certain that in many 'old' universities key skills are never mentioned let alone taught or assessed"

**Learning Outcomes** – Another feature of higher education that has percolated up from the compulsory and further education sectors since the advent of Dearing are 'outcomes'. If the value and relevance of higher education is to be made open and accountable to all stakeholders then it has to be represented in precise, explicit and objective ways. At policy level the specification of learning outcomes and the use of criterion referencing is stipulated by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA: 2000). An outcome is used to specify what will be learnt and what skills or capacities will be developed at the end of a period of learning (a module). They can be specific (to subject) and generic or transferable. What takes place in the learning and teaching context is required to be amenable to monitoring, auditing and management. The student is given a clear idea of what it is they are learning and how this progresses as they move through their degrees. There are terminological issues with

outcomes. For example, they are often qualified as 'intended/desired/required', etc; 'outcomes' has superseded the use of 'objectives' in formal documentation and the register of higher education processes and procedure. Critics point out that this raises concerns about the logic and meaning of this kind of prescription. Becher and Trowler (2001) point out that outcomes are attractive to managers in the current context of higher education because they make the curriculum transportable between teaching staff and reinforce the institutions power base by ostensibly making institutional expectations explicit to students. Orr (2005) points out that outcomes appeal to teaching staff because they appear to emphasise fairness, clarity and a shared language. On the other hand, they represent a value system that is hard to contest and which "can mask as well as reveal" (p. 177). Hussey and Smith (2002: 229) claim that 'outcomes' are "antithetical to good educational practice" because a prescribed vocabulary of 'descriptors' can never be precise: the meanings of terms are relative to the situation, subject matter and level and there is perennial ambiguity. Secondly, they "can be insensitive to the requirements of different discipline... the specification of learning outcomes at different levels will have to be different for different subjects and for different topics within that subject" (p. 227).

**Mass/Universal higher education** - Ganobcsik-Williams (2006: xxi) points out that between 1987 and 1992 student participation in higher education almost doubled. In the mid-1980s the student participation index had reached 15% and by the mid-1990s that had risen to 32% of the eligible age group. Already higher education had moved from elite to a mass system and was in the process of becoming universal. Ganobcsik-Williams (2004: 28) reports that a survey conducted in 2000 among teaching staff and support staff in all HEIs revealed that over 90% of respondents believed that it is necessary to teach students how to write in higher education. The question that is not resolved is how this should be done; how it could be best implemented and effectively achieved. These are questions which are being researched and are open to debate

**'Non-traditional' students** - The notion of the 'non-traditional' student (almost always written with scare quotes) is elastic. Lillis (2001: 16) refers to 'non-traditional' students as coming from social groups historically excluded from higher education and includes in this category students with working class backgrounds, those over 18 when they enter university and who come from a wider range of cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds than has traditionally been the case. Curry (2006:194) represents the 'traditional' student as being stereotypically "white, male, Christian, middle-class and native-English speaking". On the other hand a 'non-traditional' student is conceived of in broad terms and includes "students of colour, more women, non-native speakers of English, students with disabilities, students of

various religious affiliations and those in the first generation of their families to enter tertiary education”.

**Student diversity** is an elastic term. It is used to encompass students on part-time courses, distance learning, working students, single parents and those with disabilities, for example. It can also mean age, gender, race, and differences in educational, cultural and linguistic background. Catering for the needs of diverse students involves facilities and support measures outside the curriculum. This is not within the remit of this research and the term ‘student diversity’ is used sparingly. The term ‘non-traditional’ is considered apposite and is the one more often used in connection with students’ learning and literacy needs throughout the literature.

**Access and/or participation\*** - Access refers to the opening up of more ‘routes’ into higher education (other than the traditional A-level benchmark); ‘participation’, on the other hand, has, in addition, a political connotation associated with inclusion. The term “access” is used widely because it is associated with Access courses which were introduced in the 1980s and predominantly taught in further education colleges. This was introduced as an alternative to A-level entry to HE, principally for students whose studies were outside the traditional academic A-level curriculum. The two terms are used loosely in practise and the distinction often appears blurred in official and institutional discourse.

\*HEIs experience access and participation differently. In particular the ‘new’ (post-92) universities are more responsive to recruiting locally and the agenda of widening participation has required universities to be more accessible and responsive to their communities. Nick Hall, presenting at the Northumbria Programme Leaders conference in 2002, pointed out that the university is experiencing widening participation in the following ways:

- more local students in general;
- more working students;
- more students who are generally less ‘university orientated’ and less well-qualified on entry, and;
- more emphasis on vocational programmes and smaller awards.

According to university statistics:

- just under 90% of students come from state schools;
- just fewer than 60% are women;

- almost 30% of entrants are mature students and;
- 11% are overseas students.

The statistics also reveal that over a quarter of the student population comes from the lowest socio-economic groups (source: Learning and Teaching Strategy - 2003-6).

Students who participated in the present research identified themselves as coming to university through access courses or foundation degrees, as returnees to education or as experiencing higher (though not necessarily tertiary) education for the first time and after a long time out of an educational environment. A few identified themselves as being the first in their family to attend university. Many such students are locally based and live at home rather than in university accommodation. Recent studies at the university into student retention indicate that students who fall into these two categories are those recognised as being at risk of non-completion, especially in the first year of study (source: Student Expectations and Student Retention – student services centre report. Northumbria University).

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) requires all HEIs to develop participation strategies in accordance with current educational policy aimed at setting targets for widening participation and retention. This is driven by a range of funding incentives. In reality, widening participation to date has largely taken place through a variety of new initiatives at the pre-degree and non-credit bearing level (Foundation Degrees (FD) and diploma courses) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses. These are university accredited and monitored but co-delivered, or entirely delivered, in feeder colleges. Developing the institutional strategy on life-long learning and widening participation is long-term. However, many students who were admitted to FD and CPD courses had entered the university at the time data were being gathered.

At the time of writing widening participation was still being debated. There is scepticism over the achievability of social inclusion and reducing inequality in higher education and this is becoming manifest in public discussions and debates (e.g. HEFCE funding research report, 2006). The evidence at present suggests that while there are more students coming into higher education they are coming from a narrower social base than is the objective of official policy. This suggests that while student numbers are increasing, 'participation' (in the political sense) is not.

Access initiatives reach an impasse...The government's drive to widen access is stalling, according to new figures that reveal that universities are failing to increase the recruitment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and failing to lower dropout rates (The Times Higher, p.6, 21/07/06)



From 2008 The Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) will ask degree applicants to record if their parents went to university. Supporters of this measure regard it as a step in the direction of ensuring opportunity for first-generation entrants and reducing the dominance of the educated middle-class over the education system; critics regard it as social engineering and inherently undemocratic. In early 2007 the funding council announced the availability of a £431 million boost in grant money to increase university places by up to 70,000. However, hitting widening participation benchmarks does not automatically lead to funding and there seems to be a 'lottery' factor.

Access funding hit as 22 face cuts to grants... While most institutions were this week celebrating a healthy average 2.6 per cent after-inflation increase in their funding, a significant minority were facing up to the consequences of real-terms cuts... (The Times Higher, p.5, 2/3/07)

Northumbria University was one of the 22 institutions which experienced a funding cut at that time.

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